

## “Differentiated” and “Compatible”: Four Strategies for Additions to Historic Settings

..... Steven W. Semes

In the post-war period, an important issue for preservation has been defining how new construction might appropriately support and enhance, rather than detract from, historic buildings and districts under regulatory protection. So long as new additions or infill buildings were likely to be designed in the same styles as their historic neighbors, “fitting in” was rarely an issue.

But since the ascendancy of modernist architecture in the United States in the 1950s—a style that defined itself in terms of opposition to traditional styles and assumptions about design—an important part of the preservationist’s mission has been to tame the ambitions of modernist architects and their penchant for setting off historic structures with contrasting new ones. At the same time, many preservationists either acquiesced in or actively embraced modernist aesthetics for new buildings, especially as a means of distinguishing new

and old construction, which has been a preservation goal since John Ruskin called for it in the 19th century. Not surprisingly, much attention has been focused on the question of how we ought to manage the relationships between historic buildings and contrasting new additions in the context of contemporary architectural debates about style.

The 1964 Venice Charter—considered the founding document of the modern preservation movement—declares that the purpose of conserving and restoring historical monuments is to “safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence.” But it also says any addition to the landmark must be “distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp.”<sup>1</sup> The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, first issued in 1977, were closely based on the charter and called for additions to be at

the same time “differentiated” from the historic fabric and “compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.”<sup>2</sup> Both the charter and the standards assumed that any new work would be modernist in style and would need to be monitored to ensure compatibility.

But today contemporary architecture has reintroduced traditional styles, and the focus of some preservation authorities has shifted to defending the differentiation of new and old construction as a means of preventing confusion in the public’s perceptions of the historic building and its site. Consequently, some preservation commissions and architectural review boards have seemed to prioritize differentiation over compatibility in numerous recent decisions. For example, all the New York City projects mentioned in this article were approved by that city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission, some of which have proved highly controversial.

Moreover, both the charter and the standards assume a narrow definition of the “resource”—the built work to be protected—that empha-

sizes the tangible, physical material of the historic structure over more intangible factors, such as the original architect’s design intent or the historic style, typology, or building culture embodied in the protected structure or district. This interpretation of the resource, in combination with potentially contradictory requirements for differentiation and compatibility, has resulted in considerable confusion as both national and local bodies grapple with changing ideas and tastes among architects and the general public. This article will consider how these conflicting values have played out, both historically and in current practice.

A designer or preservationist contemplating new construction in a historic setting may adopt one of four strategies based on four possible attitudes toward the existing setting or resource: 1) literal replication, 2) invention within the same or a related style, 3) abstract reference, and 4) intentional opposition. These options represent a range of responses to the call for “differentiated” yet “compatible” designs for additions or infill construction in historic settings found in the Secretary’s Standards. Let’s consider each of these strategies in relation to both the stan-

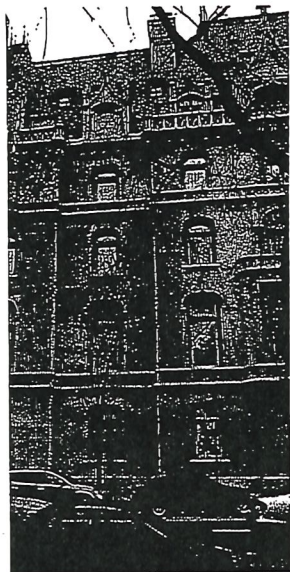
dards and historic practices and with respect to the differing views of the resource implied by each strategy.

### Literal Replication

The strategy of replication prioritizes compatibility and minimizes differentiation. This strategy will likely sustain the character of an existing setting so long as the historic elements to be replicated are well understood, the technical means to effect replication are available, and the scale of the replication is modest relative to the original building. Despite frequently expressed disapproval of this strategy by many contemporary preservation theorists and officials,<sup>3</sup> it has the sanction of history. Architects have often chosen to add to existing buildings by reproducing a previous architect’s work, sometimes even centuries afterward, usually for the sake of completing an intended but unrealized symmetry or extending a pattern already established. In such cases, the resource is defined as the design concept as a whole rather than any isolated part of it as it appears at a given time.

