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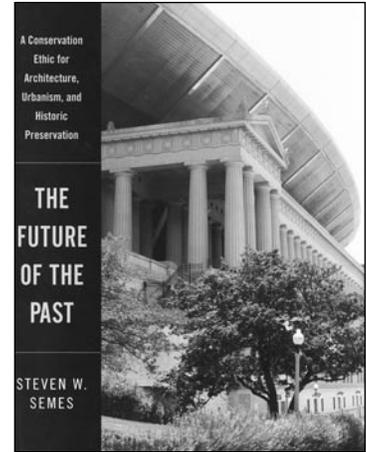
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Steven W. Semes. *The Future of the Past: A Conservation Ethic for Architecture, Urbanism, and Historic Preservation*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009, 272 pp., line drawings, black-and-white and color photographs, cloth, \$60.00, ISBN 978-0-393-73244-3.

As the current book-review editor for *PER*, I do not often choose to write reviews. However, thanks to local architecture critic David Brussat, *The Future of the Past* has made a splash in Rhode Island's historic preservation community. I wanted to see for myself what the fuss was about.

Mr. Brussat is right to call attention to this book; Semes provides much food for thought. Amply illustrated and well researched, *The Future of the Past* builds a strong case for an inclusive approach to historic preservation. Semes places value on all aspects of the built environment, including architectural styles, urban fabric, the decorative arts, cultural purposes, etc. But more remarkable is how he presents this information. What is new here is Semes's understanding of the built environment as the summation of space, structure, elements, composition, proportion, ornament, and character (p. 49). Semes demonstrates how these traits apply to well known buildings, as well as to vernacular landscapes. His argument is logical, well reasoned, and, most importantly, accessible to the average reader, who is clearly his intended audience.

Semes's case for a new conservation ethic unfolds over the course of twelve chapters. The first four chapters apply his concept of space to traditional

and modernist architecture. The middle two chapters provide information on the history of preservation and examine preservation relative to historicist values. In the last five chapters, Semes presents his theory for “Preservation After Historicism,” also the title of chapter seven. This theory advocates approaching both adaptive reuse and new construction in one of four ways: literal replication, invention within a style, abstract reference, and intentional opposition. The final chapter contains a crucial summary that unites Semes’s philosophical strains by linking them to current preservation issues, including social justice and sustainability.

Formerly a historical architect for the NPS and now an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame, Semes identifies himself as a traditionalist. The book functions as a polemic for traditional architecture, with Semes betraying his allegiance specifically to classical architecture through the images, rather than the text. He presents ideas that I, personally, had not given much thought to since graduate school, let alone in the context of historic preservation. For example, his explanation of the construction of an urban vernacular is relevant, interesting, and intense (pp. 82-85). Semes’s ability to inspire a reconsideration of the basic concepts of historic preservation in his reader is one of the book’s strong points.

The book is aptly subtitled “A Conservation Ethic,” as Semes expresses his opinions on the dos and don’ts of historic preservation. That he takes a stand is most welcome, since most historic preservation theory is very dry. That his stand *appears* comprehensive is also most welcome. Unfortunately, it is not: modernism and modernist monuments are purposely excluded from his comprehensive vision. And, in addition to the chapter explaining why modernism is “discordant,” Semes sprinkles demeaning remarks about modernism throughout the book. For example: “The introduction of new modernist buildings into a preexisting traditional setting results in a jarring contrast...” (p. 106). With debate about the preservation of modernism now at the forefront of the field, this viewpoint is disappointing.

Nevertheless, there are very exciting moments in the book, particularly when Semes makes statements that seem to inaugurate a new age of preservation. For example: “Preservation regulations...should not be

construed to require that any specific proposal should be accepted or rejected *solely on the basis of style*” [emphasis original] (p. 169). What a great idea for those sitting on their local historic district commissions to consider. And—despite what Semes might think—what a great way to begin a conversation about preserving modernism. *The Future of the Past* is chock full of interesting ideas that are well worth consideration by preservationists—and architecture critics—alike.

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