

Historic Preservation and the “Art” of Architecture

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“We shape our buildings, and afterward our buildings shape us.” Sir Winston Churchill

Architecture says a lot about society. We learn much about ancient Mesopotamia, the Orient, the Greeks and the Romans, my own Norse ancestors, through the records of their buildings and their cities, parts of which have stood for millennia.

Picture the pioneers who entered this valley just over 160 years ago. They put blood, sweat and tears into creating a commune in the valley of the desert. It may not seem much by today’s standards, but it was the best they could do. If you really study one of these buildings from a hundred or two hundred years ago, even in their primitive form, these builders of yesterday exhibited great craft, artistry, and even complexity in seemingly simple designs and details. What they created said a lot about who they were as a people. A few relics remain, mostly in the form photographs and written histories, and a few shards of structures and re-creations in our state’s many historical museums. The stories of people’s lives are written not in their great monuments, but in their buildings of everyday use as well.

Through the ensuing generations, we have seen many changes to our city. Some of these changes have been positive, and some not so much.

How will future historians regard our time—a time when buildings are discarded after a single generation (such as the downtown malls, the Salt Palace, or endless strip shopping centers), where buildings fashioned as works of art and craft are laid to ruin (such is the pending disposition of many Sugar House businesses), and where the resulting “progress” of development is all-to-frequently banal and blighted from its inception (such as the Sugar House ShopKo that replaced a once-vibrant neighborhood)? There was a time when architecture was more than mere utility, and buildings more than mere commodity.

Buildings at their best, even in the simplest of structures, can be the most meaningful expressions of art and culture, combining not only visual and sculptural qualities of form, texture and color, but also creating the scenes where the drama of daily life unfolds. This consideration should be applied in some measure to our homes, to our businesses and our institutions as well. It should be applied both to the new buildings we create, as well as to the old buildings we preserve.

Sugar House stands at a crossroad today. Nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 2003, the former Granite Lumber Company and ZCMI building, now the Blue Boutique, is one of these places that can and should be preserved as a part of the story of Sugar House. It still has many chapters left to tell in its bejeweled history. Although small and simple by comparison, this building is no less important to the history of our

place than the Salt Lake City & County Building, or the Tabernacle at Temple Square with its gleaming new roof and seismically stabilized piers, or the State Capitol now nearing completion of its massive renovation. We've certainly demonstrated as a community that we have the means to tackle even the most complex restorations, so why not this simple, regarded structure. By comparison, could one say that the ceiling of the Sistene Chapel painted by Michelangelo is of value while Albrecht Dürer's *Praying Hands* could be discarded?

Is this the best we can afford our city today? Our city is our legacy. It deserves the very best effort we can give. And we, too, can only hope that our best efforts today will be viewed as good enough of future generations who read our history in the story of our city.