Many great European monuments visible today were completed not by the original





*Figure 1. Jewish Museum, New York, formerly Warburg Mansion (C.P.H. Gilbert, 1908) with addition (left two bays) by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates, 1993. Photo by Steven Semes.*

designers but by a series of successive architects willing to realize their colleagues' designs. Filippo Brunelleschi completed his Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence (1425) on the southeast side of the Piazza Annunziata. Over the course of the next two centuries the disparate buildings around the square were unified by a series of matching arcades that appear to be the work of a single hand. In mid-17th-century Paris, Jacques Lemercier replicated Pierre Lescot's century-old facade on the Cour Carré of the Louvre to maintain the symmetry of the expanded elevation we see today.

The recent Jewish Museum addition in New York, designed by Kevin Roche and completed in 1993, continued the fabric of the existing Warburg Mansion (constructed 1909) by adding two bays to the north and replicating the materials, general design, and much of the ornament of the original building. Although this "seamless" addition was criticized by some preservationists, the resulting unity of the composition would not have been achieved had the architect introduced a different architectural style or material for this modestly scaled addition. (Figure 1)

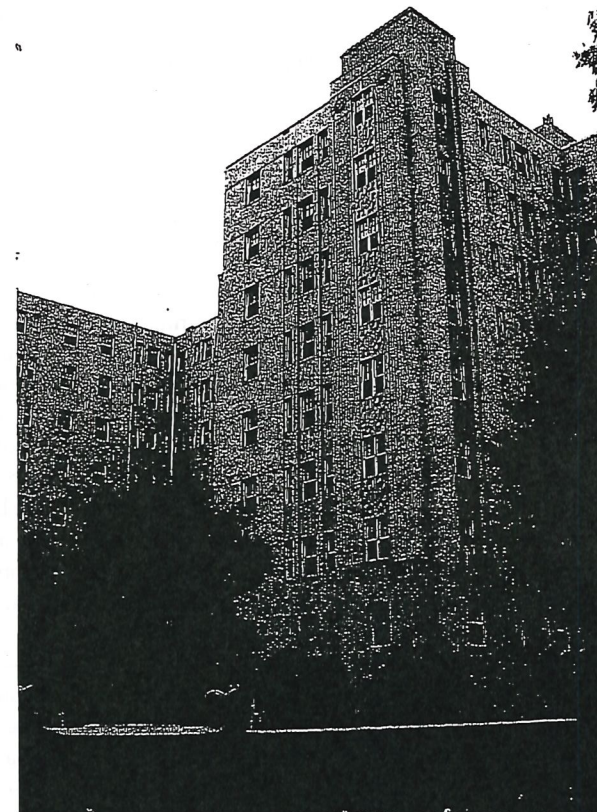
For the Kennedy-Warren Apartments in Washington, D.C., Hartman-Cox Architects designed a new wing for the building that completed the unbuilt designs of the original architect more than 70 years after construction was interrupted by the Depression. (Figure 2) With a few almost imperceptible exceptions, the new wing replicates the forms, materials, details, and character of the original building.

The National Park Service declined the project's application for historic rehabilitation tax credits, however, finding that the new wing violated the proscription in the Secretary's Standards against additions that create "a false sense of historical development."<sup>14</sup> National Park Service publications and guidelines strongly discourage additions that might confuse the public's perception of new construction as distinct from historic fabric and make no exceptions for delayed completion of a historic design. The wing completing the Kennedy-Warren's originally intended courtyard was seen as changing the historic character of the site because it changed the way the public "perceives what is genuinely historic," which is to say "the way the building came down to us in history."<sup>15</sup>

This literal and rather materialistic reading of the resource has been superseded in recent European conservation theory, which takes into account "intangible" aspects of cultural heritage—including the architect's designs, or relevant historic styles and building cultures—as well as the "tangible" historic building fabric.<sup>16</sup>

While the recent construction of the missing east stairway at New York's Grand Central Terminal would have been an appropriate occasion for replication—the original stair is plainly visible across the room—the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission required the architects to alter the design for the new stair. The carved ornament was omitted from the newels and the profile of the balusters was simplified, resulting in a blocky and inelegant appearance. In this case, the Commission's insistence on differentiation needlessly resulted in an inferior design that diminished the primary resource—the integrity of this historic interior.

Many historic preservation officials oppose replication, believing that new construction must, as the Venice Charter expressed it, "bear a contemporary stamp."<sup>17</sup> But a broader view of the resource



*Figure 2. Kennedy-Warren Apartments, Washington, D.C. (Joseph Younger, 1929) with addition (right) by Hartman-Cox Architects, 2004, completing Younger's original design. Photo by Steven Semes.*

would permit replication when the formal properties of the setting and the modest scale of the proposed construction make it appropriate. The "contemporary stamp" might then be supplied by a literal stamp on the added material, such as an inscription or other interpretive device identifying the addition and its date.



