

by JUSTIN DAVIDSON

# Young and Defenseless

**THE PLIGHT OF MODERN BUILDINGS  
IN A MODERN WORLD**

**“Every generation revolts against its fathers and makes  
friends with its grandfathers.”**

**—Lewis Mumford**

There had never been a building like it: a skyscraper that twisted back on itself like a pretzel, wrapping glass and steel around a hole filled with sky. But after 25 years or so, the vast bureaucracy of the government TV station headquartered there had been dispersed and a building that had once symbolized the technological prowess of a burgeoning economic empire came to stand instead for an overreaching state. Eventually, the Chinese Central Television building, designed by Rem Koolhaas and completed in 2010, was sentenced to demolition. Despite the protests of architects around the world, the cranes began to gather.

The specter of that scene from the not-so-distant future is galvanizing the historic preservation movement into recognizing that distinguished works of architecture often become vulnerable long before they become venerable.

In today's mercurial landscapes, buildings pop up and get torn down with dizzying rapidity. In China and Southeast Asia, cities are swelling and reshaping themselves so quickly that they can hardly afford to consider whether their rusting industrial belts contain any power stations or factories worth salvaging. In the United States, football teams are plied with newer, bigger stadiums that rapidly become cramped and obsolete. In Europe, companies erect grandiose headquarters, then vaporize, consolidate, or move, leaving behind a made-to-order shell along a highway.

In 1984, the Renault car company commissioned a factory in the English city of Swindon



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## A. CONGER GOODYEAR HOUSE

OLD WESTBURY, NEW YORK

One of the most important Modernist houses in the New York region, the A. Conger Goodyear House by Edward Durell Stone (1902–1975) barely escaped demolition at the hands of a developer in 2001. Arguably Stone's masterpiece of domestic architecture, the house, built in 1938, attests an unusually felicitous relationship between architect and patron. Goodyear was a founder and the first president of the Museum of Modern Art, which Stone also designed with Philip Goodwin.

Once surrounded by a 100-acre wooded estate, the hill-top house now lies amid a sea of new "mansion" construction. Following its inclusion on WMF's 2002 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites* the house was acquired through a partnership between The Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation, World Monuments Fund, and the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, and has since been stabilized and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Today, a buyer is sought who will purchase the house as a landmark-protected property.

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**L**ess than a century after their design and construction, numerous Modernist masterpieces—critical documents in the history of architecture—are being routinely disfigured, abandoned, or demolished, a phenomenon exemplified by the recent razing of a well-known Neutra house in Rancho Mirage, CA.

Many people still associate architectural preservation with the bricks-and-mortar challenges of preventing old buildings from falling down; however, modern structures are subject not only to the same risks but often to additional ones relating to the innovative technologies or ephemeral materials with which they were built. These

methods and materials—as well as the innovative ideas that underpin their design—are often the very attributes that embody the landmark qualities of modern architecture. But perhaps, the greatest threat to modern architecture is that of public apathy—a lack of consensus, or perhaps confidence—that buildings of our own time can be important enough to be kept for the future, both as art and as part of our cultural history.

Modern landmarks present complex conservation challenges. As a result, our efforts to save modern buildings often require the additional tools of public advocacy, education, media attention, in addition to those of money and repair.

## NATIONAL ART SCHOOLS

HAVANA, CUBA

The brainchild of none other than Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Cuba's National Art Schools were built on the grounds of the once-exclusive Havana Country Club. Designed by a trio of architects—Cuban modernist Ricardo Porro and the Italians Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti—and begun in 1961, the five innovative buildings reflect the country's blend of Hispanic and African artistic traditions. By 1965, however, Soviet influenced members of Cuba's centralized Ministry of Building Works, who favored standardized forms to the sinuous nature of the buildings, abandoned the project halfway through its construction. Only two of the five schools were ever completed. Over time the site fell into ruin, suffering from neglect, vegetation encroachment, and vandalism. Since their inclusion on WMF's 2000 and 2002 lists of *100 Most Endangered Sites*, momentum has been gathering for their restoration, completion, and reestablishment as important monuments in Cuban architectural history.

from Sir Norman Foster, who delivered a brawny beauty with undulating roof and waving arms, both in bright yellow steel. Less than 20 years later, Renault moved north and the future of the building was grim. Architectural stories never quite end, but the next chapter looks good for now: the Chinese government bought the building in Britain as a showcase for the country's exports and has presented plans for a respectful restoration.

