



Louis Kahn, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, 1953. Post-renovation. © Elizabeth Felicella, 2006.

What Decides “Heritage”? Lessons from a Comparison of Louis Kahn's Commercial and Institutional Projects

BY LLOYD L. DESBRISAY

In the quest to save recent-past, mid-century modern buildings, it is important to recognize how symbolic and commercial considerations influence the likelihood that some buildings are preserved while other buildings are demolished. Simply put, why does one building survive and another not? This article compares two of Louis I. Kahn's projects — one a commercial building and the other institutional. The comparison examines how various dynamics facilitate or hinder the preservation of modern buildings. Further analysis considers steps that preservation-minded individuals and organizations might consider to retain and restore more modern buildings.

No architect can rebuild a cathedral of another epoch embodying the desires, the aspirations, the love and hate of the people whose heritage it became... but we dare not discard the lessons these buildings teach for they have the common characteristics of greatness upon which the buildings of our future must, in one sense or another, rely¹.

Introduction

This article reflects on the issue of the longevity of recent-past mid-century modern² buildings and the dynamics — symbolic, economic, and political — behind why some buildings are preserved while others are demolished. It will compare two of Louis I. Kahn's earliest buildings — the 1949 Coward Shoe Store (Coward) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (figure 01) and the 1953 Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) in New Haven, Connecticut (figure 02) — to examine how the dynamics cited above resulted in the very different outcomes for these contemporaneous buildings. While the Coward building was demolished in 2014 — the last of Kahn's commercial buildings to be demolished — the YUAG, an institutional building that is regarded as one of his first great works, was painstakingly and expertly rehabilitated between 2001 and 2006³.

This comparison might strike the reader as unexpected given the lack of public recognition for the shoe store and the global renown of the museum. However, it is an instructive comparison given the similarity in Kahn's experimental use of materials, in both cases, and given the differences in use and ownership of the buildings. The comparison thereby allows us to ask questions about how the dynamics cited above facilitate or hinder the preservation of modern buildings. How does the way cultural institutions are given more symbolic value than commercial buildings affect preservation efforts? How do economic pressures unique to the commercial sector influence preservation consideration? How do local political dynamics, including difficulties of building constituencies for historic

preservation, shape preservation outcomes? I was drawn to this comparison as I reviewed recent writings on Kahn's work because both buildings were built within four years of each other and because Coward appears to me, based on my observations from my three-year experience renovating YUAG as project architect for the construction phase, to be a testing ground for ideas later used at YUAG (in proportions, detailing approaches and the use of large expanses of glass which were not thereafter a Kahn staple).

Through the comparison, this article argues that there are symbolic and economic considerations — which are, of course, grounded in political realities — that explain why some buildings are saved and some buildings are not saved. Therefore, we need to reconsider how we as preservationists make calculations about what constitutes our built “heritage” and develop more effective strategies to save buildings. This is crucial if we are to preserve not just what is left of Kahn's legacy but also endangered mid-century modern buildings in general. While the last decades have seen an increase in the push to preserve modern buildings that are well-recognized masterpieces, many lesser-known buildings, including commercial buildings, are also worthy of our preservation efforts⁴. Our calculations must identify ways to better protect and restore buildings of less renown as well as those considered part of the modernist “canon”⁵.

Problem

Preservationists have pointed out that modern buildings are seen, by many, as not as worthy of preservation efforts as other more typical restoration subjects that date further back into the past, and that are made of more popularly symbolic “historic” materials such as brick masonry or stone. This tends to be either because of the mid-century buildings' relatively recent history⁶ and/or because the materials used by their architects



01 Louis Kahn, Coward Shoe Store, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, 1949. Shortly after construction. © Free Library of Philadelphia.



02 Louis Kahn, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, 1953. © Yale University Art Gallery, 1953.

are not seen as being built to last, do not actually have longevity⁷, or are assembled in a less permanent way. Mid-century modern buildings, however, are important to preserve because they give us insight into the social and political moment of their construction or, to cite Kahn's words above, into "the desires, the aspirations, the love and hate of the people whose heritage it became"⁸.

