BETWEEN HISTORY AND CONTEMPORANEITY: A Critical Assessment of Historic Review in Savannah, Georgia

MICHAEL ZARETSKY
University of Cincinnati

"Every new work of architecture intervenes in a specific historical situation. It is essential to the quality of the intervention that the new building should embrace qualities that can enter into a meaningful dialogue with the existing situation. For if the intervention is to find its place, it must make us see what already exists in a new light."

-Peter Zumthor[1]

Introduction

The southern town of Savannah has a population of 120,000, though there were six million visitors in 2004.[2] When tourists visit Savannah, Georgia they are not specifically interested in a particular building; they are interested in inhabiting a time in history. There is a charm and beauty resulting from the structure of classically-proportioned brick facades organized around a series of public green spaces spotted with mature oak trees dripping with spanish moss. (fig.01-02)

However, the trees were planted less than a century ago, many of the historic facades were never intended to have brick exposed and several other facades were built within the last 50 years. The image of Savannah referred to by most is merely two and a half square miles of the historic district that represents four percent of the sixty two and a half square miles that encompasses the city of Savannah[3].

In this paper, I intend to investigate and compare the intentions behind the design and construction of historic buildings in contrast to contemporary buildings in Savannah's historic downtown. My premise is that the pre-industrial revolution buildings were not designed as a backdrop for tourist photos, but were designed as an honest expression of the best architecture possible given the culture, budget, materials and technology of the time. My hypothesis is that contemporary attempts to appear "historic" risk desecrating the honest expression of architecture of another era and eventually eroding the popularity of Savannah as a tourist attraction.

Fig 1. Savannah, Georgia

This investigation holds import for any city that nostalgically holds onto its past by encouraging the construction of neo-historicist buildings. I believe there is a misinterpretation of history as something that can be captured and held pristine. In reality, the history of a city is

Fig 2. Mansion on Forsyth

inherently changing, evolving and diversifying as its history gets layered into its present and future. I intend to make a case that contemporary architecture is a beneficial and necessary step in city evolution and that the theories of Critical Regionalism can offer assistance in this evolution.

The Mansion on Forsyth

Any visit to Savannah includes a walk around Forsyth Park, appreciating the historic mansions along its edges. A recent building completed in Savannah is the Mansion on Forsyth - a boutique hotel completed in 2005 on the eastern edge of the park (fig. 03-05). The project includes the renovation of an 18,000 square foot brick mansion with 109,485 square foot of additional space for 126 rooms, dining room, spa, cooking kitchen and other hotel facilities.

The 19th century original building is a stunning example of brick construction and millwork in an era when skilled masons and wood workers were prevalent and necessary for the load-bearing construction of these elegant homes along the park. The addition completed in 2005 is steel-stud construction with brick veneer. These bricks lack the variety of color and texture of the true kiln-fired brick of the original. Lacking the skilled labor of the 19th century, the new structure lacks the detail in masonry or interior millwork. Yet it is just similar enough that most observers have no idea that it is not an historic building. The new construction is over 500% larger than the original, so the unique architectural aspects of the original are subsumed within the mass of the new building.

As does every new building in Savannah since 1973, the Mansion on Forsyth followed the historic zoning code criteria for materials, window size and proportion, rhythm and other factors. Nonetheless, the historic building adjacent is rendered meaningless and illegible as an historic building. Not only is the scale of the addition non-contextual on Forsyth Park, the back of the building places its parking lot directly on historic Abercorn Street. This is one of several recent projects in which the completed project is incongruous with the original goals of the Historic Savannah Foundation.

I appreciate the need for design review in an historic district, but it is my belief that the present design review code is actually leading to the destruction of the historic integrity of Savannah.

Historic Savannah

Savannah's founder, General Oglethorpe arrived in Savannah in 1733 with the intention of finding a suitable place where "persecuted protestants from many different lands" could freely practice their religion and defend the Carolinas from the Spanish in Florida.[4] He developed a unique plan based on a series of "wards" or squares (fig. 06). Each ward has an open space at its center (a "square") with ten residential lots, called tithing blocks on the north and south of the square, bifurcated by a street which is centered on the square. There are two blocks on either side of the square called trust lots that were intended to house religious and civic buildings. Through this organization, each religious institution could have its own square and its own constituency who would tithe a portion of their income to the specific religious institution (church) at that square. Between 1733 and 1855 Savannah expanded to encompass twenty-four squares before the city reached the limits of its original boundaries (fig. 07).

The majority of buildings in 18th and 19th century Savannah were simple, utilitarian structures.[5] These remaining are fine examples of American southern vernacular architectural styles including Greek Revival, Federalist, Neo-Romanesque, Neo-Renaissance and other variations on previous styles. We perceive these now as historic, though they were new styles designed by innovative architects when built.

The majority of the 18th and 19th century Savannah builders followed logical principles of regionalist design: utilizing local materials and labor skills; dealing with problems of heat, humidity and flooding by lifting the buildings up off the ground and including tall ceilings and tall, thin, double-hung windows for ventilation and thick masonry walls protected with stucco for thermal mass.[6]

William Jay is one of Savannah's most noted architects, responsible for the Bank of the United States (now destroyed), the Telfair House (now Telfair Museum) and the Savannah Theater, amongst others. He came to Savannah in 1817 from Bath, England where he had been studying Greek Revivalism (previously unseen in Savannah). His first building was a mansion for Richard Richardson and according to historian Mills Lane "…this building is a graceful reinterpretation of Classical forms that trace their way from Regency England through the late Italian Renaissance of Andrea Palladio and beyond to remote antiquity."[7] Though the styles are classical, this period of stylicstic combinations was rare in Savannah.