But other landmarks can vanish before the debates even begin. The incident that shocked preservationists in New York into action was the partial demolition of the Bronx Developmental Center, designed by Richard Meier. Located just off the Hutchinson River Parkway, it opened in 1977, and was showered with encomiums—"sure to be ranked among the great buildings of its time," according to the American Institute of Architects' guide to New York City. Meier's facility for the mentally handicapped brought its population into the jet age with a metal cladding reminiscent of an airliner's skin. In 2002, it was torn down to make way for the Hutchinson Metro Center, a suburban-style office complex that aspires to pure blandness and achieves it handily.

The architectural community was blindsided. "When they started the demolition, I got phone calls from people on the Hutch asking what we knew, and we didn't know anything about it at all," says Vicki Weiner, a preservationist who was then at the Municipal Arts Society. "It was one of the landmarks of modern architecture, but it wasn't eligible for landmark status yet."

The Bronx Developmental Center had reached that fragile age when buildings begin to look dated but haven't yet acquired a beneficent haze of nostalgia. "It's at this point that, to the non-architectural historian, everything starts to seem old and in need of change or demolition," says Frank Sanchis, executive director of the Municipal Arts Society. "Buildings hit a low point in terms of respect or popularity when they get to that age."

They are also almost always unprotected by law. In the U.S., notable buildings are often protected by a tangle of overlapping and disjointed laws, rules, and recommendations. Local landmarks ordinances generally apply only to buildings at least 30 years old, while state and national Registers of Historic Places apply only to structures that have reached the age of 50, or are of exceptional significance. Registers offer legal protection only to public or publicly funded buildings. Recent buildings are no more secure in Europe. France, for instance, has a vigorous historic preservation council, which has listed more than 1,000 twentieth-

### RICHARD MEIER'S BRONX DEVELOPMENTAL CENTER (1977–2002)



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During the past decade, World Monuments Fund—along with other organizations such as DOCOMOMO (Documentation and Conservation of buildings, sites, and neighborhoods of the Modern Movement)—has taken up the cause of preserving the great architecture from our not-so-distant past. WMF has campaigned for the preservation of more than a dozen Modern sites in the Americas, Europe, and Asia, among them Richard Neutra's VDL House and R.M. Schindler's Kings Road House, both in California; the Rusakov Club and Narkomfin Building in Moscow; Cuba's National Art Schools, and most recently, Edward Durell Stone's A. Conger Goodyear House in Old Westbury, NY. ■



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**SEATTLE'S KINGDOME, BUILT IN 1976, WAS IMPOLODED ON JANUARY 9, 2000.**

century monuments, yet only a handful date from the past 40 years.

The most binding statutes in America are usually those mandated by a local landmarks authority—a body that in many places does not actually exist and in others can be stubbornly resistant to pressure. The village of Old Westbury, for instance, refused to landmark Edward Durell Stone's 1938 masterpiece, the A. Conger Goodyear House, even though it made the endangered lists of World Monuments Fund and the New York State Preservation League in 2002.

As frequently happens, activists relied on fundraising rather than legislation to rescue the house. With help from a consortium of donors, World Monuments Fund arranged to purchase the house with the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (SPLIA), spent more than \$400,000 to restore it, and is now ready to sell it again, this time with a contract that would prevent any new owner from demolishing it or making substantial alterations to its landmark features. The experience prompted SPLIA to hire one of the key activists, Caroline Zaleski, to compile a survey of twentieth-century modern architecture on Long Island—a project that is still under way.

In the U.S., where buildings are considered temporary until proven permanent, the local landmarks of the 1960s keep tumbling down. In the summer of 2003, the Emhart Building, Gordon Bunshaft's elegant 1963 tribute to corporate culture in Bloomfield, CT, campus of the Connecticut General Life Insurance Co. (now CIGNA), fell victim to the company's expansion plans and was demolished. The vast concrete span of the Kingdome in Seattle, which was on the forefront of stadium design when it opened in 1976, was torn down just 24 years later. The 1969 city hall in Fremont, California, a space-age raw concrete platform raised on columns that were deemed too spindly to withstand a major earthquake and not worth bringing up to code, was condemned in August. The hopeful futurism of yesterday is today's embarrassing past.