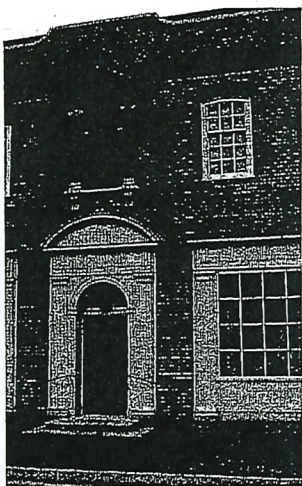


Figure 3. New commercial buildings, Merchants Square, Williamsburg, Va., by Quinlan & Francis Terry, 2003. Photo by Steven Semes.

## Invention Within a Style

This strategy, while not replicating the original design, adds new elements in either the same or a closely related style, sustaining a sense of continuity in architectural language. The intention is to achieve a balance between differentiation and compatibility, but weighted in favor of the latter. This strategy also has a long history: In fact, it is *what most architects have always done*.

Leon Battista Alberti, in his 15th-century treatise, urged architects adding to a preexisting building to work in the same style as the original builder and complete the work in the same spirit.<sup>8</sup> He followed this principle to complete the facade of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, adding to its medieval first story in kind, then subtly transforming the style into a Renaissance flourish at the top. Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola and other Renaissance designers followed Alberti's lead in their competition designs for the facade of San Petronio in Bologna, extrapolating the existing Gothic language without replication.<sup>9</sup> Back at the Louvre, two hundred years after Lemercier, Louis Visconti, and Hector Lefuel designed the monu-

mental facades on the Cour Napoléon in conscious imitation of his work. Our own United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., was greatly expanded in size over the course of two centuries without changing its style.

More recently, Quinlan Terry's group of four new buildings at Market Square in Williamsburg adopts the language of Virginia's 18th-century colonial capital but includes elements not previously seen in the restored town. (Figure 3) Similarly, the New York townhouse by Zivkovic Associates with John Simpson & Partners illustrates how a new building can display a traditional style and make a strong statement of its own identity without subverting the character of its setting.<sup>10</sup>

Modernist landmarks also benefit from this strategy. For 500 Park Avenue, a 1960 "glass box" by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in New York, James Stewart Polshek and Partners designed a sympathetic high-rise addition 25 years later that knits the older building more strongly into its urban setting without replication. (Figure 4) In these cases, the resource is defined as the continuity through time of the historic setting itself,

which is then sustained through the use of similar or congruent formal language.

Invention within a style—so long as it is an informed and fluent exercise—leads naturally to new work that is *both* differentiated and compatible with respect to its pre-existing context. Unfortunately, some preservation authorities continue to resist the very approach most likely to yield the results called for by the charters and standards they are charged with applying.

## Abstract Reference

The third strategy seeks to make reference to the historic setting while consciously avoiding literal resemblance or working in a historic style. This approach aims to balance differentiation and compatibility, but with the balance tipped toward the former. This is a difficult strategy to execute because it requires an artistry and skill that are not often available.

The abstract referencing of historic architecture is a modernist innovation in which the compatibility of the new and old is suggested by the reduction of composite form to abstract shape. An early example, Adolf Loos's 1910 Gold-

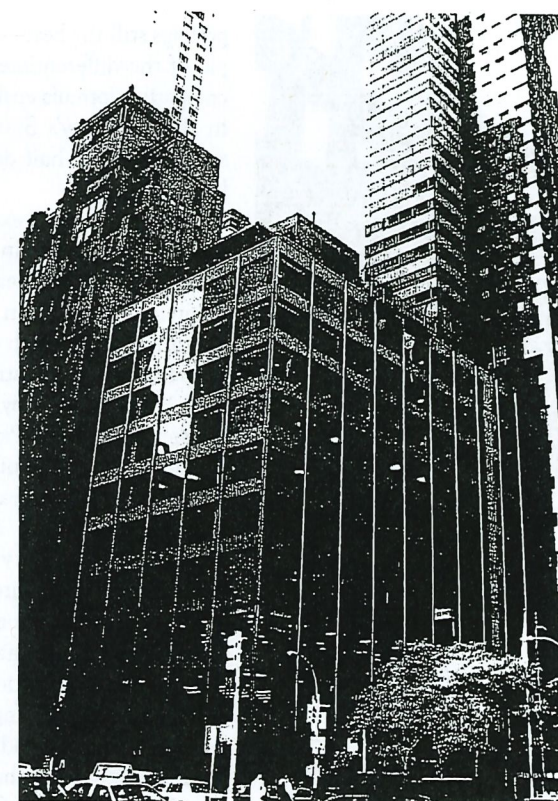


Figure 4. 500 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y., formerly PepsiCo Building (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1960) with office tower addition (right) by James Stewart Polshek and Partners, 1985. Photo by Steven Semes.

