Subtle Transitions

At the Smithsonian we have already learned some lessons in making buildings more accessible without damage to either their historic fabric or character. These lessons are simple solutions, but were reached only after a great deal of consideration and debate.

As an example, let us turn to the creation of an exterior ramp for the south entrance of the Smithsonian Institution Building. Only two steps separate the Enid A. Haupt Garden from the Children's Room.

The Smithsonian Building's architectural clarity is enhanced by the subtle transitions from one surface to another such as the chiseled edge which links the low stone baseboard to the walls of the building. Such features, which contribute to the character of the building, may not be changed or obscured under the Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation. Our challenge, as preservationists, was to provide a ramp which would not detract from the character of this landmark structure.

Our chosen solution, to regrade the existing brick terrace tilting it up to the entrance very gradually, has several advantages. The new ramp will provide the same access for all visitors with little diminution of the visual character of the site. With no super-structure the entrance will fade into a level platform well delineated in front of the base.

In simpler form, the same solution was used at the Patent Office Building (NPG/NMAA). There we were in the process of replacing and repairing flagstone in the courtyard which had become uneven and therefore hazardous. During the course of the work, Smithsonian personnel on this job saw the possibility of tilting a large, flat granite step so that it would provide a ramped entrance from the flagstone terrace to the door to the National Museum of American Art. As this interior court has remained little changed for a century, retaining the familiar materials was key to protecting the historic character of the site.

Thus, the Smithsonian has not only provided solutions to access problems in historic buildings, but has also done so with subtlety and with respect for both the material and the character of the sites. Through the judicious use of resources, we will continue to maintain the historic structures in all their beauty while making them accessible to everyone.
THE "ROPE" SOFA

An illustration for a sofa "of superior description" similar to a scroll arm sofa in the "Castle" collection is to be found in the 1839 edition of Loudon's Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farmhouse and Villa Architecture and Furniture. Loudon's encyclopedia, first published in England in 1833 and reissued (with revisions) at least ten times within the next thirty years, was intended by its author to elevate the tastes of the middle classes (or "cottagers" as he called them) to correspond with the recent rise in the standards of domestic comfort.

Loudon stated that the "sofa is a piece of furniture which affords a great source of comfort to its possessor" and that "no parlor is completely furnished without one." He went on to suggest that the colors of the fabric for a sofa should be those which "prevail in the carpet and window curtains of the room; the principal reason in this and all similar cases, being, that such a choice indicates unity of design." By the 1850's, Loudon's encyclopedia had become a guide for American taste when his theories were freely quoted in A.J. Downing's treatise on the treatment of interiors titled The Architecture of Country Houses, published in 1850.

Although the overall shape of the "Castle" collection's sofa (SL.83.72 ca.1855) is similar to Loudon's design, it has several unusual design elements which distinguish it from that example. Two applied medallions with carved head profiles (possibly of Apollo), derived from Classical sources, are consistent with the style of the sofa. However, the cable or rope molding which delineates the frame is a type of ornament first used in Romanesque decoration of the Middle Ages. The tapering, ring-turned legs are also of a shape not generally found on furniture of the Classical style. A simple and restrained elegance is created by the combination of these seemingly incongruous design motifs, making this a truly unique piece of furniture.

Many pieces of the "Castle" collection are "on view" in the hallways of the Smithsonian Building, however, the bulk of the collection is in daily use in offices throughout the building. The sofa featured in this article was recently reupholstered with historically accurate fabric and is now located in the office of the Assistant Secretary for Education and Public Service.

Structure:
Solid mahogany with pine secondary wood

Dimensions:
H.35 1/2" X W.88" X D.28"

Illustration for sofa, Loudon, ca.1833

"Castle" Collection "Rope Sofa"
A COMMON GROUND:

OEMS & OAHP,
Working Together For Your Safety

What do the Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation (OAHP) and the Fire Protection Division of the Office of Environmental Management and Safety have in common? Both are entrusted with the care of Smithsonian buildings and grounds to ensure that the buildings and their objects will endure for generations.

