



1. Interior of the *Nuevos Ministerios* arcades by Secundino Zuazo Ugalde in Madrid (1933) with lecture hall intervention by Aparicio and Fernández (2004). (Courtesy of Aparicio and Fernández)

The Contemporary Stamp of Incompleteness

Unlike the compulsion to build, the impulse to preserve cannot be justified in terms of pure necessity. Yet its power lies precisely in its non-essential condition, in its creation of excess. Although historic preservation is often confused with the juridical model of power as repression, it is in fact a productive force, relentlessly generative of new and ever-expanding categories dedicated to reordering the fundamental codes of culture in terms of history. Indeed, preservation is a process of interpreting objects in such a way as to create history of a very special kind: one dependent on places, a site-specific history. Without buildings (I use this term to include broader environments) there is no preservation. But conversely, without preservation those buildings cannot achieve their status as history.

For a long time now we have been accustomed to thinking that historic preservation “finds” and “protects” history imbedded in “built fabric.” This old notion masked the practice of interpretation which is constitutive of historic preservation. We do not stumble on history, we produce it by interrogating entities. The new awareness that interpretation is a condition of possibility for the existence of buildings as history, has placed the question of method at the center of debates about the nature of historic preservation. How should we interpret buildings and environments as history while minding the ways in which our own prejudices distort our interpretations? In other words, how can we achieve a critical historiographical method on which to base contemporary historic preservation?

To answer, historic preservationists have liberated themselves from the old notion that historiography is purely mental work. They have even freed themselves from the Cartesian belief, inherited from architecture, that ideas precede buildings and are inserted into them as “intentions,” only to be later discovered by historians. The tradition of modernist architects is based on linear thinking (i.e. I think therefore buildings come to be). Contemporary historic preservation is based on feedback circular thinking (i.e. there is a building, therefore I deduce ideas about it so I can act upon it, and begin the process anew considering the changed building). In other words, critical historiography involves both doing while thinking, confronting and chang-

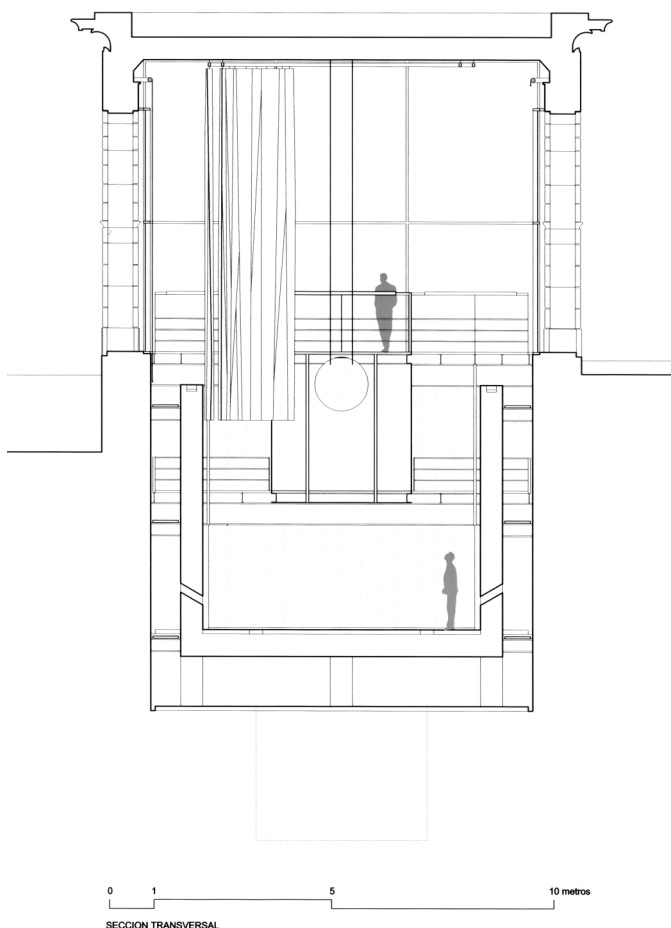
ing things while reflecting on the process, practicing while theorizing. In this sense, of all the overlapping practices invested in the production of history, historic preservation demonstrates most visibly the material conditioning of historical discourse, and in this sense holds a privileged position in the development of a critical historiography.

