Preserve

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To consider the preservation of architecture is to grapple with its very physicality. The verb “preserve” implies forces of loss—erosion, decay, collapse—against which one is (or isn’t) acting. Without these forces of loss the notion of preservation is stripped of its import. Acting against these forces, preservation is imbued with significance; to the point of sometimes becoming a metaphor for strain against mortality itself.

Consider additionally the effort that has gone into making even the most humble piece of architecture: extraction, processing, transport, design, oversight, construction. Against this backdrop, the entropic forces of loss not only serve to remind us of time’s passage but also spur us to consider the value of our time, efforts, energies, and resources. How are they best spent? To what end? In a bid to stay the inevitable, or in the production of the new?

While the rigors of time insistently illuminate architecture’s impermanence, over a human lifespan architecture also possesses significant inertia. Even the most neglected buildings often stubbornly refuse, over the course of centuries, to yield completely to the forces of loss. Though time-worn, they persist and sometimes find themselves washed up on the shores of dramatically altered social and/or economic contexts. When we again turn our attention to these buildings we must come to terms with their value as cultural objects. Interlopers from another time, they force us to question our present cultural motivations as well as the continued relevance of the motivations of our cultural forebears.

Of course, to cast preservation this way—as a reckoning with either architecture’s entropy or its inertia—is simplistic and incomplete. Yet, it reveals the profound issues that are bound into the field’s very foundations: the value of human effort, the appropriate use of resources, the significance of cultural expressions, our connections to our predecessors, the appropriate manifestations of our futures, our stances toward death. Seen this way, it is unsurprising that the field’s contemporary practitioners are probing both broad and deep intellectual spaces in their efforts to understand and calibrate the proper care of the built environment and the ideas embedded in it.

We come to this issue of the *Journal of Architectural Education* as accidental preservationists—that is, having no formal training in the field but rather led by intellectual curiosity as designers and educators seeking methods through which to ground our work and teaching. The work of contemporary preservation is not only for preservationists. There exists a clear potential for preservation and design to describe a fertile area of overlapping concerns where the two fields inform each other and nudge the larger intellectual project of architecture more toward time- and place-based concerns.

This conspiratorial relationship between preservation and design engages some of the most interesting and timely issues in the built environment today, as is evidenced by the contents of this issue. For instance, seemingly dormant and overlooked buildings can provide unexpected grounds for improvisational acts of design resourcefulness. On the other side of that coin, however, long-neglected urban districts are often imbued with difficult economic realities for their current inhabitants. What does preservation look like for these neighborhoods? Is their existing fabric the springboard of cheap, reconfigurable space imagined by Jane Jacobs or is it a millstone around their collective necks?

Alternately, consider the flows of materials that find their way through buildings over their lifespans. We might see these in terms of their unintended cultural significance or perhaps understand them through their ability to alter our perception of buildings’ continued authenticity; each a stimulating and productive viewpoint. Conversely, might we instead contend with the ethical and environmental appropriateness of such flows? Are they merely an inescapable condition of the physics of our world? Preservation offers a powerful lens through which to consider such questions as the field’s constitutional core insists that they cannot be understood as solely questions of form, space, and image but must bring the messiness of people, time, values, and place into the equation if any formulated answers are going to be valid.

The call for this issue of the *Journal of Architectural Education* cast a purposefully wide net with which to capture a range of approaches to and understandings of preservation, construed broadly. The issue’s
invited content helps to stake out this intellectual landscape and begins to describe the diversity of concerns that fall under the field's umbrella. While it is illuminating that, from a common starting point, preserve, the invited contributors have arrived at widely varied and sometimes conflicting stances, it is perhaps even more significant that they at times seem to be talking past each other, which may indicate areas of agreement and overlap that they themselves do not yet see.

The issue begins with an interview with Jorge Otero-Pailos in which he describes the motivations driving experimental preservation, its position in the academy, and its cultural curiosities. In it he makes the case that conflicts over the proper care of buildings and monuments are proxies for societal issues about which direct discussion is fraught and difficult. He sees the work of experimental preservation, in part, as developing better understandings of underlying and interconnected issues at play in these instances.

Randall Mason counters with an essay questioning experimental preservation's ability, as currently focused, to move the field forward. Tracing preservation's recent development and describing its dual focus on both objects and processes, he makes an impassioned case for a socially engaged, multi-faceted mode of preservation that purposefully intervenes in disciplinarily complex arenas. In this effort he sees experimental preservation as a potential, though not yet realized, ally.

