The Process of Compromise: A Team Approach to Conservation Environments

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From the sometimes painful discussions on the specific needs of a particular historic building and its collection, a variety of museum professionals can reach a consensus on those things that are essential to the institution's survival.

Introduction

At the first APT/AIC symposium entitled Museums in Historic Buildings, held in Montreal in September 1990, speakers from a number of disciplines gave talks on various aspects of environmental control for collections housed in historic structures. Concerns were expressed about appropriate levels of relative humidity (RH) and temperature, the effect that RH would have on different types of structures, and the cost of maintaining elaborate mechanical systems to provide "museum quality" environmental control. Richard Kerschner, whose paper "A Practical Approach to Environmental Requirements for Collections in Historic Buildings," has since been published in the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* (31 [1992]: 65-76), dealt with the possibility of compromising "perfect" levels of RH to suit particular building types that could not sustain these levels without major structural damage.

By the time of the APT/AIC Symposium II: Museums in Historic Buildings, held in New Orleans in September 1991, a major change had occurred in the approach that many speakers and audience members alike were urging when faced with the "necessity" of housing collections in historic structures. The term "compromise" appeared. The discussion continued at the third symposium in the series, held at the AIC annual meeting in Denver in 1992.

The term compromise has taken on the unfortunate connotation of giving up on one's principles. However, a well-crafted compromise is quite the opposite; it is the optimal solution to a problem. Such a compromise does not represent a victory of one side over the others but incorporates the best of all points of view by taking advantage of the specifics of a particular situation.

How is this term applicable to the process of determining what should be done to preserve both a collection housed in an historic structure *and* the structure itself? The answer lies primarily in separating what is necessary for the particular collection from what is only an application of outmoded or overly generalized rules. The determination of the actual rather than the assumed is the central, basic requirement of the process.

Common Mistakes

Commonly, when dealing with a collection in a historic structure, usually as a prelude to renovation, an institution will ask a collections conservator to recommend standards for RH, temperature, and lighting. The conservator recites the oft-repeated mantra of 50/70, that is, 50% RH ±5 and 70° ±2 and the usual 5, 15, 50 foot-candle figures for different categories of light-sensitive objects. The institution shows the figures to the architect and engineer, who formulate costs for the required mechanical system. Given the staggering costs of equipment and its installation (not to mention ongoing energy costs for its operation), the institution often concludes that such a system is impossible and confines its environmental control to summertime air conditioning and winter-

time heating. In this case, consideration is seldom given to the impact of any system on the historic fabric of the building, either in terms of immediate effects (like cutting through historic fabric for installation) or long-term effects (like continued deterioration of the structure from moisture). The result can be the eventual destruction of historic fabric caused by installation of a mechanical system that may not even maintain the levels of temperature and RH that the collections conservator *thought* were necessary. In such instances there is no "winner"; both the collection and the structure have lost.

In another common scenario, a well-intentioned and sophisticated institution accepts the costs of "complete" environmental control, although often without pollution control. Staff and consultants struggle to operate such a system without understanding the almost inevitable damage to the structure. This scenario is most common in art museums, whose attention is focused on the preservation of extremely valuable collections and whose staff are unlikely to consult an architectural conservator, or anyone else whose primary professional concern is the preservation of the building. In this case, the building has lost, and the collections may have won; if the collections conservator has failed to focus on the needs of the particular collection rather than reciting the mantra, the collections will have lost as well. The "ideals" of RH and temperature are not actually ideal for every collection and can cause significant damage to collections that have become acclimated to different levels.

These two scenarios represent opposite responses to one extreme: in the first, nothing is done to accommodate the long-term needs of collections, and in the second, all involved think they are doing everything possible for the collection. In both cases, however, irreversible damage to the building may be the result.

On the other side is the situation where no collections conservator is consulted (usually because the administration does not want to deal with what they "know" will be the conservator's requirements [the mantra]), and all respect is shown to the structure. In this case, the building wins, and the collection loses.

Looking for Answers

Exactly where does the optimal middle ground lie? The only all-purpose answer is "It depends." There is no generic institution. It is perhaps a cliché to say that all institutions are different, but they are; it is in the details that solutions can be found. This is one reason that a team is required to find those solutions; the facts must come from many different sources. It is the facts that will provide the basis for the compromise. This may appear obvious, but it is often overlooked. The crucial step, the one that is most often omitted, is the accumulation of data about the collection and the structure: not generic data, but specific information about the particular building and the particular collections. It is only after all pertinent data have been accumulated that it will be possible to make appropriate decisions regarding temperature, RH, pollution control, and light levels for the particular institution.