The only defense against the mindless purging of our recent architectural heritage is to make a lot of noise, an activity that usually depends on a scattered, decentralized network of activist groups, frequently staffed by volunteers. They range from DOCOMOMO, a worldwide organization dedicated to the protection of endangered species of modernism, to the fledgling Modern Asian Architectural Network, to the Recent Past Preservation Network, a Virginia-based shoestring association with a deliberately ecumenical agenda.

"We'll support pretty much everybody who wants to make an effort



GRANT MIDDIFORD

A black and white photograph of the interior of the Schindler Kings Road House. The room features a large, multi-paned window that looks out onto a garden. In the foreground, a dark wooden chair with a white cushion is positioned on a light-colored, textured floor. To the left, a small wooden table holds a few books. The architecture is characterized by clean lines and a mix of materials, including wood and concrete.

## SCHINDLER KINGS ROAD HOUSE

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

With its innovative “slab tilt” construction and integration of gardens as living space, Rudolf Michael Schindler’s Kings Road House exhibits a radical rethinking of domestic architecture. A Viennese immigrant, Schindler (1887–1953) and his American wife Pauline (1893–1977) used the house as a salon for progressive thinkers in the worlds of art, music, and politics, among them Frank Lloyd Wright, Edward Weston, John Cage, and Buster Keaton. Galka Scheyer lived in the house in the 1930s with her collection of paintings by the Blue Four—Klee, Kandinsky, Jawlensky, and Feiniger. In 1980, the Friends of Schindler House, a nonprofit organization, acquired the property, later entering into an agreement with the Republic of Austria to establish the MAK Center for Art and Architecture. Placed on WMF’s list of *100 Most Endangered Sites* in 2002, the house—a combination of durable and ephemeral materials—presents a wide range of conservation problems, including differential settlement caused by poor drainage, roof leaks, and the failure of cantilevered elements.

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## VIIPURI LIBRARY

VYBORG, RUSSIA

Designed by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1890–1976), the Viipuri Library—located in Vyborg on the Karelian Isthmus, which Finland lost to the Soviet Union during World War II—was built with an inner rectangular space, like a classical cella, and has massive undecorated façades. The ceiling of the lending and reading hall features gradually stepped planes pierced by skylights; the conference room has an undulating wooden ceiling. The building prefigures Aalto's ethos articulated in 1938: "Nature, not the machine, is the most important model for architecture."

The building was renovated in 1958–1961 as a municipal library for the City of Vyborg; however, over the years, it had fallen into a dilapidated state. Following its inclusion on WMF's 2000 and 2002 lists of endangered sites, the building was awarded a Robert W. Wilson Challenge Grant through WMF for repairs to the lending hall skylights and roof. Other work is being supported by private Finnish and international foundations, corporations, individuals, and Finnish and Russian authorities.



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**PARIS' 1977 POMPIDOU CENTER DESIGNED BY RENZO PIANO AND RICHARD ROGERS**

to save a building,” says the group’s president, Christine Madrid French, an architectural historian. “So many of the interesting buildings we have get demolished just because Washington never slept there, or they’re not linked with a significant architect.”

While French’s criteria for what to preserve are as generous as they get—if it exists, it deserves to—other organizations lead by making lists. After the fiasco of the Bronx Developmental Center, New York’s Municipal Art Society compiled “Thirty Under 30: A Watch List of Future Landmarks” so that those buildings, at least, could not disappear under cover of ignorance.

Creating a contemporary canon is a volatile diplomatic task. Idiosyncratic buildings elicit ire as well as admiration, and many of those feelings are still fresh, mixed up with enduring aesthetic positions, persistent rivalries, and in some cases, the memory of what had to be razed in order for one potential icon to go up.

“This is difficult stuff for some people,” says Vicki Weiner, who administered the “Watch List” for the Municipal Arts Society and is now a project director at the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Planning in New York. “You just try getting a bunch of architects who are over 40 to look at buildings from the 1980s and think about preserving them.”

