1 Conservation of the historic interior

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Introduction

The House Improved, published in 1931 by *Country Life* and written by Randall Phillips, Hon. ARIBA, the editor of *Homes and Gardens*, explains for owners of an old building how to make an 'ordinary' panelled door flush by nailing plywood over the top and how to box in the turned balusters up the staircase. It also gives several designs for encasing marble chimney-pieces in wood and fitting a gas fire insert. It illustrates how to improve a Georgian townhouse by demolishing part of the front façade and adding a bay window on the ground floor – and how to convert a Victorian Italianate villa into a bungalow with a mansard roof.

Just two year previously – in 1929 – A.R. Powys published his seminal book, *Repair of Ancient Buildings*. This was the first text, in the wake of William Morris, to lay out the principles of conservation that we still use today. So building conservation as we know it has a very short history, and the sort of vandalism advocated in *The House Improved* was still current in the 1970s, though boxing in architectural features is at least for the most part reversible – many of us have taken a claw hammer to sheets of plywood as the first step after moving in to an unrenovated house – whereas the wholesale demolition of historic buildings that continued into the 1970s was anything but reversible.

The presentation of historic interiors

The first volume in this series, *Understanding historic building conservation* (Chapter 1, 'The past in the future'), briefly reviews the growth of the heritage society in the 1970s including the adoption of the country house style

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for interiors, with scrubbed pine and flowered wallpaper, the rise in popularity of visiting National Trust properties and the success of upstairs-downstairs films. When the National Trust acquired Erddig at Wrexham, North Wales, in 1973, the new interest in upstairs-downstairs was reflected in the presentation of the house, with the servants' quarters and kitchens being emphasised. At Dyrham Park, near Bath, Gloucestershire, another of the Trust's flagship properties, in the early twenty-first century the visitor route underwent substantial revision to display restored Victorian domestic rooms, including the kitchen, bells passage, bakehouse, larders, tenants' hall and Delft-tiled dairy, while the kitchens, nurseries and servants' quarters at Lanhydrock, Bodmin, Cornwall, rebuilt after a devastating fire in 1881, have for many years been a major visitor attraction.

The presentation of National Trust country houses open to the public is a good reflection of the changing approaches to heritage and conservation. Interiors in houses belonging to the Trust formerly received a ruthless and rather standardised redecoration, but later on things changed. Kingston Lacy, where the Victorian character of the saloon was restored in 1982, was the first National Trust property to retain a sense of the history of the house.

The conserve-as-found approach was then taken much further at several properties: for example, by English Heritage in the 1980s at Brodsworth Hall, in South Yorkshire, where every stained patch of wallpaper and rusty picture hook was carefully removed while the building was renovated then reinserted back into place exactly as found. A similar approach was taken at Calke Abbey, Derbyshire, donated to the National Trust in 1985 by the Harpur-Crewe family (the house is situated on the site of an Augustinian priory, but was never actually an abbey). The eccentric Harpur-Crewe family had lived there for 360 years and had acquired an immense assortment of artefacts as they never threw anything away, and no redecoration had been carried out at least since 1924. When the Trust opened the house to the public in 1989, having stabilised the building but without carrying out any restoration, it was said to be 'a time capsule' and 'the house where time stood still'.

Chastleton, a splendid Jacobean house near Moreton-in-Marsh, Oxfordshire, built between 1607 and 1612 for Walter Jones, a wealthy wool merchant, came to the National Trust in 1991 after 400 years of continuous ownership by an increasingly impoverished family who could do no more than 'make do and mend'. The Trust carefully avoided restoration, retaining everything as found, from the kitchen's soot-blackened ceiling, to the peeling 1960s wallpaper in the library and abandoned slipper bath under the rafters; the house feels lived in, with fires in the hearths and no ropes or barriers.

When the National Trust for Scotland acquired Newhailes House, near Edinburgh, in 1997, the Trust did much to stabilise the house and prevent deterioration, while doing as little as possible to alter or restore the property and its contents. The last owner's electric fire and television were all kept in place; the railings up to the entrance were stabilised but kept rusty; and after the building was renovated the library furniture, instead of being

arranged in the room, was carefully piled up in a dusty heap in a corner, just as it was when the Trust took over.