In order to achieve this goal, OAHP and OEMS use codes and standards to guide their review of design and construction projects throughout the Institution. OAHP bases their evaluation of projects on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation while the Fire Protection Division adheres to strict life safety and fire protection codes and standards. Working together, the staffs of OAHP and the Fire Protection Division negotiate solutions to solve the tricky problem of how to install fire protection systems in historic buildings which meet the standards and codes used by both offices and at the same time accommodate programmatic changes and staff and visitor requirements.

The Fire Protection Division is guided by J. Andrew (Andy) Wilson. His fellow fire protection engineers include Robert D. Wilson, Lydia A. Butterworth, Ross Mowery, Michael Kilby and University of Maryland graduate student Richard Daley. All have been trained at the University of Maryland, the only university in the United States to offer a degree in the specialized field of fire protection engineering.

Andy Wilson states "Everybody here is interested in historic preservation. We all look for ways to cause the least amount of damage to the building. Our mission - as is OAHP's - is to preserve and protect our buildings for perpetuity. You want to keep things historically accurate. Our interest is specific in that we're looking at fire being the greatest threat to historic buildings. Fire is one of the most vulnerable elements they face."

"We have a lot of support from the building directors"

In 1979 Wilson was hired to survey each building, develop a series of master plans and present management with the best way to meet current-day codes and abate risks. Since that time, the use of the survey as a planning tool has grown. Wilson and his team conduct yearly surveys of the buildings and update the master plans. "One of our goals is to bring every building, regardless of age, up to current fire codes - a formidable task! We have a lot of support from the building directors," says Wilson.

Two Smithsonian buildings present special challenges to Wilson and his team. "The Castle has a special place in my heart," notes Wilson. "Being an historic, extremely beautiful building, we created chases throughout to hide equipment and painted sprinkler heads to match the rooms. We worked with OAHP to make sure the designs would blend well with the architecture of the building." Even more of a challenge to Wilson is the Natural History Building. "We're still implementing the master plan - I think we're in phase 15!" laments Wilson.

Wilson is proud that his office is on the forefront of promoting fire protection in historic buildings. "We're invited to many conferences throughout the world," says Wilson. "We also do a lot of work with the National Park Service. There isn't a fire protection engineer in the Department of the Interior, so we get lots of calls. It's a learning process," says Wilson.

The fire protection division serves the Smithsonian in many ways. They offer a variety of training opportunities for staff and are always available for consultations on how to correct fire safety problems in the workplace. These fire marshals of the Institution are always available to help ensure your safety in any Smithsonian building.

By working together and learning from each other, OAHP and OEMS consistently find better ways to protect not only Smithsonian collections, staff and visitors but the important buildings which contain them.

AB
PHOTO-OP

WHAT: The National Air Museum

WHERE: The South Yard on Independence Avenue, where the National Museum of African Art is located today.

WHEN: Built in 1917 by the War Department, the building was acquired by the Smithsonian in 1919 for exhibition purposes. By the end of World War II, rapid advances in air technology yielded more collection items and prompted an appeal for additional exhibition space. A bill for a National Air Museum was passed in 1946; however, a new building for this museum was not provided until the National Air and Space Museum opened in 1976. This shed pictured here, which served for over 50 years as the museum, was demolished in 1975 to make way for the Victorian Garden that preceded the present day Quadrangle and Enid A. Haupt Garden.

WHY: The shed initially served during World War I as a repository for planes and air appliances for the U.S. Signal Service. In 1919 the Smithsonian transformed the barracks-like shed, providing it with steam heat and electricity, into a museum to display all the air technology that was in production at the time of the Armistice.

CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT

A Planning Tool

The Smithsonian Institution Building, recognized around the world as the flagship of the Institution, is the most significant example of medieval revival architecture to be erected in America during the mid-nineteenth century. The "Castle" Collection, housed in this building, is an integral part of the larger effort to preserve and interpret this important structure. Secretary Adams stated in the Institution's most recent five year prospectus, Choosing The Future, that some of the Smithsonian buildings are "in fact, the most precious artifacts the Smithsonian holds in trust for the nation."

