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ARCHITECTURE SUSTAINABILITY PRESERVATION

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SOME THOUGHTS ON CONSTRUCTION QUALITY

Quality Options

Building construction varies in quality. The following list is arranged from modest conventional quality to the highest quality: residential, commercial, institutional, and museum. Residential quality is least expensive, least durable and most susceptible to destruction by natural forces. We urge owners of other than residential buildings (especially organizations planning to own their buildings beyond an individual human life time) to implement at least institutional quality construction and repairs.

Conventional Wisdom

As day-to-day decisions are made regarding how to repair your building, beware of conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom is the basis of advice promulgated by suppliers and contractors who are engaged in conventional construction, most of which is residential or light commercial. The fundamental premise is that cost is of utmost importance and durability is secondary. Since average home ownership is reputed to last only seven years, conventional wisdom may be appropriate for many homeowners. But for individuals or organizations planning to preserve a building, replacing sound original materials with short-lived materials is almost always a bad idea, for example, replacing wood windows with vinyl windows. Similarly, use of temporary materials like aluminum flashing and pressure-treated wood is ultimately more expensive than use of more durable materials. When planning repairs and improvements you may wish to seek durability and analyze costs vs. benefits over time, as befits preservation of a significant building.

Be careful where you get advice. Contractors and building material stores recommend construction and repairs using tools and materials currently in stock. For example, a roofer who doesn't normally repair slate roofs will recommend patching a leaking slate roof with roofing cement and replacing it with relatively short-lived asphalt shingles long before replacement of the slate is warranted. A roofer who doesn't have craftsmen who can do flat seam metal work will never think of recommending flat seam metal roofing, even though it may be the most historically appropriate and cost-effective roofing. A contractor used to replacing wood windows with vinyl windows will recommend replacement when repair of the wood, by the proper craftsman with the proper skills, will cost half as much as vinyl; and historic wood windows are proven to last many times longer. Building materials store clerks commonly recommend replacement of high quality historic windows with vinyl windows without ever seeing or evaluating the originals. Many similar examples can be given so select your advisors carefully. Measures of quality are not the same for all building owners; correct solutions to building problems are not universal.

Remember, almost all advisors will recommend the cheapest, most conventional solution to any building problem without any concept of context or historic value of a building.

Ordering Work

When asking for long-lived repairs, often the reaction of contractors is: “We don’t do it that way,” or “It’s not done that way,” or “Nobody does it that way any more.” Interpret these comments as the contractor’s way of telling you they don’t know how to make durable repairs, or they will be uncompetitive if they make durable repairs. Contractors are constantly under pressure from owners to reduce first costs as much as possible, and are most comfortable with conventional materials and techniques they are used to. Because of market conditions most construction is low first cost, short life expectancy “improvements.” Long-lived institutions and preservationists are not conventional clients; if you get a “Nobody does it that way anymore.” response from a contractor, continue searching for a craftsman who is comfortable using durable materials and enjoys high-quality work.

Specifying Work

In order to ensure you get the quality you expect it is necessary to have every contract in writing and to be specific regarding materials and their installation. For further recommendations on selecting contractors, please refer to Bero Architecture’s “Some Thoughts on Choosing a Contractor,” available by calling (585) 262-2035 or on our web site: www.beroarchitecture.com, under “Some Thoughts on Frequently Asked Questions.”