A later mansion by William Jay for William Scarbrough,"…employs massive, simplified elements and plain surfaces, with pioneering use of the archaic Greek Doric order."[8] Lane is noting that while the root of these elements are classical, their utilization was quite modern. Jay was abstracting the classical styles into a simpler, more planar expression. He utilized historical examples in new ways that set his buildings apart from others and influenced the design that followed. He was not limited to referencing existing adjacent buildings for his inspiration.

Books on Savannah's architectural history are filled with examples of buildings that set new design standards and were representative of the most innovative, forward-thinking work that could be done at that time. They were introducing a design aesthetic that was new, while retaining a sensitivity to the regional characteristics of Savannah.[9] Ironically, these architects would have been unable to produce these buildings amidst the regulations defined by the zoning code today.

Beauty of the Squares

> *"Savannah is a lovely city, not made so by architectural beauty, for there are very few fine houses here. What constitutes its beauty is the manner in which the city is laid out."*
>
> -Sara Hathaway writing on her visit to Savannah in 1833[10]

Though there are many registered historic buildings in the downtown, what is truly unique about Savannah is the scale, size and rhythmic modulation of the public squares. Yet the focus of the historic review process today is on the appearance of the buildings.

Savannah's urban structure was threatened in the early twentieth century as squares were turned into parking lots and three squares were removed along Montgomery Street to make way for faster thoroughfares. However, the preservationists were successful in getting the city to recognize the importance of the squares and now all 21 remaining squares have been returned to public space.

Oglethorpe began with four squares and by 1855, there were twenty-four.[11] While we appreciate their beauty today, all were originally designed for utilitarian functions: one held the water tower, each held a water-pump for the ward, and the residents' animals could graze here. The virgin forests that covered the original landscape were taken down to provide functional space. The grand oak trees with Spanish moss hanging from the branches that we see now were a 19th century addition. The curb that distinguishes the square from the street was added in the twentieth century. The only square with a building, Ellis Square, was the public market.[12] Originally the squares were a continuous open space, undefined by a border other than the building faces. Their original functions became obsolete but they proved to be very adaptable to cultural changes. They now provide a shady place for pedestrians and help slow vehicular traffic.

Historic Preservation and Tourism in Savannah

> *"In 1966 the area comprising Oglethorpe's original city plan and an extended area was designated a National Historic Landmark District. In 1968 the City, and the Foundation*

> *succeeded in convincing the State Legislature to pass an amendment to the Georgia Constitution that authorized historic zoning in Savannah. The Historic Review Board was established in 1973, ushering in a new era of regulated development within the Historic District".*[13]
>
> - the Historic Savannah Foundation

During the first half of the twentieth century, urban modernization was beginning to dismantle the historic fabric of the downtown. The move to the suburbs, the construction of shopping malls south of the city and the dominance of the automobile led to the construction of several parking garages, gas stations and other utilitarian buildings post-World War II. Three squares were destroyed to make way for a faster entry into the city. When the City Market on Ellis Square was torn down to make way for another parking garage in 1954, a growing sentiment of resistance that was brewing in the city erupted. Savannah was deteriorating and modernism was blamed.[14] The cumulative reaction to these events motivated seven women to start the Historic Savannah Foundation in 1955. They defined a clear set of goals to save the historic character of the city and make Savannah financially successful as a tourist destination.

Commencing with the Isaiah Davenport House which was slated for demolition, the members of the Historic Savannah Foundation garnered support to save the building, going on to develop a revolving fund that would enable the foundation to purchase historic properties in disrepair. These would then be passed on to responsible owners along with a contractual agreement that they would be renovated to their original condition.[15]

Though preservation groups had previously existed in Savannah, what was unique about this particular group was their belief that Savannah's success lay in recognizing itself as a historic tourist destination. If recent tourist income and property values are correct, they were correct.[16] Most cities in America have recognized the potential income tourism can bring to a city, but in Savannah this has given an economically derived political strength to the zoning regulations that now define all construction in the historic district.[17]

Downtown Savannah was a dangerous, crime-ridden area in the 1970's. Downtown Savannah (Broughton Street) was abandoned as the suburbs south of Savannah flourished following World War II. The tourism industry took on momentum beginning in the mid-1970's and has since become one of the major sources of revenue for the city. Businesses and residents have returned and other factors have encouraged and benefited from this tourist industry.

Tourism has been big business for Savannah economically. The Historic Savannah Foundation offers a document entitled "The Green Pages: A Sourcebook of Contractors, Suppliers and Service Providers who Support Preservation." With an introductory page entitled "Preservation Is A Proven Strategy In Boosting Local Economies", the document goes through the economic reasons why historic preservation is beneficial, including: historic preservation attracting investment, enhancing property values, attracting new businesses and jobs and boosting tourism. They point out that the average price of a home in the historic district in 1968 was $10,000 while in 2002 it was $450,000. The economic impact from tourism has jumped from $150,000 in 1965 to a staggering $1.7 billion in 2004. They state "Historic preservation has been the driving force behind this tourism economy."