Ironies abound. In the 1970s, the Municipal Arts Society threw itself into an unsuccessful fight to block the razing of three old Times Square theaters and their replacement by a massive hotel. Three decades later, the society’s “Watch List” includes the gloomy glass fortress that John Portman designed for the Marriott chain. Ugly though it is, the hotel has an unavoidable significance: It launched the 20-year rebuilding and re-glamorizing of a derelict Times Square. The very idea, in 1981, when construction began, that large numbers of tourists might choose to stay in the infested and dangerous heart of midtown was a long-range vote of confidence that eventually paid off in a thronged neighborhood a gleam with corporate logos.

The last generation of architects has bejeweled the planet with projects that seem as secure as they are stellar. James Stewart Polshek’s Rose Center for Earth and Space in New York, Richard Rogers’ Lloyd’s Building in London, Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles, Santiago Calatrava’s bridges, and Rogers’ and Renzo Piano’s Pompidou Center in Paris have all become indelible, postcard-worthy icons of the cities they occupy.

It might be hoped that a building’s best defense is the ability to stir

ALVARO AALTO ARCHIVES

affection: People won't destroy what they admire. It's not an argument that convinces DOCOMOMO's president Theo Prudon. "That's the theory that time sorts it all out for you and the only surviving pigsty is the best pigsty around because it's the only one left from 1632," Prudon says. But that means leaving a process to chance and fashion, and while the criteria for making preservation cases may be intricate and inconsistent, he insists, they are not haphazard.

"Whether a building is significant is not just some arbitrary decision made by three people in a back room that will change everything for future generations," Prudon says. "It's a problem we always have in dealing with recent buildings: their significance may lie in non-architectural, non-aesthetic criteria."

In many cases, preserving recent architecture is a matter of overcoming long-cherished loathings and recognizing the importance of the ostensibly ordinary. "What's difficult with modern preservation is that a lot of people don't think the vernacular, the everyday buildings are that interesting," says Nina Rappaport, a member of both the U.S. chapter of DOCOMOMO and of the "Watch List" jury. "The icons are easy: the Seagram Building, Lever House"—both triumphs of 1950s modernism in Manhattan that were given landmark status. "With the more in-between buildings it's harder for people to understand their value."

Some buildings, ignored or even detested at the outset, become symbols of their eras or accidental repositories of history, and rescuing them often requires engaging in house-by-house combat with other preservationists, who put architectural quality above all else.

China and the former Soviet countries, for instance, have the architectural legacies of totalitarianism to contend with, including an enormous stock of shabby and unsafe housing that is unlikely to elicit widespread sentiment. "They're concerned with development, and they're not focused on saving buildings from the Communist Era," says Richard Blinder, a founding partner of the New York-based architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle, which will soon open an office in Beijing. "An incredible amount of what was built is very substandard construction. They have millions of apartment blocks that are falling apart. Nobody cares about that stuff—but at least some of them should be preserved."

**ONCE SLATED FOR DEMOLITION, ALBERT FREY'S ICONIC 1965 PALM SPRINGS GAS STATION HAS FOUND NEW LIFE AS A TOWN VISITOR'S CENTER.**



DAVID GLOMB



JULIUS SHULMAN

## **VDL RESEARCH HOUSE II**

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

At a time when Mission-Mediterranean was the style of choice in Los Angeles, CA, architect Richard Neutra (1892–1970) built himself a Modernist home/studio in 1932 that emphasized his belief that the “skeleton” of a structure should be readily visible. The three-level structure is marked by floor to ceiling window walls, narrow support columns, interlocking volumes, and private outdoor spaces. Gutted by fire in 1963, the house was subsequently rebuilt by Neutra and his architect son and partner, Dion Neutra.

Although California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, took over the site in 1990, no substantive work has been carried out on the house save for the replacement of its roof in 1998. The house is plagued by a suite of conservation problems—asbestos needs to be removed, electrical systems need updating (faulty electricals caused the 1963 fire), dry rot has set in, termite damage is evident, and most of its windows and doors need replacement. Although the university has exhibited an interest in restoring the house, funds for the project have yet to be secured.

