

Cosmetic Aspects of Historic Preservation

— by James Marston Fitch

Although it may indeed be only skin deep, the cosmetic condition of a building has a profound effect upon our reaction to and judgement of it. The visual information conveyed by its appearance forms an important part of our experience as a whole. (Sound, odors, temperature and touch are also important sensory inputs but many of them are subsumed by vision; and in any case, visual perception is overwhelmingly the most powerful. A blind person might be moved by the incense and sound of a high mass in Chartres but, lacking sight, his experience of it will be tragically reduced.) Thus it is vision which enables us to say of a building that it is dark and gloomy or bright and airy; to decide whether it is new or old, loved or neglected; ultimately, whether it is beautiful or ugly. But from information derived from visual scanning, we also fabricate another set of judgements as to its physical condition or structural stability. Such judgements are necessarily valid. The stained, cracked and spalling discolored stucco of Seventeenth Century buildings in Mexico might lead to a totally unwarranted conclusion of structural weakness while a new coat of white paint on a New England farm house might conceal evidence of imminent collapse. In short, the cosmetic appearance of architectural surfaces forms the basis for two quite different levels of response: associative and diagnostic.

Under such circumstances, the visual appearance of many old buildings in Central Europe might suggest structures weakened by decades of decay and neglect; yet that very building might have been carefully restored only a few years before. This is typically the case in cities like Prague or Cracow, where the burning of brown coal for heating produces smoke that quickly discolors stuccoed surfaces. For all its unhappy visual consequences, such processes might continue for decades without serious damage to the stucco. On the other hand, the same combination of gases would set into motion a complex chemico-physical process in marble and limestone which would lead to serious decay which would be concealed by a surface coat of grime. This is typically the case in many Gothic structures in northern Europe. While surface cleaning might be the first stage in therapy in both cases, for esthetic reasons in the first case and diagnostic in the latter, the removal of the surface crust on fine-scale limestone or marble sculpture might result in the loss forever of irreplaceable detail.

On the other hand, serious structural defects may display very few cosmetic consequences. Wooden beams may be riddled with termites or dry rot without any external evidence. The White House, whose outdoor and indoor surfaces had always been carefully maintained, turned out to be on the verge of actual collapse when its structure was carefully examined

in 1948. Similarly, cracks in the walls of the cathedrals at Norwich and York Cathedrals were alarming only to specialists who, by their location and direction, could interpret them as warnings of grave structural weaknesses requiring immediate attention. (Subsequent work revealed that the rubble interiors of the masonry were riddled by voids caused by dessication and migration of the Norman cement: thousands of gallons of cement grout had to be injected into them to consolidate them.)

Entirely aside from the physical condition of the exposed surface (or of the structural member behind it), the philosophical aspects of its preservation are thorny and complex. These deserve far more attention than they have received up-to-date. One pivotal question takes this form: when our intervention (whether preservation, restoration, consolidation, reconstruction, etc.) is complete, should the building "look old" or "look new"? Should replaced elements be left to "weather naturally" or should they be "antiqued" to meld into the older tissue around them? There are competent experts on both sides of this argument. (Karol Estreicher has restored the Collegium Maius in Cracow so that all new material is antiqued to match the original. The curators of the Folk-museum in Copenhagen, when they must repair one of their old wooden farm houses, use new unpainted wood just as the peasant would have done).

The same problem is raised to even more critical levels in such activities as the cleaning of entire historic districts such as the Marais district of Paris, or the restoration of the polychromy in many English churches. The results of such interventions are often startling, compelling many people radically to re-adjust their ideas of how Paris "ought" to look (blue-gray, the way the Impressionists saw it) or Westminster "the way it always was" (i.e., before it was cleansed of centuries of soot, smoke and dust.)

