Rebecca A. Shiffer

The Recent Past

And now there's only one thing that I'd like to know.
Where did the Twentieth Century go?
I'd swear it was here just a minute ago.

—*Steve Goodman,* The Twentieth Century is Almost Over

CRM first examined cultural resources from the recent past in a 1993 thematic issue (Volume 16, No. 3). By 1993, cultural resource professionals were beginning to define the recent past and to formulate arguments for the preservation of its buildings and landscapes. Since then, preservation gains and losses, media attention, scholarly publications, and grassroots word-of-mouth have all raised public awareness of the significance and state of the 20th-century built environment and cultural landscapes.

Perhaps the surest sign of a growing interest in the recent past occurred with the convening of over 800 people from the US and abroad in Chicago in March 1995 to participate in the Preserving the Recent Past conference sponsored by the National Park Service and other federal and state agencies and national organizations. The conference offered three tracks — Resource Evaluation, Preservation and Reuse Strategies, Materials Conservation — and an in-depth workshop examining the Curtain Wall, a building construction type unique to the 20th century.

The Fountainbleau, Miami Beach, Florida, designed by Morris Lapidus, 1954.The architect said of his building, "People loved it,but the critics were aghast." Autographed postcard courtesy of Dennis R. Montagna.

Conference presentations and conversations among participants stressed again and again that while traditional approaches to the preservation of historic buildings and landscapes, as reflected in the track titles, are largely applicable to 20th-century resources, some evolution in methodology will be required if we are to succeed in preserving the recent past. Preservation efforts must begin with an understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the resources, many of them less than fifty years of age. Until now, cultural resource professionals have relied on the passage of time to explain that significance and to tell us what elements of the past are worthy of preservation. But more recent resources are already disappearing too rapidly to afford the luxury of allowing specified periods of time to pass before studying them. Time obliterates — often literally — as easily as it clarifies. With solid scholarship, the significance of much of the recent past can be put in historic perspective now.

Like resource evaluation, formulating preservation and reuse strategies takes on a special twist because more recent resources often lack the broad popular appeal of older resources. Modernist buildings, suburbs, roadside structures, and missile silos do not easily fit the popular concept of "old," let alone "historic." They also defy the general understanding of "aesthetically appealing," which consciously and unconsciously drive many people's decisions about the worth of elements of the built environment. Cultural resource professionals largely appreciate the significance and fragility of the recent past, but they still face the formidable task of convincing a public that generally does not "get it."

Finally, the conservation of recent materials is still a nascent field, and it promises to offer far more complexities than the care of traditional materials such as wood, bricks, paint, and mortar. The 20th century has witnessed the unprecedented growth of new manmade building materials. With the rapid change that has been a given in this cen-

Designed by architect Charles Noble in 1936,the Elwood Bar in Detroit,Michigan, was constructed with porcelain enamel panels, a relatively new building material at that time. Photo courtesy of William Scarlet.

tury, many of these materials have already passed out of use. Zenitherm, Flexboard, and Cushocel are long gone from the shelves of the lumber yard and home center. The large-scale industrial manufacturing processes and equipment used to make these materials are now obsolete or non-existent, making modern materials virtually impossible to replicate for restoration needs. As a consequence, recent materials challenge the ingenuity of cultural resource professionals, who are eager to learn of successful projects that could inform their own work.

The articles presented here reflect current issues in the state of the recent past. Five of these—denoted by the Greyhound bus station logo—are reprinted from the published proceedings of the Preserving the Recent Past conference. H. Ward Jandl's introduction lays out the questions faced by cultural resource professionals dealing with the recent past and underscores the need for continued discussion of the issues unique to 20th-century buildings and landscapes. Bruce Kriviskey reports on historic preservation planning efforts in Fairfax County, Virginia, which are perhaps unique in including local historic design review of an historic district constructed entirely in the 1960s. Tim Samuelson and Jim Peters describe the restoration of a building significant for its associations with the history of American rock-and-roll, and the emerging needs to restore 1950s building materials that have been considered intrusive at worst, and ephemeral at best.

Three articles examine modern building materials and construction. Carol Dyson and Floyd Mansberger discuss the history of and offer conservation techniques for structural glass, which found wide application on both the interior and exterior of buildings constructed and remodeled during the mid-20th century. Ann Milkovich McKee presents perhaps the first comprehensive research on a group of materials that may be the most ubiquitous, most derided, and least understood of recent building materials — simulated stone (Formstone, etc.). Bruce Kaskel examines the curtain wall, the construction system that literally changed the face of corporate architecture during the decades following World War II.

Concern with the preservation of 20th-century cultural patrimony is not solely, or even primarily, an American phenomenon. Thomas Jester looks beyond our borders and surveys ongoing international efforts to evaluate, interpret, and preserve architecture of the recent past.

These articles, and the conference for which they were first prepared, are by no means the last words on this topic. Instead, they are among the first words in a field of scholarship and conservation that will ultimately lead to effective methods of preserving and caring for 20th-century resources. Ward Jandl calls the preservation of the recent past "the greatest challenge of all..[one which] preservation professionals will be grappling with for the remainder of this century and well into the next millennia."

Where do we go from here? To meet this challenge, we need to build upon what we know and reach further. As in any new field, our understanding and appreciation of the significance of the resources has advanced further than our knowledge about how to maintain and conserve them. Many excellent books, articles, and other published materials about the recent past, specific building types, and, to a lesser extent, materials, are now available. One aspect of the field that needs greater attention is the research and study of the properties of modern building materials. This is the essential foundation for making informed decisions about treatment; it is impossible to determine an appropriate treatment without understanding what you are treating. We must attempt more conservation treatments, instead of removal, of these historic materials, forging partnerships between preservation professionals and the building owners who are their clients to support these efforts. And we must actively share results with colleagues through publications, meetings, conferences, and newer on-line technologies.

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