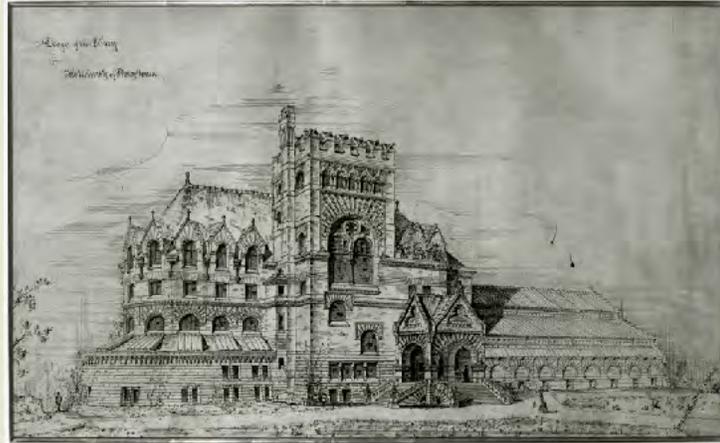


Original perspective of Library of the University of Pennsylvania, drawn by J. M. Huston (1888). Source: Library of the University of Pennsylvania Building Collection, Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, 195.4



Proposal by Robert Rhodes McGoodwin to re-clad the library in the Collegiate Gothic style (May 17, 1931). Source: Same, 195.19



THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF STYLE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION:
HOW TASTE ALMOST DESTROYED THE FISHER FINE ARTS LIBRARY
MICHAEL SHORIAK

“Judgment implies rationality; taste, on the other hand, is based on the irrational.”

Joseph Rykwert

“Fashion is also a search for a new language to discredit the old, a way in which each generation can repudiate its immediate predecessor and distinguish itself from it.”

Fernand Braudel

Style is an unpredictable phenomenon. Tastes change, buildings come in and out of fashion, and architects loved by one generation are reviled by the next. So why does style still play such an important role in selecting the buildings that are preserved and those that are destroyed? This paper questions the validity of style as a designation and motivation for historic preservation by looking at one of the most adored buildings on the University of Pennsylvania campus, Frank Furness’s Fisher Fine Arts Library. Studying the movements to drastically alter the building’s appearance, to tear it down, and later to restore it as the centerpiece of the campus show how fluctuations in style are the enemy of preservation. Although the library still stands, most of Furness’s other buildings and buildings by mannerist architects of every period are torn down as aberrations to the prevailing taste of the next generation.

In 1885, the University of Pennsylvania sought to improve the quality of education at its new West Philadelphia campus by constructing a library to replace the cramped quarters in College Hall. Architect Frank Furness designed a library that was the most modern of its time, with a grand space for studying and an efficient method of storing books. Furness designed the building in his characteristic style, today called Victorian Gothic. The exterior is a mixture of red sandstone, brick, and terra cotta, the last molded into a dramatic chimney and gargoyle-shaped downspouts. Piston-like columns and intricate wrought and cast iron make the library’s interior one of the most unique and impressive spaces in any building in the United States. But these cherished features of Furness’s design are part of the same thing that almost condemned this building in the 1930s and again in the 1960s: style.

By 1930, the taste of architects working in Philadelphia had changed dramatically. Firms such as Cope and Stewardson and Robert Rhodes McGoodwin were constructing university buildings at the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton in the Collegiate Gothic style. To these architects, Furness’s library was now hopelessly out of style. William F. Gray, author of *Philadelphia’s Architecture* (1915), was troubled by the fact

that the University library was not designed by Cope and Stewardson or Frank Miles Day: “It is unfortunate that the change in regime did not take place a few years earlier, as we would have been spared the so-called Library Building with its raw, ugly color, its ‘original’ design and awkward plan and wild and obtrusive ‘ornament.’” To correct this problem, McGoodwin proposed recladding the building in the proper Collegiate Gothic style of the period. In 1930, he constructed the Horace Howard Furness Memorial Gallery as the first phase of a process to reclad the entire building. But 1930 was also a year of great economic hardship, and his proposal for the rest of the building was never executed. It had taken just under forty years—one generation—for this building to fall from the height of design excellence to something that should be covered to hide its ugly face.