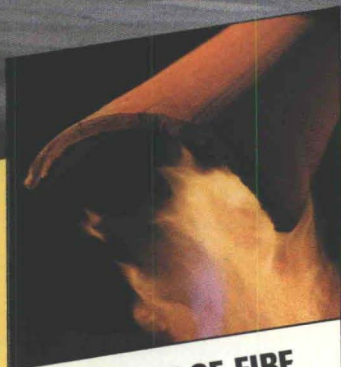
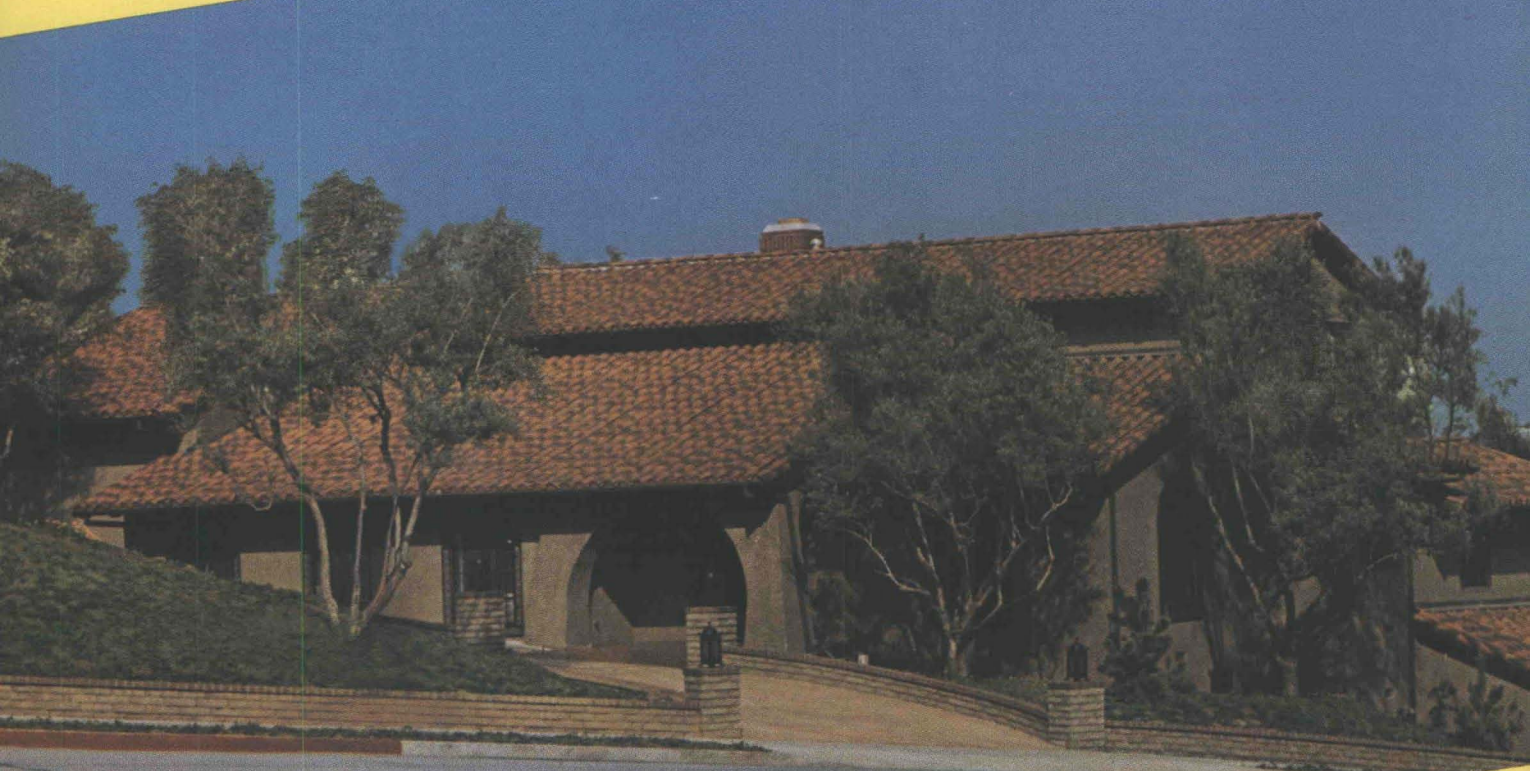
While the individual, layman or expert, is entitled to his own preferences in such matters, the preservationist must develop broader, more objective and more comprehensive criteria for evaluating such decisions. Certain parameters can be established. For example, the preservationist should consider the following factors:

1. The esthetic ambitions of the original designers/owners of the artifact must be taken into account. Most monumental architecture is urbane and upper class, the expression of a life style which developed very precise standards of display, etiquette and propriety. They were implemented by very definite re-

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A chapter from a forthcoming book, *The Past in the Future: Retrieval and Recycling of the Historical Environment*, by James Marston Fitch. The book, published by Oxford University Press, is due in the spring.

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