Taking a contrarian view, Deborah Berke highlights the catalytic potential existing structures may lend to contemporary design. Drawing a distinction between the historic and the merely old, she decodes what she sees as an overly broad cultural desire to protect and maintain undeserving structures. Arguing against nostalgic tendencies, she advocates for robust interventions in existing buildings.

In a sobering piece, filmmaker Tim Slade highlights the purposeful destruction of cultural monuments as a weapon of war. When compared to the more ephemeral characteristics that may define an imperiled population, such as languages or practices, buildings and monuments present a concrete and thus an enticing target for those who seek to erase another culture.

David Leatherbarrow reminds us of architecture's role as a register upon which human existence, both individual and collective, is recorded across multiple timescales. His insights have the potential to shift our consideration of the appropriate care of and design response to the built environment; raising myriad questions about the cultural significance of wear, patina, and material flows.

Three Scholarship of Design articles serve to further flesh out the issue's focus. First, Phoebe Springstubb considers the preservation of ephemeral aspects of cultural heritage and to what extent such preservation may serve as an analog for the more familiar preservation of buildings, landscapes, and monuments. Using the French meal as a touchstone, she describes many versions of its practice and its changing connections to place, be that table or landscape.

The multiple incarnations of the Barcelona Pavilion serve as a framework for Lance Hosey's exploration of how we philosophically consider objects' persistence (or non-persistence) over time. With the Pavilion(s) as his lens, he traces various permutations of how we might think about an artifact's authenticity, how that authenticity is maintained or lost, and how that authenticity might therefore color our consideration and care—questions with clear implications for contemporary preservation.

Alison B. Hirsch tackles the difficult issues surrounding spaces of resistance and unrest. Using the troubling history of the urban violence in Los Angeles sparked by the Rodney King verdict as fodder for a graduate landscape studio, she and her students propose methods through which the affected areas might be restored—a proposition made even stickier and more urgent by considerations of the areas' fragile economic states.

Rounding out the invited content, Bryony Roberts has curated a set of discursive images exploring the use of unorthodox methods of documentation. Along with a sample of her own work, these examples by Moreshin Allhayari, David Gissen, Farzin Lofti-Jam, Caitlin Blanchfield, and Jaffer Kolb upend expectations about the role of documentation while nonetheless revealing unexpected aspects of the subject artifacts.

Three Micro-Narratives offer glimpses into further wide-ranging aspects of contemporary preservation. Landscape architect Danielle Narae Choi uses the unusual circumstance of tree species, whose growth remains stunted until more favorable environmental conditions arise, to reflect on how the idea of preservation is applied to the dynamic and changeable, and what the resulting insights might mean in light of our expanding awareness of the changeful lives of buildings.

Julia Jamrozik describes her oral history project, “Growing up Modern” (undertaken with Coryn Kempster) in which they interview the residents of landmark modern buildings such as the Tugendhat House and the Unité d'Habitation. The interviews bring a sense of humanity to these iconic projects and help to conserve an overlooked aspect of their histories.

Referring to English probate records from the Middle Ages, Zachary Stewart suggests one route for extending the historical timeline of the architectural preservation movement by examining the language that was deployed to describe building renovations and additions of the time. He uncovers a vein of language that considers buildings as corporeal constructs and posits that such a line of thought might be productive for contemporary preservation.

The issue is rounded out by a Design as Scholarship project. Forbes Lipschitz, Halina Steiner, Shelby Doyle, and Justine Holzman propose to use projection mapping technology to create a digital landscape preservation project that conjoins the US...
National Parks with the Washington DC Metro system. Speculating about the power of such projections to create emotional bonds with subway commuters, the project suggests that we might meaningfully extend the desire to conserve the parks to those who have not yet had direct experience with them.

The breadth of the work in the issue and the diversity of its interests and motivations serve to reinforce the intellectual vitality of the field of preservation, the relevance of its efforts to broader cultural projects, and its potential to serve as an important touchstone not only for those interested in the proper care of buildings but also for those concerned with their design and construction.

The paradox of entropy and inertia physically embodied in the built environment continually force us to take stances with respect to the values by which it is made, maintained, reconfigured, and ultimately destroyed.

Notes
1 “Architecture” here is understood to include the built environment at various scales – objects, landscapes, districts.
3 See, for instance, Kiel Moe, Empire, State, & Building (Barcelona: Actar, 2017).