Other factors have been part of this revitalization. The Savannah College of Art and Design was developed in 1979 as a private art college in Savannah that would use the city as its campus. They have purchased over seventy historic buildings in the city and renovated them within the standards set forth by the Historic Savannah Foundation. The school now hosts nearly 8,000 students and has brought income and energy to the city.

John Berendt's 1994 book and film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* brought national attention to the city. Tourism increased greatly following this film's release and the city has since been the backdrop for several other Hollywood films including *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (1999), *Forrest Gump* (1993), Glory (1989), and Roots (1976). Savannah has been so successful at selling the image of its town, that the American Institute of Architects Best Practices Guide refers to it in *Marketing Historic Buildings for TV and Film: Creatively Leveraging Historic Assets to Help Sustain Them*.[18]

As a result of Savannah's economic success, the majority of its beneficiaries (politicians, business owners and others) are devoted to retaining the popularity of the city. The Historic Review Board is considered largely responsible for this success. They have continued to garner support and there is now a clear message that decision in Savannah must be pro-historic and against the modern.

Nearly all construction post-1980 in Savannah is built to appear "historic". Though this may not have been the intention of the zoning codes set forth by the historic review board, this is the apparent result. While originally a proponent of modernism, the Chamber of Commerce quickly came on board once they saw the economic effects of preservation. Now, the review board struggles with the Chamber of Commerce and other political forces in the city who are less sensitive to the effects of false historicist buildings.[19] What needs to be addressed is the fact that if the city continues to encourage the design and construction of historicist buildings, the historical integrity of the city will be undermined. The result will inevitably have a negative impact on the tourism industry and other subsidiary industries that draw on the historic character of the downtown (such as the movie industry).

The Historic Review Process

On its website, the Historic Savannah Foundation sets forth the goals of the Foundation:

1. Historic Savannah Foundation preserves and protects historic buildings
2. Historic Savannah Foundation protects our unique city plan
3. Historic Savannah Foundation advocates for compatible new development
4. Historic Savannah Foundation enhances the livability of our community

The clarification of "advocates for compatible new development" are as follows:

1. "Ensures new construction fits in with surrounding buildings
2. Protects neighborhoods from inappropriate buildings
3. Preserves Savannah's status as a travel destination

In its literature, the Historic Savannah Foundation addresses the question of its position on development and responds "Historic Savannah Foundation has always been supportive of high quality economic development and through the Foundation's efforts, Savannah has created a highly profitable tourism effect and has become an attractive place to do business. Historic preservation is good for business."

It is the definitions of "high quality economic development", "compatible new development", "fits in with surrounding buildings" and the protection from "inappropriate buildings" that get to the core of the problem. These are clearly subjective statements that represent the opinions of the eleven members of the board at a given time. All new design is subject to these opinions.

The definition of these phrases can be found in the Savannah Zoning Ordinance section 8-3030 Historic District (2005). Anyone renovating or building new construction in the historic district of Savannah must strictly adhere to this document. A developer or owner must submit an application for a "Certificate of appropriateness" which is evaluated by the adherence to several "visual compatibility factors"[20] including: building and entrance height, proportion of façade and openings, rhythm of solids and voids, wall color and materials, roof slope and shapes, porch and balcony locations, overall scale and the "directional expression of front elevation"[21]. These factors are further defined in the "design standards" which differentiate residential from commercial requirements and provide specific minimum heights for floor expressions on the façade.[22] There is an additional category defining "street elevation type" which, in summary, states that the building elevation must look like the adjacent historic building elevations.

The design projects for new construction in an historic district must be reviewed by the Savannah Historic Board of Review whose eleven-member board is supposed to have "one or more representatives from a preservation-related profession such as architect, architectural historian, attorney, or restoration contractor."[23] Though this board has the responsibility to choose which buildings can get built in the historic district, there is no requirement that an architect be on the review board.

The conditions required for new construction in historic Savannah served a purpose in Savannah's history. The situation as it exists is problematic. What is deemed appropriate and compatible by the Historic Review Board is inevitably a building that emulates the historical features of surrounding buildings. Given the budget for design in America, it is not economically feasible to design a project that has the potential to be rejected by the review board. In development, the budget for design is minimal and therefore any decision that could lead to additional design iterations will be discouraged by owners and lenders.

The New Old Buildings – Savannah 1973 – 2006

Those influencing design and construction in historic Savannah believe that the financial rejuvenation and success of the city is a direct result of historic preservation. However, there is a concurrent belief that any contemporary architecture will have a negative impact on the growth of Savannah. As a result, nearly every new building in historic Savannah built since 1955 has been designed to look as if it was built in a previous era. There are barely any buildings that reflect the expressions of architecture evident from 1973 onward – since the inception of the historic review process. What has been built is a conglomeration of historicist buildings that blur recognition of the city and its character.