The National Trust (of England) also implemented a conserve-as-found renovation at the very grand Victorian country house, Tyntesfield, at Wraxhall, North Somerset, acquired in 2002. However, as James Finlay asserts in Chapter 13, the conserve-as-found approach records only the decline of a once-great house, and its chief merit is in preserving evidence of an interior for future generations. But the great presentational innovation at Tyntesfield was to keep the house open during the conservation work, making the repair work visible to the public as part of the Trust's educational remit. Visitors can climb a viewing tower to see the roof repairs and meet specialist conservators carrying out work ranging from re-roofing to rolling carpets.

Croome Court, Croome d'Abitot, near High Green, Worcester, Worcestershire, was purchased in 2007 by the Croome Heritage Trust, working in partnership with the National Trust. The house with its surrounding estate was 'Capability' Brown's first major commission in 1751 and helped establish his reputation together with that of Robert Adam, who designed part of the Court's interiors. The debate at the time of writing is how to present the interiors when eventually restored. Should the interiors be furnished in an appropriate if conjectural manner, or presented as a sequence of sparse architectural spaces? In recent years the house was a centre for the Hare Krishna movement, and one room was bizarrely but finely decorated by the Hare Krishna. Should the existing interior decorative scheme revert to an original style, but a conjectural one, or remain as part of the history of the building?

A very different approach to conserve-as-found had to be taken by necessity at Uppark, West Sussex, after a major fire caused by a workman's blowtorch completely destroyed the interior on 30 August 1989. Most of the pictures and furniture in the house were saved and the house was rebuilt in replica, re-opening its doors in 1995.

Managing change

In the field of repair and presentation of historic interiors – indeed, in the conservation world as a whole – the ground is always shifting as conservation philosophy evolves, and as knowledge and understanding improves and better repair techniques are developed. The only certainty is that in twenty or fifty years' time whatever we did today will be dateable to our own era.

The classic interiors of the decorator John Fowler (1906–77), in the third quarter of the twentieth century, transformed dreary pre-wartime interiors with vivid colours, informality, rich twentieth-century textiles and deeply upholstered soft furnishings, all projecting a sense of ease and comfort and historic association for his clients, many of whom had downsized with the disappearance of servants and country house life. Fowler, working with society decorator Lady Sibyl Colefax and later with his business partner,

Nancy Lancaster, lent freshness and liveliness to historic interiors, though the freedom of treatment and the use of subtly varying multiple tones and stippled paint effects may seem today to lack an academic approach, and in some of his private commissions to be over elaborate. However, Fowler's work itself evolved and his later, extensive work for the National Trust became more serious and historical, though without becoming lifeless.

Most historic interiors themselves have evolved over time. In the present day, decorative schemes are changed particularly frequently as property changes hands – it is very rare today for a family to occupy the same house even for one whole generation. It is vital that buildings are allowed to continue to adapt to changing needs and circumstances and to remain alive. After all, the interiors of Bath's Georgian houses were frequently modified and refurnished from Georgian through to Victorian times to remain up to date for rental by the upmarket London grandees coming to the city to socialise and take the waters. It is a common misconception among householders that if their home is listed they will not be allowed to make any changes whatsoever: the reality is that the legislation protecting historic buildings is not about *preventing* change but about the *management* of change, as buildings must accommodate owners' changing needs and lifestyles – and sometimes complete changes of use (though it is important for the householder to understand that the listing applies to the entire building and everything within its curtilage, not just to items that are described in the listing schedule).

One of the chief reasons for more major rebuilding work to historic interiors was to repair fire damage. It is remarkable that, along with smaller historic properties, nearly every country house has suffered fire damage – and not just in the era of lighting by open flames, with in the past two or three decades major fires at Hampton Court (1986), Uppark, West Sussex (1989), Prior Park, Bath (1991), Windsor Castle (1992) and Moreton Hall, Warwickshire (2008), one of the country's best Edwardian houses. On 30 June 2011 fire destroyed much of the 16th-century manor house former home of Augustus John, one of Britain's leading portrait painters, at Fordingbridge, Hampshire.

Building history and understanding significance

With old buildings care has to be taken over the question of authenticity because, especially in the case of buildings that have suffered fire damage, what you see can be misleading: sometimes the rebuilding was in the original style and sometimes in a contemporary style. Before applying for listed building consent to carry out alteration work to a historic interior, it is essential to understand the significance of the building through a combination of observation on the ground and a desktop study to reveal the building's history and to understand what in the interior is authentic. This, together with the formulation of a policy towards the proposed works – the conservation philosophy to be adopted in terms of approach, techniques and technology, and proposed structural interventions such as floor strengthening – will result in a justification statement in the case of small

buildings and a conservation plan, sometimes preceded by a synopsis of the plan in a conservation statement, in the case of major buildings, together with a Conservation Management Plan for large sites that will map how the heritage asset will be cared for in the future.