man & Salatsch Building on the Michaelerplatz in Vienna makes reference to its setting through massing, size, materials, and very restricted articulation, allowing it to be both "modern" (in the sense of using a minimum of historical detail) and "contextual" (in the sense of "fitting in" physically with the scale, materials, and massing of the surrounding buildings). Loos's building may be the earliest—and is





Figure 5. Seamen's Church Institute, South Street Seaport Historic District, New York, N.Y. James Stewart Polshek and Partners, 1992. Photo by Steven Semes.

perhaps still the best—example of the differentiated-yet-compatible formula enshrined in the Secretary's Standards some six and a half decades later.

A more recent example of abstract reference in a historic setting is the Seamen's Church Institute, an infill building in the South Street Seaport Historic District in New York, designed by James Stewart Polshek and Partners. (Figure 5) The new building's brick and metal facade approximates the massing of the adjacent 19th-century structures, but its pipe railings and exposed steel connections recall early modern maritime design, the rounded corners of its windows resembling port-holes. The flatness and industrial imagery of the building clearly differentiate it from its historic pre-industrial neighbors, but the general massing and color pass the "first glance test" for compatibility—the building does not jump out of its context or attract immediate attention.

Beyer Blinder Belle Architects took a similarly referential approach in their unbuilt design for the East 95th Street townhouse, in which similarities of abstract composition and alignments of horizontal features are used

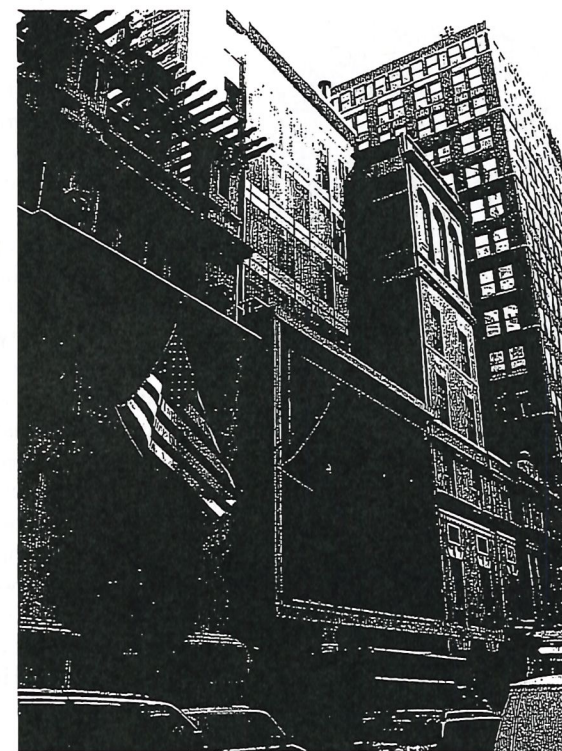
to relate the new and old buildings in the absence of a shared formal language.<sup>11</sup> But this reduction can only be carried so far: In the Davis Brody Bond addition to the landmark Harvard Club in New York, compatibility is sought through alignments of curtain wall mullions and limestone projections alone, but such abstract references do little to mediate a conspicuous disparity in formal composition, predominant material, and scale. (Figure 6)

This strategy is limited by the fact that a formal language—classicism, for example—cannot be reduced to abstract shape and still retain its distinctive "composite" quality—its ability to subdivide into coherent sub-parts or to join with other parts to become a larger whole.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, many modernist architects resist compromising for the sake of "fitting in," which is undoubtedly why the contextualism of the 1980s has been abandoned in favor of a newly aggressive oppositional posture toward historical architecture in the recent works of Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Steven Holl, and others. In any event, the strategy of abstract reference sees the historic urban setting as a resource to be conserved by

means of deferential massing, but is typically unwilling to engage traditional formal language at the scale of the building or its constituent elements.

