DISSENT AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG: ERRORS OF RESTORATION
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New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 22, 1963; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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WILLIAMSBURG.

THE preservation movement is at a crossroads in the United States, and to this observer it is moving rapidly backwards. It could not do so at a more appropriate place than Williamsburg, Va., the Rockefeller-financed, restored 18th-century capital that was the setting recently for the Seminar on Preservation and Restoration, cosponsored by Colonial Williamsburg and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Colonial Williamsburg has a "cut-off date" of c. 1800, and no expression could be more ironically apt than this one used by professional preservationists, for it cuts off not only later buildings, but also any sense of reality, vitality or historic continuity. As far as expert research can guarantee, this is a reproduction of the 18th-century town, with some genuine buildings of the period restored, many moved from other places and given cosmetic corrections, and the long-gone Governor's Palace and Capitol totally reconstructed from remarkably complete records.

To maintain this superbly executed vacuum, nothing else is permitted to exist within the project's didactic limits; a Greek Revival house or other later structure, good or bad, on a spot that once held a colonial building, must go, and a newly created colonial substitute, constructed with exquisite taste, painstaking accuracy and alarming artificiality, is put up instead.

The result has a tidy, if oversanitary and frequently suspect, kind of stage-set charm (does she, or doesn't she, says a popular hair-tint ad; is it, or isn't it a real 18th-century building?), with indisputable value as an educational document for the teaching of history, although one wonders if all that trouble was really necessary.

It is also, let's face it, a bore. And it is a dangerous bore, because it is largely responsible for the present widespread corruption of preservation practices at a time when the national architectural heritage is most seriously threatened. And it has fostered an unforgivable fuzziness between the values of the real and the imitation in the popular mind.

The fault and the danger are in the preservation philosophy that Williamsburg represents, which is less a philosophy than a disease that might be called galloping restorationitis. It has infected innumerable cities and towns and antiquarian societies, and has turned the preservation movement upside down when its first aim should be—and originally was—to save fine old buildings of any period as a living part of the community. Its last function is doctrinaire reconstruction.

Errors of Restoration

This curious reversal of values is responsible for that peculiar perversion, the "restored back" building, which, if real, is returned by surgery and graft to its earliest period, no matter what valid accretions of later history or art it may have acquired. It sets the historical parlor game of synthetic rebuilding — the erudite lie with the magic appeal of the department store model room — above the real job of keeping legitimate landmarks that provides the continuous panorama of change that is *real* history.

As a consequence, America raises the dead and ignores the dying. Every city knows the problem. Less than a fifth of the money necessary for the survival of Wright's Robie House in Chicago has been forthcoming in this year's desperate campaign. According to reliable sources, Rockefeller generosity does not extend to badly needed help for New York's legitimate architectural legacy in lower Manhattan; it favors invention, rather than preservation, of the past.

The justification for "selective reconstruction" is that it teaches history. "Williamsburg is an educational institution," says Dr. Edward P. Alexander, its Director of Interpretation, at the same time that he confesses that America's second most popular parlor game, surveys, have shown that the visiting public has not responded to its lessons of democratic government.

What is taught here, chiefly, is confusion. In spite of outstanding collections of folk art and furnishings, Williamsburg's basic esthetic lesson is bad. The visitor learns, by example, not to differentiate between real and fake, original and imitation, or to make the essential value judgements involved. Guides consistently blur the distinctions. The critical question is whether this serious educational minus is balanced by the plus of the history lesson expensively produced and imperfectly absorbed.

What are the consequences of this kind of indoctrination in terms of public attitudes toward the irreplaceable value of genuine monuments or works of art? Perhaps the answer has been given by the corporation that recently tore down a 19th-century landmark to build a copy, not of a historic structure, but of the Williamsburg Inn.

The error is in the presumptuous insistence that the past can be "interpreted" by "selective" restoration. It just doesn't work. The culture that produces any art form is, above all, comprehensive, and architecture is its most comprehensive expression; it is short-changed by the deliberately imposed limits of selective interpretation. Continuity is banished, and it is continuity that makes the past real, by putting it in perspective.

The past is complex, and its buildings stand for many things. They are works of architecture as well as testaments of events. The authentic, even abused, old structures that have come down to us from their own day speak most directly and genuinely of history and art. It's time to get on with the business of saving them.