Though the library survived, it was neglected for the next forty years to the point where imagination was required to see its beauty and significance. The second floor halving the reading room (added in 1922) remained, the exterior was black with eighty years of dirt and soot, and the leaded windows and skylights were replaced or painted over. Still, some could still see this building as the work of a creative genius. When Alfred Bendiner brought Frank Lloyd Wright to see the building his teachers told him “stank and was Supreme Lousy,” Wright remarked simply, “It is the work of an artist.” Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown also saw something in this building. In *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture*, Venturi describes the hatred of this building as

A matter of taste – your sensibility concerning what seems perceptually right – or rather, the matter of cycles of taste. You usually hate what your father loved and like what your grandfather liked, as Donald Drew Egbert pointed out, but believe me, it was only we extreme sophisticates who could take Frank Furness even as late as the mid-sixties.

The same stylistic features that were used to criticize the library were the very same aspects of the building that attracted its most committed admirers. Historic preservationists must somehow find the middle ground, valuing the characteristics of a building that can be both hated and loved by the same generation.

During the early 1960s, the library was almost demolished. Scott Brown was one of the only faculty members willing to speak out at faculty meetings against its destruction. David De Long, former chair of the Historic Preservation Program, also served as a voice against demolition in faculty meetings where architecture professors advocated tearing down the library and replacing it with a building that was cheaper and easier to maintain. Scott Brown and De Long succeeded in the end, and in 1985 they joined again to restore the library that they had fought to preserve.

The renovation and restoration of the Fisher Fine Arts Library was carried out by Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown Architects and Planners (VRSB) with the Clio Group and Mariana Thomas Architects under the guidance of De Long, who served as the chairman of the Furness Restoration Committee. On the exterior, the brick, sandstone, and terra cotta were cleaned, and missing copper finials and leaded glass windows and skylights were replaced. The interior spaces were divided into areas of primary, secondary, and tertiary importance. De Long stipulated that the architects perform an accurate restoration in primary areas such as the stair hall and reading room. This meant that the second floor that had cut the reading room in half would be removed. In the studios and basement level of the building, which were never fully utilized in Furness's original plans, VRSB was allowed more design freedom.

The furniture that Venturi designed stands out as one of the most visible marks on Furness's library. Venturi took Furness's original designs and abstracted and simplified their form. Tables were designed with Formica-inlaid tops to withstand the library's heavy use. Their flattened profiles evoke the past but are certainly a product of modern thinking. Venturi cites Furness as a primary influence, writing, "The first lessons I learned from Furness had to do with mannerism: architecture could be complex and contradictory."

Ralph Adams Cram's 1913 essay "Style in American Architecture" distinguished seven contemporary styles. It would not now be possible to count the number of styles that exist in architecture internationally; even separating one style from another would be difficult. Today, style is ubiquitous and constantly changing and evolving. Fashion changes every spring, summer, fall, and winter. Technology is constantly updated, making cutting-edge products obsolete the following year. Modern style can also arise from popular culture and commercial advertising. As Venturi, Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour remind us in *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, "We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything." Venturi, Scott Brown's interpretation of Thomas Cole's *The Architect's Dream* (1840) visually describes what has happened. Cole's original image of the styles that the architect can choose from—Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Gothic—is supplemented by modern stylistic influences that Venturi and Scott Brown have incorporated into their architecture by "learning from everything." Commercial images of the Las Vegas Strip and Main Street are now a part of the landscape of styles from which the architect can design, opening the door for style to come from everywhere.

On what grounds, then, can contemporary practitioners of historic preservation base their judgment about which buildings to preserve? Simply preserving what is in style fails to fully address the task of preservation. Rather, preservation “must allow itself to be emphasized as a true historical event – for it is human action – and to be made part of the process by which the work of art is transmitted to the future,” as Cesare Brandi asserts. Tearing down a building can also be seen as a historical event indicative of the values of the period—but coupled with James Marston Fitch’s claim that buildings are “reservoirs of energy,” tearing down buildings simply because they are ugly no longer seems rational. The critical act of preservation is to make the building more comfortable for the modern user while also preserving its material fabric, just as Venturi reinterpreted the furnishings of the Fisher Fine Arts Library. That is the only way for preservation to move forward on a rational footing. Simply following style can no longer be an option if preservation seeks to establish itself as an equal member of the design community.

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