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An Interview with Brian Rich about Future-Proofing and Historic Structures

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If Brian Rich, a preservation architect in Seattle, had motto to guide his work, it would be “first do no harm.” His second motto would be “take the long view.” Together these two maxims have led him to his current interest: future-proofing our historic buildings. Future proofing, according to Rich, is the process of anticipating the future and developing methods of minimizing the negative effects while taking advantage of the positive effects of shocks, stresses, and changes due to future events, such as increased severe weather events and rising sea levels.

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Rich to talk about his work and the role of future-proofing in protecting historic resources.

Rich has been working in the field of architectural preservation for 22 years. He started his career in Chicago rehabilitating 1920s vaudeville theaters for modern Broadway productions. He returned to his hometown of Seattle in 2000, and, inspired by Seattle’s old building stock, he became increasingly interested in the adaptive use of old buildings. He opened his own firm, [Richaven Sustainable Preservation Architecture](#), where he pursues preservation projects in the Pacific Northwest.

Rich explains that he has always been interested in how to make old buildings perform again with a different use. He says, “In addition, I also became very interested in technical design and implementation. I began to ask, how can you design an intervention in a building that allows it to continue to perform in the future without creating more problems than you are solving?”

He tells the story of 1930s brick and terra cotta school that was recently rehabilitated. When he went up on the roof, he says, he saw that some of the terra cotta glazing had spalled off in dozens of different places, most likely from water vapor getting inside the tiles and freezing and expanding. Exposing the soft clay core of the terra cotta would lead to further frost cycle deterioration, he explains, and he began to wonder why we make changes to buildings that do more damage to them. The school building was severely harmed by the renovation. He says, “I couldn’t believe someone else hadn’t thought of it before—and I began to see things like this everywhere. Problems with older buildings and materials that could have been prevented with improved thought processes during design.”

The term future-proofing has traditionally been used with reference to technology, such as computers and utilities. It meant designing systems that were flexible enough to be reused in the future and not become obsolete in a marketplace that focuses on innovation. But Rich notes that up until recently, no one has used that language to talk about the built environment. He says: “If we want our buildings to be able to adapt in a future world, we have to talk about materials and performance in addition to flexibility and adaptability. How can we rehabilitate our



University of Washington, Guggenheim Hall. Rehabilitation of 1920's brick and cast stone building to serve the current and future needs of the Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering Departments. Project completed by Brian Rich for Bassetti Architects in 2006. | Credit: Richaven PLLC, 2014.



South Lake Union Naval Reserve Armory. Section 106 review completed on seismic upgrades. Project completed

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buildings to continue to be useful in a changing world?"

by Brian Rich for URS Corporation in 2005. | Credit: Richaven PLLC, 2014.

To answer this question Rich has developed what he calls the “[Principals of Future Proofing](#).” Some of these principals include, preventing decay, fortifying existing structures, and reducing obsolescence, which means finding the most appropriate use for a building and continually evaluating the built environment in terms of future capacity to accommodate different uses. Rich encourages preservationists to take active steps in assuring that the built environment is durable and continues to perform. “A big part of this is understanding change over time—not only with regard to building use and demand, but also in terms of materials and design. Often developers will approach a reuse project in terms of what is trendy—lofts, etc.—but in doing so, they are not listening to the building. One of the Principles calls for finding the best use of the structure, even if that means allowing it to sit vacant for a few years.”

Future proofing will require some changes in current thinking about rehabilitating older buildings. Rich says that as a society, we aren’t particularly good at taking the long view. He explains that developers have inherently short timelines because of financing models, and that a typical development project could have a timeline of just seven years, which encourages the developer to get in and get out without thinking of creating something adaptable for future uses. He also notes, “We have a culture of technological innovation—looking for the next big thing—which can lead to a misunderstanding of older materials and an inability to integrate the old with the new in a way that doesn’t cause deterioration of the historic building fabric. If we can do more projects that highlight this integration and continue to educate about adaptability and reuse, I think we can shift the perspective toward a longer-term view.”



Lakota Middle School, Federal Way, WA. The original 1950’s gym was retained and the rest of the school demolished. With additions and rehabilitations, the old gym to serves all the current athletic facility needs for the school. Project completed by Brian Rich for Bassetti Architects in 2011. | Credit: Richaven PLLC, 2014.

Rich suggests that we look to Europe for inspiration. “European countries have had a much older building fabric and have traditionally done a better job of taking care of it,” he explains. “There are many examples in France and Italy of centuries-old structures that have been continuously used. The European culture requires human adaptability to the built environment instead of asking the buildings to change to meet human-imposed requirements. This is something we should look at as we hope to shift our culture away from an attitude of disposability.”

Going forward Rich encourages preservationists to promote the fact that building reuse is a key strategy in planning for a resilient future and be prepared to talk about adaptability. “We have to incorporate more flexibility in our approach,” he says, “but stand behind the fact that old buildings are irreplaceable with respect to their materials, their character, and their contribution to our communities.”



The Evergreen School, Shoreline, WA. Preliminary designs for rehabilitation of a neighboring house ultimately found that the house would not be a future-proof solution for the school’s space or curriculum needs. Project completed by Richaven PLLC in 2012. | Credit: Richaven PLLC, 2014.

About Jeana Wisner

Jeana Wisner is an associate project manager at the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Preservation Green Lab.

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