In 2006, there are approximately 2200 buildings in the downtown historic district.[24] The city was inventoried in 1962 and over 1100 buildings were found to be historic. Historic Savannah is one of the largest contiguous historic landmark districts in the United States.[25]

Based on the Savannah Historical Society's definition of historic, anything over fifty years old is historic and must therefore be protected from destruction or alteration. There is no differentiation made between building types or status. Basic residential buildings were included as well as civic and monumental buildings.

In 2006, downtown Savannah has a predominance of buildings such as the First Chatham Bank, built in 1970 that is, at first glance, nearly indecipherable from buildings built a hundred years earlier (fig. 08). However, when one looks closely, one sees clues to its actual age. The lintels spanning above the windows are not structural; they are merely steel decoration. There is an exactness inherent to modern steel frame buildings built with an accuracy not possible before contemporary tools. These stand in contrast to actual historic masonry buildings that have shifted over time. The actual historic buildings also show their age in the variety of color and texture of brick in contrast to contemporary buildings, where brick size and color is standardized. The stucco of historic buildings is layered over these brick facades and has a variety of color and texture built up over years rendering it markedly different from the new stucco facades which span standardized concrete masonry units or steel framed walls without variation.

In pre-industrial Savannah, many of these factors were obvious choices given the materials and resources available, the local labor skill, the building types needed and the region in which these buildings were constructed. In post-industrial Savannah, materials and resources, labor skills and building types are completely different. If brick were not being produced locally, would pre-industrial builders and architects have used it? If the skilled labor in the area supported steel construction instead of brick, would they have been required to build in brick?

The architects and builders of traditional Savannah were obviously not appealing to a tourism economy. They were responding to climatic factors, locally available materials and labor, building types that were functional for the city and basically accommodating the city plan designed by Oglethorpe. However, there are notable examples of respected architects of Savannah's past altering the urban plan when necessary. William Aiken designed the historic Federal Post Office (built 1894-99) along the western edge of Wright Square by combining two trust lots. This is considered an important historic building, yet it clearly violates the code.

It is the same code violation – disabling alley access between tithing blocks – that led to eighteen months of re-design for architects at Moshe Safdie's office when designing the Jepson Center for the Arts 1999-2002. The debate over this building traveled through the

media and led to significant discussion of the historic review process[26].

The major violations of the code caused by the Telfair addition (the Jepson Center for the Arts) included insufficient "solid" on the north façade and too much building mass spanning the alley. The architectural program for the museum was developed by the Telfair Museum and it included a grand stair evident from the north entrance off of Telfair Square. The inclusion of this grand stair required length in the plan that would inevitably require the designer to utilize some of the alley. So when Safdie responded to the program, he was likely surprised to find that the main stair was actually a violation of the historic zoning code. More surprising still was the power wielded by a group that is not protecting the life and safety of inhabitants (as do building codes) or even assessing design quality.

Those refusing to accept the Jepson Center's crossing of the alley stated that it could set a bad precedent for future buildings[27]. They seemed to ignore the fact that the Federal Post Office had already violated this and instead focused on the 1960's Savannah Civic Center as an unacceptable mistake. This project obliterated Orleans Square and completely ignored Oglethorpe's original plan. However, Safdie's design was offering a much more condition specific response. Once again, looking back at previous mistakes denies forward-thinking possibilities. Cities can learn from their mistakes.

Herein lies the limitation of the zoning code in the design process. We have a value judgment imposed without context. The results of this are inevitably generic mediocrity as is evident in the Chatham Bank. Applying the theories of critical regionalism theorist Alexander Tzonis, it imposes a "top-down" approach as opposed to a "bottom-up" approach to design.[28] As we will see in the later discussion of Critical Regionalism, there is a need to develop a well-informed design dialogue using a series of design principles to address specific design solutions rather than generic guidelines.

While there is clearly a level of financial success as a result of the Historic Savannah Foundation's review process, I believe that an inappropriate obsession with this image of historic Savannah has led, and will increasingly lead to a false presentation of historic Savannah. The eventual outcome will be a town no different than a Disney street or a movie set. The history, meaning and specificity behind the historic buildings of Savannah will be lost amidst generic neo-historic buildings that render the overall façade of the city false. These architectural decisions will eventually have a negative affect on tourism.

The implications of forcing designers to mimic historic buildings are subtle but evident. With the construction of each contemporary building that appears to be historic the actual historic significance of the city as a whole is diminished. It is the modern version of the infamous western town that was all façade, with no building behind it. Once people can't distinguish between historic and contemporary, the historic loses its integrity and what we are left with are historic simulacra.[29]

Telfair Square

> *"Architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it assumes an arriere-garde position, that is to say, one which distances itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the pre-industrial past. A critical arriere-garde has to remove itself from both the optimization of advanced technology and the ever-present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism or the glibly decorative."*[30]
>
> -Kenneth Frampton

Fig 3. Chatham Country Bank

Telfair Square in historic Savannah is unique in that is has a significant mix of architectural

styles (fig. 09). The historic Telfair Museum was designed by William Jay in the 1820's and an addition was added by Detlef Lineau in the 1880's (in a different architectural style). The Telfair Museum and the Trinity Methodist Church of 1848 by John Hogg hold the trust lots on the west of the square. The eastern trust lots hold two of three federal buildings designed in the late 1970's by the U.S. Government Architects. These Federal buildings are examples of post-modern historicism, clearly created as a result of the early versions of the Historic guidelines. There are classical expressions of base, middle and top with a minor cornice, but the materials are not traditional to Savannah. The buildings respond to the porticos of the historic buildings opposite the square, though in this case they are oddly scaled and proportioned and have none of the elegance and craft of the traditional work (fig. 10-13).