Every act of historic preservation brings the physical limitations of historiography to the foreground. It exposes the dependence of history on the physical matter interpreted. This seriously undermines traditional historiography, which remains caught in the Hegelian spell that history is all-pervasive, a “spirit of the times” that draws everything towards itself in exchange for significance. Now that we can glean the site-specificity of history through historic preservation, the old-fashioned grouping of buildings by period, type, or style, in order to subject them to the “meaning” of a common *telos* shows the evidence of a flawed methodology. Instead of attempting to make buildings fit into preconceived “historical” categories, contemporary historic preservation begins by physically probing the building, destroying parts of it (from paint chips to foundations or entire walls), until it finds something unfamiliar to the present.

Take for instance the work recently carried out by Jesús Aparicio and Héctor Fernández Elorza inside an arched loggia of the historic 1933 *Nuevos Ministerios* building in Madrid by architect Secundino Zuazo Ugalde (Figure 1). Commissioned to create a new lecture hall in the arcade, Aparicio and Fernández began cutting sections of the existing flooring to increase the floor to ceiling height. They discovered a de-mapped subway train tunnel below. The tunnel existed there, below the building, a part of it, and yet remained outside of what historians deemed “historic.” The encounter with radical difference, with something external to history, both made the limiting horizon of history clear and set historical interpretation in motion. The vault concretized a new boundary beyond which history ceased to be. It produced a new context for the historic building, which was not just physical but also conceptual. It concentrated the historicity of the 1933 structure on everything above the street level, but also severed it from its place, shook its ground, and literally revealed that it was sitting on non-historical foundations.

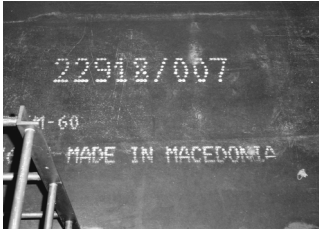
Could this subterranean vault be captured into the fold of history? If so, wouldn't bringing the tunnel to light kill the very otherness which helped demarcate the historicity of the arcade above? Wouldn't the attempt to interpret the tunnel historically water down the significance of the arcade? Instead of attempting to resolve these questions, Aparicio and Fernández took the brilliant tack of trying to capture the vault in its otherness,

2. Section drawing showing the relationship of the new “U” shaped lecture hall to the existing arcades. (Courtesy of Aparicio and Fernández)



so as to encourage visitors to engage in the process of historical interpretation themselves. Here again, contemporary historic preservation reveals its divergence from the modern tradition which only informed visitors of the expert’s analysis, without involving them in interpretation.

Two entrances were cut down into tunnel. The first puncture is only large enough for a light one-person steel stair, which is suspended down from the vault and barely caresses the lower floor. It leads to a large room, two-thirds the total length of the tunnel. The existing barrel vault was left exposed, and the floor and walls sheathed in a “U” of polished concrete. Behind the new walls indirect fluorescent lights illuminate the chisel marks that removed that loose debris from the existing ceiling. The space now serves as a gallery for architecture exhibitions, where the old vault is as much on display as the models and drawings. The second entrance cut more aggressively into the tunnel. Indeed, one enters from the street level through a historic arch, and onto a steel catwalk, to find the floor entirely missing, and a new striking double height space. Aparicio and Fernández removed



3. Marks on the unfinished steel in the entrance floor of Aparicio and Fernández's intervention. (Courtesy of Aparicio and Fernández)

the remaining third of the vault's length down to the imposts, and used the same strategy of inserting a concrete "U" to hold the new program, in this case, a lecture hall (Figure 2). But the "U" here is larger and separated from the existing floor and walls by over a meter in gap. The natural light pours down from the historic arcade, reversing the direction of illumination set up in the gallery. Here the old sheds light on the new. This area is the most successful part of the project. Aparicio and Fernández's genial move was to take historians at their word. If the vault was technically "not there" as far as historical significance was concerned, then it was reasonable to physically remove it. Yet by doing so, historians could no longer pretend the subway was not significantly related to the historic building above. In sum, the whole project is a meditation on what the presence or absence of the vault makes available historically, namely different contexts for interpreting the 1933 structure. What is important for our purposes here is to note that the new intervention was not "inserted" into an existing context. Rather, it *generated* new contexts that reordered the existing categories of interpretation historically.