The desktop study will often involve a combination of primary sources, such as documents and drawings, and secondary sources, for example history books, listed building descriptions, Pevsner's The Buildings of England series, dictionaries of architects including Howard Colvin's *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, 4th edition (2008), and websites such as *www.imagesofengland.org.uk*. The archives that may be valuable include local record offices and libraries and national resources including the National Register of Archives; the National Monuments Record; the public archive of English Heritage, in Swindon; the British Library and the Public Record Office, Kew; Lambeth Palace Library; and the Church of England Record Centre. Private sources for major houses may include family archives with deeds, letters, building accounts, estate maps and photographs. The history of lesser houses may be investigated through deeds held by the owners or local record offices (though many deeds have been destroyed since the Land Registration Act 1925, as property is transferred), street directories, electoral registers, census returns (from 1841), rate books, estate maps, tithe maps (by parish, c.1840), early large-scale early Ordnance Survey maps (which are highly accurate), land tax assessment and building control records (kept, for example, in Bath from 1865, usually with drawings of proposed changes or additions to buildings), while record offices and libraries often have useful published prints, engravings, newspapers and sales particulars, sometimes illustrated with plans. Different building types, such as commercial and industrial buildings, public buildings and churches, have further sources of information that can be investigated and on which archives can advise.

The study may require some complex detective work to unravel the history of the building – investigative work that occasionally involves more than one building. Following an earlier devastating fire at Prior Park, Bath, in 1836, much rebuilding was carried out using components – decorative features, windows and other elements – sold to the then owner, Bishop Baines, that had been salvaged from the late eighteenth-century Huntstrete House, near Marksbury, Somerset. As with churches, early country houses sometimes underwent major programmes of restoration work in the nineteenth century. Frederick Leyland, a nineteenth-century lessee of the outstanding Tudor timber-framed Speke Hall, Liverpool, and a shipping magnate and patron of the arts, carried out major restoration work on the ground-floor rooms in 1867–78 that now forms a significant part of the history of this National Trust house. At another National Trust property, Great Chalfield Manor near Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, Sir Harold William Brakspear carried out sympathetic restoration work in 1905–11 that is architecturally interesting in itself, with careful Arts and Crafts detailing and reconstructing demolished parts of the building, working from drawings made by Pugin's pupil, Thomas Larken Walker, in 1836 when the building was still in its original state.

'Reading' the classical interior

When 'reading' a classical interior, another aspect of the investigation – especially important in reconstructing a decorative scheme – is to establish the original use of rooms. Frequently in classical Georgian interiors the iconography of decorative elements may give the vital clue, such as gesso work on chimneypieces and details of decorative plasterwork. Rooms in a house were given a particular character relating to their function in accordance with the fundamental, but now deeply unfashionable, eighteenth-century concept of propriety, the notion of what is appropriate to a room, to a person's status or to social behaviour. Interiors were broadly masculine or feminine in character, and decorated accordingly, though the entrance and stairway to a Georgian townhouse was perceived as an 'outdoor' or public space, especially in the case of rooming houses that were let as multiple occupancy. These areas would be sparsely furnished with a stone floor and the walls painted a stone colour, sometimes blocked to resemble ashlar, or the walls might actually be clad in ashlar. Libraries and dining rooms – where the chimneypiece might have bacchanalian suggestions or sheaves of wheat or garlands of fruit – were perceived as masculine, and were decorated in sober tones, the dining room especially avoiding fabrics that were thought to harbour cooking smells. In Victorian country houses, the billiard room and smoking room were of course most strictly male domains. Drawing rooms, on the other hand, were feminine places and were decorated and furnished accordingly, while a music room might have a pine and gesso chimneypiece with depictions of lyres or clusters of musical instruments, and bedrooms might have iconic clues in the decorative scheme such as images of Venus.