These buildings are commonly considered some of the ugliest in the historic district and yet, they follow the early guidelines of the historic review board. Over the years, the review board has tightened its requirements to include materials, window shapes and proportions, and even setbacks of windows in facades. But these guidelines still do nothing to avoid "ugly" architecture in historic Savannah.

The aforementioned Chatham County Bank (2001) on the north side of Telfair Square follows the historic guidelines from its date of design. This building appears to be historic at first glance, but is of course a contemporary building designed to look historic by use of shape, proportion, materials and other factors. While the Federal buildings may be post-modern stylistically, they are honest expressions of the architecture of their time. The First Chatham Bank seems unlinked to a particular time. While I am not advocating for more post-modernist work, I think that an honest expression of a building's place in history is critical.

There was an opportunity for Savannah to choose a contemporary building when they hired Moshe Safdie to be the architect for the Jepson Center for the Arts on the southern edge of Telfair Square. He was hired in 1999 and produced his first design solutions in 2000 (fig.14-16). It took more than eighteen months and dozens of design revisions to find a compromise between Safdie's original design response and a design solution that was "visually compatible" according to the Historic Review Board.

The original design of the Jepson Center for the Arts responded to the local materials and colors, the rhythms, shape and height of other buildings on the square, and the windows on the south are of the prescribed zoning code proportions. There were two major complaints from the review board – the building didn't respect the alley between the north and south tything blocks and the expression of the façade on the square had too much void (glass) and insufficient solid. The argument against crossing the alley denied the presence of a noted previous precedent - the Federal Post Office. A compromise was eventually reached to decrease the obstruction of the alley while still allowing the grand stair to occur.

Safdie's design concept was to create a contemporary dialogue between the interior life of this museum and the life of the square. He wanted to provide a 21st century museum while respecting the position on the historic square. Given technological and societal changes, façade of opaque material is not always necessary.[31] In addition, the north-facing location on the square allowed the design to be visually accessible without overheating. Unfortunately, the historic review board refused to accept this solution and he was forced to add falsely massive columns to the glazed front façade, clearly compromising the original design intentions. It is obvious that these columns do not belong on this otherwise, elegant and appropriate building.

Reactions to Modernism

> *"Architecture is a physical representation of human thought and aspiration, a record of the beliefs and values of the culture that produces it."*[32]
>
> - Leland Roth

Just as emphatically as a city can't ignore its history, if a city is to grow, evolve and thrive it can't cling to its history to the point of false representation. Culture, society, politics, economics and architecture all change as reflections of history. In Savannah, the success of preservation has become a deterrent to natural architectural evolution.

In an interview with the executive director of the Historic Savannah Foundation, Mark McDonald, he reiterated that the intention is not to have designers emulate the historic buildings. He agreed that there are many examples of historicist projects completed in the last twenty-five years and that this is potentially damaging to the historic district. However, Mr. McDonald stated that "design review panels don't create excellence; they find violations."

I also spoke with Beth Reiter, Historic Preservation Officer for the Metropolitan Planning Commission. Though she also encourages good contemporary design, she felt that the problem with the recent buildings was that they had not emulated historic buildings accurately. Her criticism was not of historicist design but that the designers had chosen and applied historic aspects indiscriminately.

I believe that any attempt to design a building to appear historic is false and without meaning. In this paper, I am advocating a change in the development of new construction in the historic downtown. I agree that the designer is responsible for what is placed in front of the review board, but the review board is presently creating a condition in which designers can't reasonably design contemporary buildings in the historic district.

It is not a de facto condition that an historic area have no contemporary buildings. In much of Europe, buildings much older than those in Savannah are adjacent to extremely contemporary architecture. The cities are thriving and richer as a result of the diversity. When mistakes are made, they learn and adapt.

Alternatives to Historicism

In America, a 50-year old storage shed that originally held no significance for its users can be deemed historic. Once deemed historic, it becomes nearly sacred – any alteration becomes synonymous with the destruction of American history. Though architectural history in Europe spans centuries beyond our own, the European citizens do not seem to have the same relationship to their historic buildings and cities. In much of Europe (specifically northern Europe), there is a continually evolving dialogue between contemporary and historic architecture.

All great cultures have had contemporary additions.[33] The Romans added to the Greeks and the contemporary Italians add to the Romans. Even if architects tried to mimic the past, it would not be physically or philosophically possible; every building is an archaelogical artifact representing its time in history.

Good historic architecture represents the best that a designer could do with their given place and time working with the materials, labor and culture available. A contemporary designer has the responsibility to respond in kind.

While practicing architecture in Copenhagen, Denmark I witnessed a cultural relationship between historic and contemporary architecture that engages and encourages contemporary design responses. This is commonly perceived to be how a contemporary society could best honor and respect the designers and builders of historic architecture. Again, it is through the lens of Critical Regionalism that we see how contemporary designers can respect historic buildings while express the new work with an equivalent specificity.