## Intentional Opposition

Finally, the fourth strategy is one of conscious opposition to the context and the determination to change its character through conspicuous contrast, prioritizing differentiation at the expense of compatibility. Modern architects did not invent this idea. Andrea Palladio, who famously loathed Gothic architecture, wrapped the medieval town hall of Vicenza with elegant arcades to conceal the geometric irregularities of the older building. Palladio's arcades became a model of urban amenity and there is no question that the center of Vicenza is the richer for this facelift. Sometimes contrast is the appropriate response to a context that is weak or otherwise unsatisfactory, but we must be careful making such judgments. The most suitable use of this strategy is to repair damage to the historic setting brought about by previous insensitive or oppositional interventions. The use of this strategy intentionally to diminish a valued



historic context is usually inappropriate.

For example, Hugh Hardy's cubistic reconfiguration of a bombed-out Greek Revival townhouse on West 11th Street in New York's Greenwich Village is a dissonant interruption in the civility of the historic street, perpetuating the violence that destroyed the original facade in the 1970s. (Figure 7) Norman Foster's *mediateque* in Nîmes opposite the Maison Carré or his glass tower above

Figure 6. Addition to the Harvard Club (McKim, Mead & White, 1892-1902) by Davis Brody Bond, 2003. New York Yacht Club (Warren & Wetmore, 1899) is at left. Photo by Steven Semes.





Figure 7. Greenwich Village Townhouse, New York, N.Y., by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Architects, completed 1978. Photo by Steven Semes.

the Hearst Building in midtown Manhattan confront older masonry landmark buildings with contrasting metal and glass structures that have been widely imitated in historic settings worldwide. The Polshek firm, whose reputation was made by deferential additions like those at 500 Park Avenue and the Seamen's Church Institute in the 1980s, embraced the new oppositional stance in their more recent entrance pavilion at the Brooklyn Museum, a discordant intervention that deliberately violates the classi-

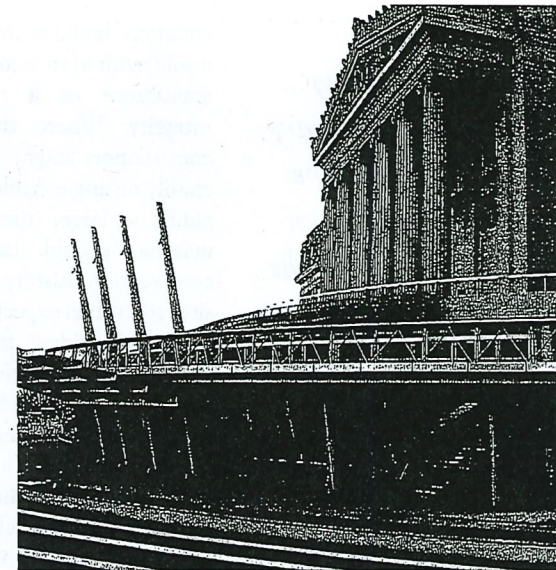
cal composition of the landmark building. (Figure 8) In these cases, the resource is seen as an artifact from a vanished world, something to be isolated in a museum setting or set off by contrast with a radically different modernist expression. Such designs are inherently incompatible with adjacent traditional buildings and inevitably lead to the erosion of historic character as increasing numbers of intrusive and alien forms challenge the qualities that made our protected settings valuable in the first place.

### Rethinking Differentiation and Compatibility

These strategies represent four variations on the relationship of differentiation and compatibility, two terms that represent a logical contradiction if we treat them as equally important values. In my view, the fundamental interests of preservation can only be served if compatibility is given greater weight, since it alone allows us to sustain valued historic character in the face of the many forces threatening it. To insist on differentiation by means of a contrasting modernist style for new construction, as some authorities have

in recent years, condemns historic buildings and districts to change in ways alien to their historic patterns and typologies. When consistently applied, this policy leads to the gradual erosion of historic character as the inevitable consequence of the preservation effort itself—an unacceptable contradiction in contemporary preservation practice.