This is not to say that the accumulation of data is the first step in the process. Before that can begin, it is necessary to assemble a team composed of representatives from all appropriate disciplines. This team will usually include an architectural conservator, a collections conservator, an engineer familiar with the problems of historic structures, and representatives from the institution's governing body, as well its curatorial and education departments. Many very different points of view and professional backgrounds must be included if the project is to be brought to a successful conclusion.

A museum exists in both time and space. The architect and designers focus on the static, but the staff of the institution must focus on the processes that take place there. Someone must follow staff members through their days: where will they keep their coats and personal possessions? Where will they eat lunch? Where can they work while observing objects? The same questions should be asked of visitors, of scholars, and of student groups. The paths that collections objects follow through the building must be followed as well, from a loading dock or other entrance to registration and on to storage or exhibition. This is particularly true for oversized or very fragile objects. What about objects on approval for loan or gift, or collections to be loaned?

Likewise, someone must be responsible for coordinating museum programming, special events, and disaster planning. Someone must look at the implications of the design for security, energy efficiency, pest control, and its effect on the routine of the docents. The multitude of points of view and the large numbers of different constituencies that are served by the institution justify the team approach; no team member should feel that the team exists only to correct each other's mistakes or to look over each other's shoulders. On the other hand, team members should not be team players to excess; they must be willing to stand up for their own points of view until objections are satisfactorily dealt with.

Building a Team

Although the composition of the team will vary depending on the staffing of the institution and the scope of the project, certain typical roles can be assigned. The conservator's job is not to quote numbers from the conservation literature but to produce recommendations based on direct examination of the particular collections involved. It is not unusual to see recommendations in conservation assessments for silica-gel controlled microclimates where the conservator has presented no evi-

dence that the objects concerned are humidity-sensitive or have suffered humidity-related damage. In excavated objects, for example, it may be unwarranted to recommend expensive RH controls if the objects have no history of salt damage. Variations in the materials, construction, and history of each artifact will cause variations in its response to environmental factors. Conservators and conservation scientists have been quite sloppy in their arguments about the need for climate control, taking examples of damage seen in individual objects as equivalent to evidence for the need for climate control in whole categories of objects. The need for control of RH rests on evidence derived from the examination of individual objects; there is no evidence to support the need for flat-line RH controls of major groups of objects.

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that whole classes of objects like wood, canvas, and paper undergo particular stress at extremes of RH. If there is no evidence to support the need for close controls of RH, there is evidence that removal of the highest and lowest RH levels provides substantial protection. For whole collections, therefore, control of RH that prevents levels above about 70% and below about 25% may be warranted for virtually all humidity-sensitive collections, but the need for tighter controls must be demonstrated on a case-by-case basis.

The collections conservator's job is therefore to balance observation from a specific collection with published research on the response of classes of artifacts to the environment. When proposals are made during negotiations over environmental parameters, the collections conservator should be able to specify groups of objects that will be affected in certain ways. For example, if a group of objects can be expected to corrode at above 60% RH, and the proposed system can provide such protection, the objects will not need containerization; if the system will prevent only RH levels above 80%, these pieces will need additional protection. Additional costs and inconvenience to the operation of the institution would therefore have to be factored into decision making.

Typically the collections conservator is on the staff of, or a consultant paid by, the institution. Because collections management and environmental control are becoming a specialized field within the larger field of conservation, it is becoming more common for institutions with a conservation department to hire an outside conservator to take on some of the burden. Politically this may be helpful, as the conservator's role may become the source of considerable friction. As the team process proceeds, it is often the conservator who acts as the devil's advocate, questioning the claims and recommendations of the architect and engineer. The process is often noisy and painful; that some team members question the recommendations of others is, however, essential.

Some architectural teams have taken on conservators as their consultants; this is a new development with interesting but untested ramifications. Conservators put in this role are happy that architects consider them important but nervous that their opinions will be filtered through, and possibly altered by, their employers, denying them direct access to the institution.

The architect's job is to produce building plans that fulfill the client's program. Although complaints about architects' high-handedness abound, it is important to remember that the architect may have the most at stake in the outcome of the project. Typically, the architect expects to be the captain of the team; if all parties participate in the team effort in good faith, that should not be a problem. Variations in the role of the architect in historic-preservation projects depend on the architect's experience in the field. Some architects have extensive training and experience with historic preservation; others become involved with little preparation. In the latter case, other members of the team may have to take a leading role in explaining the goals and limitations on a restoration project.