This is yet another important distinction between modernist and contemporary historic preservation. Whereas the former believed the new was introduced into a pre-existing, invariant and stable context, current advanced work recognizes that the new produces shifting and ever expanding contexts of interpretation which transform the very core of the old. Methodologically this suggests that cutting edge historic preservation is the process of keeping the old "open" for interpretation, and of holding out the possibility that its work is never finished; indeed cannot finish.

Aparicio and Fernández attempted to give aesthetic expression to this notion that historic preservation is a relentless search for openness. Their work was literally left incomplete. The scars of destructive tests and pneumatic hammers that made the new use possible were left visible. No "finishes" were applied, no plaster or veneers. Even the concrete surfaces of the new intervention were left exposed. The resulting raw aesthetics of incompleteness pervade both new and old, relate them together, and give the work its unity. Yet, no sooner do we find the work complete in its incompleteness, Aparicio and Fernández de-center the temporary stability of this tenuous constellation. Just steps beyond the street level entrance, on the floor of the catwalk the marks left on the unfinished steel relate the building to a context beyond its immediate physical surroundings. The floor reads "Made in Macedonia." This simple inscription turns our expectations that the building was made in Spain on their head, shifting the goal posts of the space's context to include the geo-poli-

4. Unfinished drywall in the basement of Rem Koolhaas's interior design for Prada in Manhattan (2001). (Photo by author, 2004)



tics of the construction economy (Figure 3). The context of interpretation created by the design in turn transforms and holds open its aesthetics, keeping it from becoming self-referential. The historicity of the work is produced, not by reducing everything to a single world-view, but rather through the deployment of mini-narratives, each pointing to larger stories beyond. While each mini-narrative never can claim to encapsulate the meaning of the work, taken together they form equiprimordial, unfinished and ever-widening contexts of interpretation.

In contrast to the work of Aparicio and Fernández, other architects have tried to put the aesthetics of incompleteness back in the service of old modernist ways of making and thinking. For instance, Rem Koolhaas has for some time now been aestheticizing unfinished construction. A prime example are the drywall panels in the basement of his Prada store in Manhattan, which were purposefully made to appear as though they lacked the last coat of paint, a gesture he has since repeated in other buildings (Figure 4). Clearly, this was not an invitation to complete the work, but rather an attempt to frustrate the possibility of historical closure. However feebly, the work resists being inscribed in some master narrative of historical evolution—a commendable direction. For how should we date the work if it is not complete? Yet Koolhaas's work falls short insofar as the unfinished drywall only tells the story of its own incompleteness. It fails to enter into a relational constellation with the 1900 building it inhabits, thus lapsing into another modern totality, that of self-referentiality, to which modernist architects subscribe in justifying building the same way everywhere, without regard for context. Koolhaas, who has yet to awaken to the new critical historiography (perhaps because of his oedipal fascination with Modernism) has been unable to explore in practice the

methodological questions opened up by historic preservation, and which have fascinated him theoretically, at least since he wrote the book that made him famous in 1978. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* argued that history's incompleteness (Manhattan lacked a manifesto!) represented a challenge to the present, which was not easily addressed since history resisted intervention (why should Manhattan have had a manifesto?). Koolhaas portrayed past and present as discontinuous realms which challenged each other, an important early theoretical motion in the direction of critical historiography, insofar as it disputed the late 1970s and 1980s definition of "context" as a palimpsest of historical continuity.

The theory of history emerging from cutting-edge explorations of the unfinished owes its thrust to the preservation practices in which the problems of modern historiography first began to unravel. With the rise of contemporary historic preservation, the work of architecture can no longer be inscribed into a narrative of continuity and completion, as was attempted by modernist, postmodernist, and traditionalist schools. The 1964 Venice Charter recognized this early on. That poorly understood "retroactive manifesto" registered the discursive shift in which old art and architecture ceased to be evaluated in terms of a common aesthetic purity, and came to be interpreted as disparate historical documents. Just as it splintered history into material fragments, it charged new interventions with putting them back together into novel meaningful wholes. In the process it denied contemporary work any historical status, and compelled it to assume the role of history's lacuna, by demanding that it bear the "contemporary stamp" of incompleteness. How we retain that unfinished openness of the past, while critiquing the idea that the new is ever outside of history, is an important challenge that lies ahead for the field of historic preservation.

Author biography

Dr. Jorge Otero-Pailos, Assistant Professor of Historic Preservation in the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia University, is the Founder and Director of *Future Anterior*, a registered architect with an international practice, and an architectural historian.