One difficulty with determining the original use of rooms and thus decorating them appropriately is that architectural features are often peripatetic, as Georgian chimneypieces and the like have frequently been removed illegally, or, until recent years, imported from Ireland and sold through architectural salvage yards – a ruthless and regrettable trade – then installed elsewhere, often inappropriately. Many of the finest architectural elements were removed from the 750 major country houses prior to their demolition in the years between 1945 and 1973, a sad period that was graphically depicted in Marcus Binney's tide-changing exhibition of 1974 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 'The Destruction of the Country House', with grim pictures of decaying and crumbling houses. Cities fared no better, with great swathes of Georgian Liverpool, Bath and elsewhere being cleared.

The fall and rise of craftsmanship

Traditionally, craft skills and the use of traditional tools were passed from one generation to the next. Boys of fourteen might be apprenticed to men in their eighties – still working in pre-pension days – and the boys themselves might work to a similarly venerable age, so that over two generations alone there could be the best part of 130 years of unbroken skills and

knowledge. This perception of craftsmanship as a continuum is very different from the 'filing cabinet' approach to architectural history – the largely Victorian conception still in use today – of compartmentalising architectural styles into periods of fixed dates when change supposedly took place. Indeed, in the case of minor rural dwellings that have no documentation and where deeds are not available, dating on stylistic grounds may be deceptive as building traditions often had continuity to the extent that a provincial house built around 1900 might be mistakenly dated as c. 1780.

Despite this, however, craftsmanship did begin a terminal decline during the Industrial Revolution. The Regency saw a growth in mass production and the consequent availability of artefacts, from architectural fittings to fabrics and household goods (as well as the rapid dissemination of the latest styles and fashions in architecture and furnishing through publications such as Rudolph Ackerman**'s** influential British periodical *Repository of Arts*, published from 1809 to 1829, which could reach America or Hong Kong within weeks of publication). With decorative plasterwork, for example, the exquisiteness of Georgian freehand in situ modelling with heavy undercutting became replaced by moulded plasterwork, where a little undercutting was possible using several piece moulds, but without the three-dimensionality of the earlier work – typical, for instance, of Jeffrey Wyatville's work at Windsor Castle. Victorian plasterwork is perfect and hard, but lacks even further the liveliness of earlier craftsmanship.

Rebuilding works after the fires at Uppark and elsewhere were largely responsible for the revival of traditional craftsmanship in the United Kingdom; of skills that had been all but lost in the twentieth century with the use of Portland cement instead of lime products, and mass production of components and new methods of construction including reinforced concrete and steel framing.

In present-day conservation and restoration work, however, modern methods are often used to achieve a visual result similar to that of original work at a much lower cost; in the rebuilding of Windsor Castle after the fire, the term 'equivalent restoration' was coined. Instead of traditional methods of plastering, for instance, where gypsum or lime plaster with hair reinforcement is applied onto riven oak or chestnut laths, fibrous plaster with hessian reinforcing may be used, with one mould able to be reused many times. Such work may shrink and crack over time and tends to be visually dull compared with traditional work, albeit redeemed at Windsor by copious gilding.

Joinery detailing: a case study

Whatever the repair method used, it is essential that the detailing is correct. One of the key elements of the historic interior is joinery. When refurbishing an interior the decision must be made whether to reinstate original detailing, or to retain later alterations where – with decorative plasterwork and other elements – these are so extensive and complete that it would be nonsense to reinstate original joinery details. With Georgian

houses, broadly speaking, it is desirable to do the latter, and essential for instance in the case of a Georgian house where rooms may have been subdivided and original joinery altered piecemeal. The Victorians frequently removed dado rails (which went out of fashion in the Regency period) and installed picture rails. With the latter removed, the dado rail should be reinstated to the correct height and profile. Too often dado rails have been replaced too high, while the exact correct position can often be determined as the original fixing battens are usually to be found behind Victorian plaster skim; as a general guide, the dado rail aligns with the windowsill and the profile is usually an inversion of the skirting. The exception is the staircase, where the skirting is normally bull-nosed and the dado rail is positioned at balustrade height and is profiled as a half balustrade. The Victorians frequently replaced glazing bars with plate glass after the mid-1840s, when the tax on glass by weight was removed. When reinstating glazing bars it is vital that the thickness and profile is correct for the period of the building (the profile does of course face the room interior, except for shop fronts, where the joinery profile faces the street). Early eighteenth-century glazing bars in Bath were 1½ inches (38 mm) thick, of ovolo profile, set within small 'nine-over-nine' sashes, and they became increasingly thin and elegant as the century progressed. The post-1755 houses of Bath's Gay Street have 1⅛ inch (29 mm) bars, and by the 1760s and 1770s (e.g. Brock Street, Royal Crescent and Rivers Street) these are ¾ inch (19 mm). The most elegant bars, with their reflection of light off curved surfaces, are astragal and hollow, used in the 1790s and early 1800s and just ⅝ inch (16 mm) thick, with meeting rails of ¾ inch (19 mm). The entire sashes were often replaced by the Victorians with a heavier profile and with 'horns', the extension of the styles beyond the mortice and tenon of the meeting rail to strengthen the frame to take heavy sheets of plate glass.