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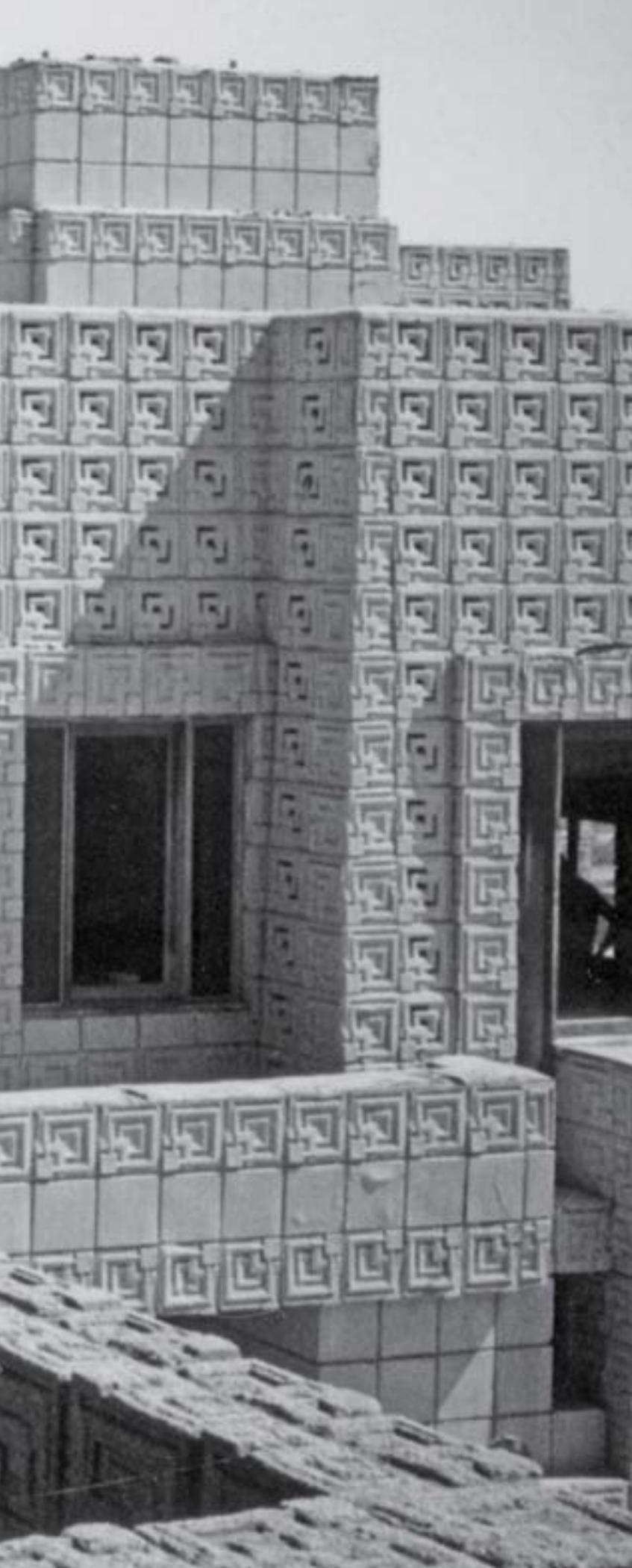


## ENNIS BROWN HOUSE

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Frank Lloyd Wright's theories of organic architecture prescribed that buildings should draw materials from their natural environments. In Los Angeles, this translated into the creation of four textile block houses, the largest built for Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ennis in 1924. Wright used decomposed granite from the site for the Mesoamerican-inspired blocks that form the building's exterior so that it would match the color and texture of the surrounding hills. In 1980, August Brown, then owner of the house, donated it to the Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage.

Unfortunately, it is the very materials from which the house was built that have contributed to its deterioration, a condition exacerbated by the 1994 Northridge Earthquake. The house has since been designated an Official Project of Save America's Treasures. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has earmarked \$2.5 million for restoration; however, \$1 million must still be raised to stabilize the house. The Ennis Brown House was included on WMF's 2004 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*.



**NEW YORK'S LANDMARKED LEVER HOUSE, DESIGNED BY GORDON BUNSHAFT OF SKIDMORE, OWINGS, AND MERRILL AND BUILT BETWEEN 1950 AND 1952**

The issue of preserving the unloved comes up wherever environments are built. In Britain, the 20th-Century Society produced a survey of neglected and endangered architecture called “Risky Buildings,” which includes Foster’s widely admired Renault factory, but also a brutalist multilevel parking garage in Gateshead designed by Owen Luder in 1969. It’s not a graceful structure, but it is arguably an important representation of Britain’s postwar, post-imperial condition. The garage’s raw concrete surfaces and hard, muscular lines functioned as an emblem of soulless savagery in the 1971 movie *Get Carter*, in which a killer played by Michael Caine throws a victim off the topmost story.

