

January 2013: Restoration & Preservation

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They Don't Build 'Em Like They Used To

By Rhonda Maas

Modern masonry construction can be a high-tech proposition, but building with stone is one of the oldest techniques in the world. And, while, pyramids aside, old buildings don't last forever, historic masonry structures that are properly preserved and maintained can function for decades, even centuries.

In many places, old buildings are the heart of a city or neighborhood. They tell the story of a place – where it came from, who built it and what it looked like long ago. Many modern high rises and cookie-cutter commercial/retail zones look the same anywhere you go, but a city's historic buildings are what set it apart from all others. Think Boston's Back Bay, Denver's Lower Downtown or San Francisco's painted ladies, and you instantly have a mental picture of a unique place. Historic buildings help define a place's personality, culture and community.



Besides maintaining local beauty and personality, there are practical advantages to preserving or renovating existing masonry buildings instead of tearing them down to build new. Preservation can be thought of as extreme recycling. To start with, reusing an existing structure keeps all that demolition material out of the waste stream. Then it reduces or eliminates consumption of new materials, saving not only the raw resources, but also the energy required and the pollution generated to process and transport them. If additional stone is needed for repairs, it is most likely to be found nearby, either in a local quarry or stoneyard. Masons working a hundred years ago did not have access to exotic materials from faraway places, so they used what they had close at hand. That means masons working on old buildings today usually can "buy local."

Even though any building can be restored if enough money is available, not all buildings are equally desirable. What factors drive a decision to preserve a masonry building? First, is it valuable? Does it have the beauty, history or personality discussed earlier? Is it in a good location for its intended use? Is there access to utilities? Parking? Transportation?

Second, can it be adapted for the required use? "Preserving" a building doesn't have to mean freezing it in time. Turning a beautiful old building into vibrant new living or commercial space gives both building and neighborhood renewed vitality and energy. So, part of the decision may be whether an old building can be put to a new use.

Third, can it function practically? Can it be made ADA-accessible? Can technology upgrades be made? Contrary to what many believe, old masonry buildings often can be quite energy efficient if renovated properly (a subject for a later column in this series) so that is consideration, too.

The final factor in deciding whether to preserve a masonry building is the nature of the work required. What problem(s) does the building present? Are they structural, or merely aesthetic? If there is damage, is it stable? Or is it continuing to deteriorate? Was the building properly constructed in the first place? Can compatible materials be obtained? A thorough building assessment by an engineer or contractor specializing in historic buildings will help

answer these questions, so that costs can be weighed against benefits for a final decision.

In an economy of constricting new construction budgets, renovation has been something of a bright spot. Restoring old buildings can be a new revenue stream for a masonry contractor willing to learn the proper techniques. Historical societies or local preservationists can be sources of information about how buildings in your town were constructed. The National Park Service publishes technical guidelines for proper preservation. But the very best way to gain this expertise is in the field, working on the job with others who understand how masons of 50 or 100 years ago worked.

It is true that we don't build masonry buildings like they used to. But understanding how they did build them lets us preserve them and give them new life. Thoughtful restoration and proper preservation gives us a more sustainable future, a connection with our past and an appreciation of the accomplishments and craftsmanship of the past.

Rhonda Maas is the co-founder and president of Building Restoration Specialties Inc. (BRS), which specializes in masonry restoration, preservation and conservation of historic buildings. Founded in 1986, BRS has a bonding capacity of about \$7 million, and is positioned to handle projects ranging from \$2,000 to over \$2 million. Learn more at www.brsrestores.com.

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