The inhabitants of Copenhagen, Denmark don't encourage historicist architecture. Though they debate at length about the success of new buildings, emulating historic structures rarely occurs. They preserve their historic buildings without the preciousness of our own society.

One of Denmark's most noted architects, Henning Larsen, designed the editorial offices of the newspaper BT (1993-4) adjacent to a row of historic buildings in Copenhagen's downtown (fig. 17). This building dialogues with the fenestration and datum lines of the adjacent buildings, it responds to the scale and shape of adjacent buildings, but it clearly expresses itself as a contemporary expression of its program. The inhabitants are often working late at night and the steel mesh panels on the side show their movement through the fritted pattern of light.

The Black Diamond library is a more radical example of a contemporary addition (1995-1999 by Schmidt Hammer Lassen Architects) (fig. 18-19). The original Danish Royal Library built in 1906 by architect H.J. Holm. The new construction adheres to the end of the existing library and extends across a major roadway

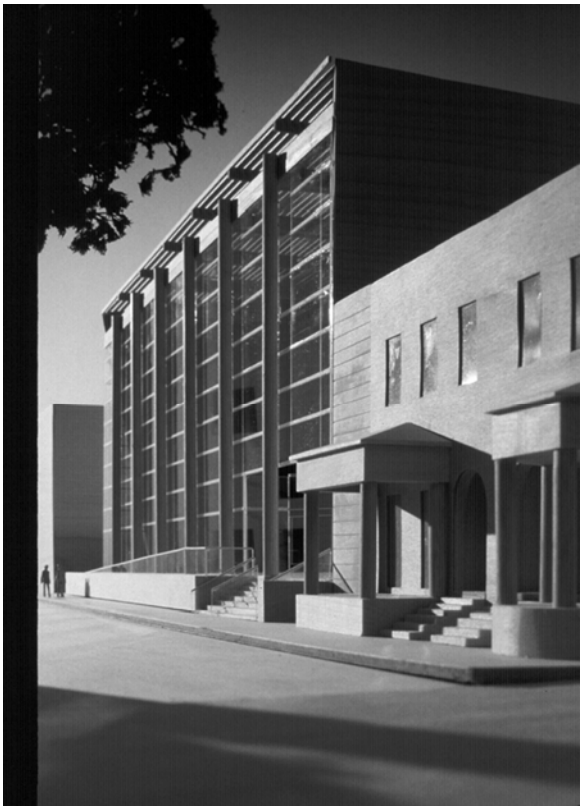

Fig 4. Moshe Safdie Architechts, early design model of Jepson Center for the Arts

and out to the canal. The Black Diamond gained its name from the black granite panels that sleekly cover its exterior. It appears to hover above the ground as it leans out towards the water. This building offers a completely new expression of a library that redefines a 21st century library and responds to the context of the water more than the existing architectural fabric. This utilizes contemporary materials, technologies and forms to create a striking, successful addition that wastes no time feigning historicism.

I believe that there is a profound misinterpretation of historic. Historic seems to be synonymous with sameness in Savannah. In actuality, history is the story of diversity, change and evolution. By forcing designers to emulate work done in a previous era, the city is refusing to move forward and accept inevitable change. A review board can help shape change and Critical Regionalism is a tool for that assessment.

Fig 5. Jepson Center for the Arts, Moshe Safdie Architects

Critical Regionalism

Critical Regionalism offers a solution for anyone involved in the design process in Savannah and cities facing similar questions of contemporary structures in historic contexts. Following insensitive copies of International Style work design done in the 1950's and 60's, towns and cities responded with a variety of solutions to stop what was perceived as the destruction of their cities. Historicist Post-Modernism was one response that gained popularity in much of the country, but this soon was recognized as lacking meaning and integrity to the same degree as the lesser modernist projects. Critical Regionalism arose as an alternative response to the sterility of insensitive modernism.[34]

As defined by Tzonis, the term Critical Regionalism came out of an analysis of the architectural work of the early 1970's that was not following the post-modernist stylings of that era, but was instead "giving priority to the particular rather than to universal dogmas."[35] He and others were advocating for a "bottom-up" approach to design which evolved out of

contextual specificity rather than a "top-down" approach that imposed generic regulations on design.[36] The goal for Tzonis is to recognize the "value of the identity of a physical, social and cultural situation, rather than mindlessly imposing narcissistic formulas." The historic zoning code has proven itself to be just such a formula.

Regionalist responses to modern architecture were touted in the first half of the twentieth century as an alternative to the rigidity and universality of the International Style. Lewis Mumford wrote about the Bay Area architects of the area – Bernard Maybeck, William Wurster and others who were incorporating modernist conceptions of space and form into architecture that was responsive to the specific social, cultural, political, topographical and climatic conditions of their specific locale.[37] However, Philip Johnson and other International Style architects chided regionalist architecture as being "anti-modernist".

According to Kenneth Frampton, another leading theorist on Critical Regionalism, "…the fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place."[38] "Indirectly" is a key term here. Simply emulating a list of criteria (window proportions, etc) doesn't allow the opportunity to discover and respond to the peculiarities of a particular project, site and time in history.

Frampton was critical in helping architects step out of the post-modernism of the 1980's and into design responses that were cognizant of the culture, history, politics, topography, climate, forms and all relevant factors in design from a perspective that does not discount the historical but requires a contemporary response.