Finding 'forgotten spaces'

We emphasised earlier the need to keep buildings alive through a process of carefully managed change. With important, usually large-scale, public buildings another way of breathing new life into historic interiors is by finding 'forgotten' exterior spaces and enclosing them with a contemporary intervention, which may not only extend the accommodation to provide much-needed public facilities and substantially improve internal circulation; this concept also allows the experience of the historic interior to remain undisturbed. There are several significant examples in London, principally the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court at Sir Robert Smirke's British Museum, designed by Foster and Partners in the late 1990s based on a 1970s proposal by Colin St John Wilson. In the vast central quadrangle, commonly known as 'the Great Court', an accretion of additions were demolished to reveal the drum-like Reading Room and the space enclosed by a fully tessellated glazed roof designed by Buro Happold. Besides providing retail, catering and other facilities, the vast enclosure 'resolves' the circulation whereby the visitor can enter any part of the existing building without

relying on the entirely linear circulation as before. At the Wallace Collection, Marylebone, Rick Mather Architects enclosed the dank and disused courtyard (1993–2000) with a glass roof to form a badly needed restaurant with educational and exhibition spaces below.

The architects Dixon Jones have completed several conceptually similar projects. Their work at the Royal Opera House (1983–99; in collaboration with Building Design Partnership, as Dixon Jones BDP) adapted and extended the historic interiors, which included linking the building with the adjacent Floral Hall – another 'forgotten' space – to form a spectacular atrium, while the building was democratised by forming a single main entrance for all ticket prices. The main auditorium was enhanced, meanwhile, by decorative scheme by David Mlinaric, without any alteration to its character. At the National Portrait Gallery in St Martin's Lane, a once-dingy service yard that separated the Gallery from the National Gallery next door was enclosed to form the Ondaatje Wing (1994–2000), a triple-height hall that improved the circulation system without altering the essential experience of the three main levels of picture galleries. At the National Gallery, in the newly pedestrianised Trafalgar Square (built in 1832–8), Dixon Jones created (2003–2005) a new entrance, alternative to the main entrance at the central portico, through an access passage and opening up the ground floor for public facilities including a refurbished café, a shop and a double-height top-lit atrium, originally an external courtyard. This was achieved while maintaining the integrity of the richly ornate interiors of the existing galleries, which were refurbished to their original decorative appearance in the 1990s by the conservation architects Purcell Miller Tritton, using rich figured silks and restoring many of the ceilings' original decorative schemes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential in any interior conservation scheme first of all to understand the process. This involves recognising the importance of the initial investigation into the history and fabric of the building and the establishment of a philosophical approach and a policy towards the work. It is necessary to make a diagnosis of problems that may exist and an assessment of what work is required. Finally, it is essential to recognise the division of responsibility, when the work is carried out, between management, professional consultants, specialist conservators, contractors and others who may be involved.

Further reading

Specialist books are noted by chapter, but among general books, James Ayres, *Building the Georgian City* (Yale University Press, 1998), provides a systematic explanation of eighteenth-century building trades and methods and an understanding of traditional tools and craftsmanship. Geoffrey

Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England, 1660–1820* (Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc., 1981), is a rich source of information on the very finest work. Of the many books on the history of interior design, the first to draw widespread attention was Mario Praz, *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration* (Thames & Hudson, 1964), and Peter Thornton, *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior 1620–1920* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984) and John Fowler and John Cornforth, *English Decoration in the Eighteenth Century* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1974) remain among the best. John Cornforth, *The Inspiration of the Past: Country House Taste in the Twentieth Century* (Viking in Association with Country Life, 1985) gives much information on the influential decorator, John Fowler. Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton, *Life in the Georgian City* (Viking, 1990) explains how Georgian houses functioned domestically. There are few books on the humble interior, and James Ayres, *Domestic Interiors: The British Tradition 1500–1850* (Yale University Press, 2003) fills this gap.