The doctrine of differentiation has too often been used to mask simple stylistic bias. The Secretary's Standards and the Venice Charter both assumed that the modernist aesthetic would remain normative for contemporary building indefinitely. But current practitioners have revived traditional architecture and urbanism so that "contemporary" no longer necessarily means "modernist." Preservation regulations, including the Secretary's Standards, should not be construed to support the acceptance or rejection of any proposed project *solely on the basis of style*. Consequently, alterations or additions to historic settings that improve or strengthen the pre-existing character should be welcomed, regardless of their style; changes that weaken or diminish the historic character should not be permitted, again regardless of style. Additions



or new construction may be in the same style as the historic buildings, provided that the new construction is consistent with the typology, composition, scale, proportion, ornament, materials, and craftsmanship typical of the setting. Violation of these attributes for the sake of a questionable principle of differentiation leads inevitably to the loss of historic character and, thereby, loss of the resource in its truest sense.

When additions or new construction are appropriate at all, they should be added in such a way that the new is distinguishable from the historic fabric by informed observers or trained professionals. No differ-

Figure 8. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y. (McKim, Mead & White, 1897) with addition by the Polshek Partnership Architects, 2003. Photo by Steven Semes.



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entiation should be made that would result in an incongruous appearance or a ruptured integrity. Where the new construction might not be readily distinguishable by the public at large, interpretive materials should clarify the construction history of the site rather than expecting this to be self-evident from the appearance of the new construction alone. De-emphasizing differentiation and prioritizing compatibility would allow historic buildings and districts to grow and change in accordance with their historic patterns and styles, thereby assuring a continuity of character through time. This, in my view, is the proper way to protect the resources to be conserved in our historic buildings and districts.

Compatibility requires more than similarities of massing or abstract references; it must be a primary objective of the designer and an integral part of the design process for projects in historic settings. What makes buildings from different eras and styles compatible is that they share the same underlying principles of space, structure, elements, composition, proportion, ornament, and character. If these principles are consistent among the buildings along a

street or around a square, they will be compatible, regardless of style. Compatibility is not uniformity; however, if the principles embodied by neighboring buildings are antithetical, no alignment of cornices or adjustments of massing will be sufficient to maintain a relationship of civility among them.

The decision about which of the four strategies to follow cannot be made lightly. It is a question of what is most respectful of the existing architectural and urban conditions or, if these are not suitable, what will produce the greatest degree of harmony and wholeness in the built environment. Such decisions cannot be made one building at a time, but must recognize the potentially exemplary nature of every architectural act. If we pay more attention to the historic urban setting than to the individual building and move beyond an obsessive concern with the chronology of construction, our choice of strategy can fulfill our obligation as citizens to make the city more beautiful, sustainable, and just. If we adopt this ethic, we will naturally seek not the architecture of our time but, more importantly, the architecture of our place.

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# NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Second International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, "International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites" The Venice Charter, Venice, 1964. See in particular Articles 3 and 9.

<sup>2</sup> *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, 1995. As amended and annotated. First published 1977. See in particular the "Standards for Rehabilitation," Standard 9.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World*, McGraw-Hill, 1982 (reprinted by University Press of Virginia, 1990) and Paul Spencer Byard, *The Architecture of Additions: Design and Regulation*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1998.

<sup>4</sup> *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, 1995. (See in particular the "Standards for

Rehabilitation," Standard 3.)

<sup>5</sup> See National Park Service publications such as Preservation Brief 14: *New Exterior Additions to Historic Buildings: Preservation Concerns*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Conservation Principles: Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment*, English Heritage, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> The Venice Charter, 1964, Article 9.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (Translated by Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavenor), MIT Press, 2001. (Originally published in Venice, 1486.)

<sup>9</sup> See Rudolf Wittkower, *Gothic vs. Classic*, G. Braziller, 1974, and Marzia Faietti and Massimo Medica, editors, *La Basilica Incompiuta*, Museo Civico Medievale Bologna, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> See Steven W. Semes, "The Art of Conversation," *Period Homes*, October 2006, pages 18-21.

<sup>11</sup> See Semes, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of classical formal composition, see the author's comments in "Raising the Standards," *Traditional Building*, February 2007, pages 13-18. There is extensive literature on classical composition: See for example Nathaniel Curtis, *Architectural Composition*, J. H. Jansen, 1935, and A. Trystan Edwards, *Architectural Style*, Faber and Gwyer, 1926. More recent discussions include Steven W. Semes, "The Art of Composi-

tion" in Georges Gromort, *Elements of Classical Architecture* (Henry Hope Reed and W. Stafford Bryant, editors), W. Norton & Co., 2001; Alex Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Classical Architecture: The Idea of Order*, MIT Press, 1986; Nikos Salingaros, *A Theory of Architecture*, Umbau Verlag, 2006.