In Savannah, architecture is being built that has completely lost its sense of meaning that comes from the particular. Instead, reductionist guidelines are narrowing the scope of possibilities for contemporary work and the result is a general reading of the "historic" architecture of Savannah with no specificity of history or meaning.

If the addition to the Mansion on Forsyth had taken a Critical Regionalist approach, the resultant building would have had a clear relationship with the original building, but would in no way deny the difference in technology, program, construction and socio-political history between them. The historic building would retain its identity as would the contemporary addition.

A perfect example of a Critical Regionalist response would have been the original design of the Jepson Center by Moshe Safdie Architects (fig.14). The original design recognized the cultural and natural context of its specific location, it honored the history of architecture and urban design in Savannah, but resisted dishonoring it through mimicry. The initial design encouraged a contemporary dialogue between the building and the square which could have opened up new ways of experiencing historic Savannah.

As previously discussed, the compromise design solution for the Jepson included a series of massive columns on top of the glass façade that faces the square. They are clearly an unintended addition, added out of necessity. They not only deny the original design intentions of the architect (to connect to the square) they force the building to falsely reference a historic building technique which is inappropriate on this contemporary building.

Conclusion

There is a small increase in contemporary design in Savannah, but it is not happening in the historic district. The new work-live lofts on Bull Street, south of Forsyth Park (out of the historic district) were built in a working class, under-populated area, but proved to be very popular by selling out well before construction was completed.[39] They are simple, unadorned forms built of pre-cast concrete slabs. They surround a courtyard which has multiple functions (social interaction and site water collection). The project honors the contextual adjacencies and heights, but in no way attempts to appear historic. This project utilizes the inherent properties of pre-cast concrete to capitalize on structural and environmental benefits. In addition, glazing is minimized to individual windows as opposed to large spans of glass. Project Architect Jerry Lominack, AIA believes that the project could have passed design review if it were places in the historic district, but every indication is that the review board would not allow a contemporary project such as this.

There are several empty lots in Savannah and developers continue to build new structures downtown. With each new design comes a choice: either respect and honor the historic buildings by designing buildings that follow the values set forth by the designers of the historic buildings or decide that we have nothing meaningful to add to the history of Savannah today and therefore, we must simply mimic what has been done before.

If towns like Savannah want to continue to thrive, the design and construction of contemporary projects must be considered not a simulacrum of existing buildings, but as projects that need to dialogue with existing culture, context and structures without cheap imitation. Instead of a typical Historic Review Board, there should be a design review board that is responsible for assessing whether the proposed projects (new construction and additions) are honest expressions of the best architecture possible.

When the Historic Review Board was reviewing the Jepson Center, they had an opportunity to set a positive precedent for Critical Regionalism in Savannah. Instead, the compromised solution states clearly that Savannah is not ready to honor its history by recognizing its place in the present.

The notion that buildings designed and built in the cultural and technological context of the 21st century should be unmistakable from those built two centuries earlier is disconcerting and destructive. If this perspective had been held by the community in 19th century Savannah, no one would be talking about Savannah today.

Bibliography

Adler, Leopold, et. al., “The Savannah Story”, Historic Preservation: Magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Jan. – Mar., 1969, pp. 8 – 21

Frampton, Kenneth, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”, from Postmodernism: A Reader, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993

Lane, Mills, Savannah Revisited: History and Architecture, The Beehive Press, 5th edition, Savannah, Georgia, 2001

Lefaivre, Liane and Tzonis, Alexander, Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World, Prestel Verlag, Munich, Berlin, London, New York, 2003

Parr, Adrian, The Deleuze Dictionary, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005

Roth, Leland, Understanding Architecture, Its Elements, History and Meaning, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1993

Savannah Zoning Regulations Section 8-3030 Historic District, Revised 02/03/2005. Available from http://www.thempc.org, aug. 1, 2006

Toledano, Roulhac, The National Trust Guide to Savannah: Architectural and Cultural Treasures, John Wiley and Sons, Preservation Press, 1997

Virtual Historic Savannah Foundation, http://vsav.scad.edu, Savannah College of Art and Design 1998-2005, Robin Williams, Project Director and Coordinator of Historical Research

Wiltrout, Kate, “Telfair addition a major test of Savannah's Chadbourne guidelines, which protect the scale of the Historic District”, Local News Now, Savannah Morning News On-line, September 5, 1999, http://www.savannahnow.com/stories/090599/LOCchad.shtml, viewed aug 20, 2006

Zumthor, Peter, Thinking Architecture, 2nd edition, Birkhauser, Basel, Boston, Berlin, 2006

Interviews – all by phone

Lominack, Jerry, AIA, Principal of Lominack, Kolman, Smith Architects, Savannah, Georgia, 08/28/06

McDonald, Mark, Executive Director of the Historic Savannah Foundation, 09/01/06

Reiter, Beth, Historic Preservation Officer for the Metropolitan Planning Commission, 08/30/06

Illustration

Fig. Source Content, location, date of photo

01 Zaretsky, Michael
view of Savannah, GA 2004

02 Zaretsky, Michael
view of Savannah, GA 2004

03 Zaretsky, Michael
Mansion on Forsyth under construction, 2004

04 Zaretsky, Michael
Mansion on Forsyth, Savannah, GA 2006

05 Zaretsky, Michael
Mansion on Forsyth, Savannah, GA 2006

Endnotes

[1] Zumthor, Peter, p.18

[2] Savannah Chamber of Commerce, "Savannah Tourism 2004"