History does not consist only of major events, and urbanism does not consist only of heroic buildings. Often, unremarkable structures become valuable only in hindsight, as vanishing examples of a moment in the relationship between necessity and design. Think of the red British phone booth or the espresso shacks set up in front of gas stations all over Oregon—examples of fragile forms of shelter whose only long-term future is probably in a museum.

In recent years, a wing of the preservationist movement has turned its attention to the ordinary, the un-iconic and the not-so-old. The Modern Committee of the Los Angeles Conservancy, for example, consists of a group of a collective of post-boomer preservationists dedicated to preserving such ephemera as roadside diners, bowling alleys, and drive-in movie theaters.

Paradoxically, the key to preserving relatively recent structures can be the willingness to tolerate substantial changes. The luxuriously accurate facelift lavished a few years ago on Lever House, Gordon Bunschhaft’s bottle-green Manhattan masterpiece from 1952, is not often a realistic option. Nor is it necessarily desirable. The noted New York architect and preservationist Paul Spencer Byard, for one, decries what he calls a “fundamentalist approach to preservation, where you identify something you care about and then declare that it’s sacred. The problem with sacredness is that it doesn’t lend itself to thought. It rests on belief.”

Saving a building can mean subjecting it to quite radical redesign, and

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HENRY NG

Byard has irked many of his fellow preservationists by supporting the Museum of Arts and Design's plan to renovate and re-clad Edward Durell Stone's 1958 folly at Two Columbus Circle in New York. A far less thorny example of the adaptive re-use of modernism would be Albert Frey's gracefully canopied 1965 gas station in Palm Springs, which was once slated for demolition but was happily recycled into a town visitor's center last year—even if the alteration meant encircling the building with a low traffic barrier, disrupting the play between the desert's horizontal expanse and the upward swoosh of the roof.

Few places in today's world would wish to be too sweeping and declare large numbers of more generic gas stations or shoddily built glass boxes off limits to developers. Cities cannot refuse to change; they can only grow or wither. So while the desire to place a Victorian house or an eighteenth-century parish church under the aspic of legal code may by now be relatively uncontroversial, the need to safeguard the history we were actually around for is still far from obvious.

Nor is preventive observation an all-purpose answer. Since in most cases, there are no legal barriers preventing a property owner from destroying a cultural gem of recent vintage, the Municipal Arts Society's "Watch List" is fundamentally a tool of informal persuasion, to be used in tandem with a venerable technique: buying lunch. "There's nothing you can do to prevent the demolition except what we dream up," says the society's Frank Sanchis. "It may be nothing more than notification and encouragement of the owners not to destroy. That's part of the project we haven't gotten to yet." ■

**EDWARD DURELL STONE'S TWO COLUMBUS CIRCLE, THE SUBJECT OF A HEATED PRESERVATION DEBATE**



WENDY GLICKMAN



LIBOR TELPY

## TUGENDHAT VILLA

BRNO, CZECH REPUBLIC

The Villa Tugendhat was the last major residence in Europe designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969). Its free-flowing, open plan recalls the Barcelona Pavilion and it features opulent materials—onyx, chrome, travertine, ebony, and Macassar. Set into a hill, the villa's simplicity of form is elegantly integrated with its garden—laid out by Markéta Müllerová in accordance with Mies' notion of "accentuated emptiness."

The Jewish Tugendhat family was forced to abandon the villa in 1938, at which time the Gestapo took control of the building. After the war, it was used as a school and a children's hospital. In 1969, the City of Brno partially restored it for special occasions such as the 1992 talks on the division of Czechoslovakia. Over the past few decades, however, only minimal work has been carried out. In 1997, WMF funded a conditions assessment through its Kress Foundation European Preservation Program, and, with a recent pledge from the International Music and Art Foundation, plans to help with the villa's restoration. Plans call for it to reopen as a museum.

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