

## **Lecture 9: Preserving Contemporary Life: The Ugly and Ordinary and the High-Style**

This week's class featured a guest speaker from the international preservation advocacy group known as DOCOMOMO. The class began with an introductory lecture by the professor on the topic of cultural landscapes. Students were reminded to visit the Woodberry Library at Harvard University and to prepare a draft presentation on their final paper topics before the next class meeting.

### **Slide Lecture: Cultural Landscapes**

The preservation of modernist architecture and the preservation of cultural landscapes appear, at first glance, to be very different movements within the field of historic preservation. For instance, cultural landscapes tend to be anonymous while modernist architecture is not. However, these movements are similar in that they both represent "blind spots" of traditional historic preservation activity. These movements represent the frontiers of historic preservation and vibrant areas of contemporary practice. They ask the question of "historic significance" in new ways, raising questions about authorship and symbolic importance. They also raise the question: How do we protect those resources which have few defenders? In the cases of 2 Columbus Circle and Boston City Hall, we find that many people consider these modern buildings to be ugly and unworthy of landmark status. These debates raise the question of what is considered beautiful and what place beauty has in questions of historic significance.

### **Slides**

Maxwell Street, Chicago  
Casitas, South Bronx, New York  
Boston Common  
Connecticut Valley  
Pullman, Illinois  
Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York  
Levittown  
Gated community, Green Valley, Nevada  
2 Columbus Circle, New York  
Woodberry Library, Harvard University  
Marina Apartments, Chicago  
Wood's Hole, Massachusetts  
Noguchi playground  
Fountainbleau Hotel by Morris Lapidus, Miami Beach, Florida

### **Discussion**

The class briefly discussed ideas of cultural landscapes, focusing on the example from the readings of casitas as an example of Puerto Rican vernacular architecture, social space, and cultural symbol in New York. Other examples of cultural landscapes were mentioned in the course of the discussion: battlefields, designed landscapes, and working agricultural landscapes such as farms and ranches. Two students with prior work experience in historic preservation commented on the ways in which cultural landscape thinking has been incorporated into evaluation and designation work. The issue of the changing, dynamic quality of landscape- especially of plant material- was mentioned in reference to the concept of historic integrity.

### **Guest Lecture: Helene Lipstadt**

DOCOMOMO was created in 1989 and held its first meeting in 1990. It was founded as a pluralistic, interdisciplinary forum for design professionals, architectural historians, enthusiasts of modern architecture, and others. While some countries around the world had measures in place for the protection of "young monuments" or the "recent past," in many places such protection was not possible under standard historic preservation laws. At the time, postmodern architecture was popular and modernism was out of favor. Nevertheless, some of the most famous works of International Style or Modern Movement architecture had been recognized and preserved, notably the work of Le Corbusier.

Originally formed as an agreement between people from thirteen different countries, today DOCOMOMO has representatives from more than fifty countries or regions. Worldwide the group has about 2,000 members.

DOCOMOMO has three main goals: advocacy, awareness, and documentation.

### **Slides**

2 Columbus Circle  
TWA Terminal  
Lincoln Center  
Jamaica Savings Bank, Queens  
Lever House  
Johnson Wax building  
Case Study Houses, Los Angeles

DOCOMOMO's activities and concerns are now considered a part of mainstream historic preservation practice. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has developed a resource guide. The National Park Service has begun to recognize modern architecture. According to National Register of Historic Places criteria and guidelines, resources less than fifty years old are not eligible for designation unless they possess extraordinary significance. Not long ago, the few buildings and sites listed under this exception tended to be recognized for their association with historic events, not for architecture. For example, the Kennedy Space Complex was designated as historic well before it was fifty years old. It was rare for works of modern architecture to be designated up until the mid-1990s. A few notable exceptions include the Carpenter Center at Harvard University, Dulles airport, and Lever House.

In 1991 a special issue of APT, a well-recognized and extensively-read journal within the field, devoted an entire issue to the preservation of modern architecture. In 1995 the National Park Service hosted the "Preserving the Recent Past" conference in Chicago. These events were instrumental in bringing the concerns of advocates into the mainstream of historic preservation practice.

Nevertheless, this recognition among professionals did not extend to the general public. Many people still do not consider these resources as worthy of preservation. The architectural historian Richard Longstreth commented in this regard that the problem is that many people just can't see it and don't understand it. In addition, many of these works are associated with the period of urban renewal, which many preservationists fought against. Longstreth urged preservationists to forego their concerns with architectural style and to stop thinking that history is finite. Preservations should become better historians and preservation work, he argued, should embrace the recent past by recognizing that evaluating what is significant and what is not will be a continuous and ever-changing process.

The debate over the preservation of the TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport in New York provided the first major exposure to DOCOMOMO. In December 2000, New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp wrote an article on the topic. In April 2001, a press conference was held, highlighting the preservation perspective. Soon thereafter, a letter writing campaign to the Port Authority (which manages the airport) commenced. As a result of the Section 106 review process, the Port Authority entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) agreeing to preserve the building.

DOCOMOMO's interdisciplinary character is one of its strengths: it provides a place for architectural historians and preservationists to engage with one another. DOCOMOMO is also valuable because its activities help put the U.S. preservation movement in context.

## **Discussion**

The class ended with a discussion of Boston City Hall. The local chapter of DOCOMOMO and other advocates have argued that the building should be considered eligible for landmark designation by the City of Boston. Students presented their perspectives on the building's architectural design, its setting (including the plaza), its association with urban renewal, the proposal to construct a new City Hall on the South Boston waterfront, and its landmark eligibility. To the surprise of the guest speaker, only a few students expressed support for landmark designation.