[3] Savannah Chamber of Commerce data

[4] Lane, p.11

[5] Construction was slow, but by 1786, there were 400 dwellings in Savannah. The original buildings were predominantly simple structures of wood construction, generally not of high quality construction due to time and money. Of the few structures standing in 1796, nearly 400 were destroyed following a vast fire. After 1796, those with the funds chose to build with masonry. The Savannah depression of 1821, the 1876 Civil War and the end of the cotton industry (Savannah's major economic industry) in the early twentieth century all slowed construction in the city. By 1848, Savannah had 1702 wood-framed buildings and 233 of brick construction. See Lane, p.24, 33, 64

[6] The locally produced Savannah brick was a very soft brick that was never intended to be left exposed in exterior applications. Traditionally stucco covered the Savannah brick while a more durable, imported brick was used for exposed conditions. When these buildings fell into disrepair, the stucco spalled off, exposing the Savannah brick underlayment. Today the exposed brick has become a popular aesthetic and one that defines in large part the image of the historic downtown.

[7] ibid., p.75

[8] ibid., p.75

[9] Without being able to rely on active mechanical systems (pre-industrialization), designers had to consider sun, daylight, and climate.

[10] ibid., p.46

[11] In 2006, there are twenty-one remaining squares. Three squares along Montgomery Street were removed in the first half of the twentieth century.

[12] The public market had three iterations before being replaced by a parking garage in 1954. This structure was removed in 2006 and the square will no longer have major structures. EDAW Landscape Architects, Atlanta, and LKS Architects, Savannah are designers on the Ellis Square revitalization.

[13]

[14] The attitude towards modernism in the 1950's and 60's is evident in an article from Historic Preservation magazine from 1969 written by the director of the Historic Savannah Foundation at the time, Leopold Adler. The article describes the history of the Historic Savannah Foundation's "…opportunity to demonstrate that it is cheaper to restore the facades of historic properties than to spend great sums on neo-modern, often ugly, storefronts." The Savannah Story, Historic Preservation magazine, Jan-Mar 1969, v21, n.1, pp.8-21

[15] Historic Savannah Foundation Green Pages 2006 edition, p.1

[16] Historic Savannah Foundation Green Pages 2006 edition, p.1

[17] Savannah Historic Zoning Code sec. 8-3030

[18] AIA Best Practices, Jan 2004 – 18.13.01

[19] Interview with Mark McDonald, 01/09/2006

[20] Savannah Code sec 8-3030, 6

[21] Savannah Code sec 8-3030, 6, k

[22] Savannah Code sec 8-3030, p.11

[23] Savannah Code sec 8-3030, c, 1: *Creation and Composition*

[24] Data from the Virtual Historic Savannah Project, Savannah College of Art and Design, Robin Williams, chair of Dept of Architectural History

[25] http://www.savannah.com/, "Welcome to the Historic District", sep 1, 2006

[26] Local News Now, Savannah Morning News On-line, September 5, 1999, "Telfair addition a major test of Savannah's Chadbourne Guidelines, which protect the scale of the Historic District", as viewed on sep 9, 2006

[27] Local News Now, Savannah Morning News On-line, September 5, 1999, “Telfair addition a major test of Savannah’s Chadbourne Guidelines, which protect the scale of the Historic District”, as viewed on sep 9, 2006

[28] Tzonis, p.11

[29] The definition of simulacrum has multiple interpretations. Plato presents the notion of simulacrum as the “copy of the copy”. There is the idealized form that once materialized, is already a copy (a simulacrum). I am referring more to the more optimistic Deleuzian definition from Parr’s Deleuze Dictionary. This definition by Jonathan Roffe states “As Deleuze frequently argues, we must understand the eternal return in terms of the return and affirmation of the different, and not of the Same. Rather than distinguishing between good and bad copies, the eternal return rejects the whole model/copy picture – which is grounded on the value of the Same and infuses negativity into the world – in favour of the productive power of the simulacra themselves.”

[30] Frampton, Kenneth, Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance, _____, p.20

[31] Technologically, we rarely use load-bearing masonry construction given the structural efficiency of steel and other materials. Societally, a museum in the 21st century is a much more transparent building type than it has been in the past.

[32] Roth, Leland, Understanding Architecture, p.__

[33] Danish architectural historian Lars Gemzoe was the first to point this out to me in a lecture he gave in Copenhagen in 1999.

[34] This is not a criticism of modernism. I am referring to copies of modernist design done by developers to save costs. The original modernist work of Paul Rudolph, Aalto, the Eames and many others comes from the same sensitivity being espoused by proponents of Critical Regionalism.

[35] Tzonis, p.10

[36] Leaning upon the Kantian definition of criticism the principles of Critical Regionalism included responsibly defining the “origins and constraints of the tools of the thinking that one uses.”, Tzonis, p.10

[37] Lefaivre, p.26

[38] Frampton, Kenneth, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”, p.21

[39] Lominack, Kolman, Smith Architects, Savannah, GA, 2006