The fact that the "Castle" Collection is so entwined in the daily life of the Smithsonian Building has profound implications for its care and preservation. This collection consists of a wide variety of nineteenth century domestic artifacts which present a broad range of styles. Many objects have significant historical provenance and all of the objects are constantly increasing in value. However, the real significance of this collection is its use in association with the "Castle."

The original purpose and scope of the collection was established in 1964, in accordance with a plan to restore the Smith-
sonian Building. The goal was to provide appropriate furnishings for the principal offices and rooms, creating a period setting within this significant cultural artifact. Over the past five years, the conservation and restoration efforts of the OAHP and the "Castle" Collection have been largely reactive in nature. OAHP, since its inception in 1986, has been responding to divergent programmatic demands on the fragile historic fabric of each of the Smithsonian's significant structures. The "Castle" Collection has been responsible for loaning furniture to most of the offices in the "Castle," while responding to the continually changing needs of the buildings tenants. These needs often require moving, disassembling, or exchanging collection pieces which in turn necessitates repairs to collection pieces. Neither OAHP, or its collecting entity, the "Castle" Collection, have a proactive, long-range conservation plan, although the OAHP has formulated an Institution-wide Historic Preservation Policy.

A preservation policy is a tool for the preservation of historic structures, which is based on law and precedent. A long-range conservation plan is a preservation tool based on a physical assessment, which focuses on actual needs and develops priorities for action from those needs. Only an assessment of existing conditions and practices by the team of an architectural and a collections conservator can accurately identify current strengths and weaknesses, so that the preservation concerns of the Smithsonian may become more than a reflex to programmatic directions, and more of an active part in the development of Smithsonian initiatives. A conservation plan can be used to improve the management of deterioration for a collection in continual use, within a strategy that ensures the preservation of the "Castle" for future generations in perpetuity.

PLM

SCANNING PROJECT AT OAHP

The Office of Architectural History and Preservation has initiated a long-term, on-going project which, when completed, will provide an important research tool for the entire Institution. The project involves creating computerized databases con-

ETYMOLOGICAL MORSEL

While conducting research on "Smithson’s Crypt," a room in the Smithsonian Building’s north entrance, we came across the origin of a term familiar to architectural historians which we pass on to you our readers.

Around 350 AD, a huge tomb was erected at Halicarnassus in Asia Minor by Mausolus, the ruler of the area. The structure, named for Mausolus, rose to a height of about 160 feet and was 117 feet wide by 82 feet deep at its base. In time, the name "Mausoleum" became a generic term for all above ground funerary chambers. Since the building was completely destroyed in antiquity, the accompanying illustration is one scholarly reconstruction drawing found in Janson’s History of Art. It is based on written descriptions and architectural fragments found on the site of the ruined tomb.

RS
taining key text from all of the Smithsonian Institution Annual Reports. Each year since 1849, an Annual Report (one book for each year) has been published. For the OAHP project, each book is scanned onto a computer, page by page, using the "Calera" program. This body of information is then transferred to a word-processing format to be edited. The final product is a computerized replica of the text of each Annual Report.

With the final product in hand, OAHP will be able to use a "search" program to locate bodies of text related to any specific research question. For example, if information were needed regarding the south tower of the Castle building, the search program would highlight all areas of the text related to that part of the building. This will save OAHP staff members, as well as other Institution researchers, from having to read each Annual Report, a time-consuming process which is presently required to answer many questions. It will take quite some time to enter all of the Annual Reports onto the database, but when completed, this project will better enable OAHP to fulfill the Smithsonian pledge to "increase and diffuse" knowledge. JF

CONTACTS IN OAHP

» Cynthia R. Field, Director, OAHP...........................................357-2064

» Amy Ballard, Historic Preservation Specialist..........................357-2571

» Rick Stamm, Keeper, OAHP "Castle" Collection.........................357-4986

» Peter Muldoon, Restoration Specialist, OAHP "Castle" Collection.........................................................357-1409

» Heather Ewing, Architectural Historian................................357-2064

» Jennifer Frehling, OAHP Intern.........................................................357-2064

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