The engineer's role is to design environmental systems that fulfill the specifications established by the rest of the team. In most cases, the engineer's primary job during deliberations is to cost out various specifications. As it is not ordinarily seen as the engineer's job to provide estimates for continuing energy or maintenance costs, others on the team should ask for this information early. The engineer on a project is typically one who has worked with the architectural firm in the past.

Collections staff, including registrars, curators, and educators, will be part of the team as appropriate for the institution, paying particular attention to the impact of the design on the spaces they will use. Where will the collections go while the facility is being renovated? When and where will photography and cataloging be done? Will there be room for both permanent and temporary exhibitions? How much space will be needed to produce the exhibitions that fulfill the goals of the institution and do justice to the collections? Where will scholars be able to view objects not on exhibition? What special needs will loan exhibitions have? When the project is a house museum, a staff position on the team may be filled by someone primarily trained as a historian rather than as a museum-based art historian, and the job may be centered on discussion of authentic period design.

For a building with exhibition galleries, the exhibition designer's role is to look at the plans with an eye to the display of the collections. The designer will ordinarily work closely with the curator on a design appropriate to the collections, with the architect on interior design, and

with the collections conservator on the choice of materials, particularly those for interiors of display cases.

The project's mechanical engineer is commonly from a firm with long-term ties to the architect. Few architects have designed more than one museum, and their engineers are often in the same situation. The museum environmental control expert's role is to bring to the team extensive experience in the design and long-term operation of mechanical systems in cultural institutions. He or she must bring to the table ways in which the museum's needs and capabilities differ from those of other types of institutions and to be aware of the pitfalls and successes seen in comparable institutions. It is advisable that this consultant, like the collections conservator, be hired directly by the institution, so that the institution can receive honest and direct evaluations of the work of the architect and engineer. In some cases, specialists in lighting, fire protection, and pest control may also be brought in.

Some institutions include on the team a project manager, whose role may be to coordinate communications; this role may also fall to an administrator of the institution. There must be completely clear lines of communication to maintain the best possible morale in a highly charged environment.

The role of the museum director is to represent the long-term interests of the institution. Ideally, the staff and governing board will have had substantive discussions of the institution's short- and long-term goals, its mission, and its concrete plans for conservation, exhibitions, and acquisitions. With this information, the director can guide the discussions in certain general directions and forestall the development of plans that fall outside the scope or capabilities of the institution. In many cases it will be the director's job to administer the project or to ensure that such supervision is provided, to keep the project within budget, and to ensure the desired outcome. The director may or may not participate in the minutiae of the project, but experience shows that it is the director's head on the block if disaster strikes.

Other team members (those in public relations, programming, interpretation, fundraising, and the like) will have their customary roles, but with an added complication. Most of the work of the team will be based on readings of successive architectural plans. All team members must be able to read the plans and visualize the repercussions in the areas they represent. Architectural plans represent a large amount of information that is not necessarily labeled in a way that makes its meaning obvious. Everyone must be willing to sit and ask so-called "stupid" questions, or the team will find that it has, willy-nilly, approved details that it was unaware of. The architects should be required to present their material in a manner that is clear to those outside their profession.

Conclusion: The Process

How does the process actually work? The way is rarely smooth. It is important for someone to establish a balance that will allow sufficient input from a number of parties without total chaos. Part of the process is establishing a pattern of circulating documents for review, but there will be times when only face-to-face meetings will expedite the process. Smaller groups may benefit from meetings where they "walk through" the building in order to facilitate understanding. Initial input from the separate parties will not produce the desired results; every change that is made on behalf of one party's interests will affect the concerns of others, and constant adjustments will be needed. Perhaps one of the important criteria for a successful team process is a tolerance for discord; until museum design gets to be more of an exact science, the best results will undoubtedly require the services of people who are willing to disagree openly, to defend their views with facts, and to work creatively to arrive at solutions that incorporate ideas from all parties.

The history of this team process of museum design and renovation is short, but sophistication on matters related to conservation, as well as other subjects like the authenticity of paint colors, finishes, window treatments and furniture arrangements, and the appropriateness of various modern technological intrusions is growing rapidly. The three APT/AIC symposia on Collections in Historic Buildings and the resulting New Orleans Charter for the Joint Preservation of Historic Structures and Artifacts (which appears in this issue) have illustrated rapid growth in technical knowledge, as well as shifts in approach. Change will undoubtedly continue. All involved in historic preservation projects should be aware of the most up-to-date information in their specialties and be eager to learn from professionals in allied fields. By doing so, all participants benefit from the opportunity to contribute to the public's knowledge of our joint past that collections housed in historic buildings can offer.

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