Observers and practitioners of historic preservation have argued that while much work remains to be done, in recent years the preservation community has made significant strides in settings standards and practices for the restoration or rehabilitation of modern materials⁹. However, we still need to build and nurture constituencies — professional, public and political — not only to advocate for but also to support the preservation of modern buildings¹⁰. Others have pointed out that while there might be a constituency for those modern buildings that are well recognized as masterpieces, many lesser-known buildings that are worthy of preservation efforts lack such constituencies¹¹. These "everyday" buildings not only allow us to understand the complex relationship between the built form and the context of its construction but, quite often, provide indispensable links that allow us to trace the evolution of an architect's career. In short, as Michael McClelland, Graeme Stewart and Asrai Ord argue, in their study of post-WWII apartment towers in Toronto, "greater efforts are necessary to bring modern preservation topics into planning and political circles and to start to recognize the contributions such projects can make towards effective economic and planning goals"¹².

Case Studies

Coward Shoe Store

The Coward Shoe Store was designed in 1947 by Oscar Stonorov and Kahn. It opened in 1949 on Chestnut Street in the then high-end specialty store retail center of Philadelphia. Despite the efforts of the city's Preservation Alliance to save the building, it was demolished in 2014. At that time, it was the only surviving commercial building of which Kahn participated in the design.

William Whitaker, the curator and collections manager of the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, has observed that the Coward Shoe Store was typical of post-WWII efforts to "modernize main street". City planners and retailers spearheaded such efforts to revive downtown districts. They sought to use new, futuristic, sleek designs to attract crowds. In this context, William Whitaker notes, manufacturers sought to increase the demand for innovative construction materials such as glass and aluminum by holding public design competitions. One such competition was entitled *There is a New Trend in Store Design* which was sponsored by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company (PPG) during the summer of 1944. The competition encouraged new "ideas of what post-war store design might look like". Stonorov and Kahn's submission, according to Whitaker, included large sheets of Herculite glass — a product marketed by PPG — juxtaposed with free-floating display cases. The emphasis was on the products for sale in the store, shoes, and not on architectural glamor or tricks. The clean lines, careful proportions and fine detailing conveyed the message that the products being sold within were of high quality. Three years later, their submission to this competition garnered Oscar Stonorov and Kahn the Coward commission, as the store sought to build a "modern" space that would attract consumers to its product¹³.

Oscar Stonorov and Kahn's design sought to carve a space among the older buildings on Chestnut Street by using a simple, if technologically experimental, flat façade composed of a glass and aluminum curtain-wall. The clear glass panes revealed (figures 03–04): "...the organization of the two sales floors within... Specially-designed showcases, first seen behind the glass of the façade, lined the way in, and screened the men's fitting area from initial view. The emphasis placed by the architects on the quality and craft of the merchandise, via case display, was further accented by the design of the staircase; its structural glass parapet drew into view the up and down parade of the female clientele — seen to best advantage from (as if it was out of an episode of *Mad Men*) the men's fitting area"¹⁴. In these ways the built form of Coward is indicative of elements that in the coming decades would come to symbolize modern architecture — including not just



03 Louis Kahn, Coward Shoe Store, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, 1949. Interior ground floor. © C. V. D. Hubbard.



04 Louis Kahn, Coward Shoe Store, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, 1949. Interior second floor. © C. V. D. Hubbard.

retail spaces but also commercial buildings. As Pamela Jerome and Angel Ayon point out in a study of high-rise office buildings of the 1960s, it was the curtain-wall cladding that came to symbolize their “Modernism”¹⁵.

As high-end consumers increasingly moved to the suburbs during the 1950s and as shopping malls began to replace shopping streets as preferred centers of consumption¹⁶, the area around Coward and the physical state of the store itself declined — both in symbolic and commercial value. The store’s modern architecture, once its draw, began to appear dated, its iconic first floor of large windows were renovated to be less transparent and the building fell into disrepair¹⁷. After its demolition in 2014, Brickstone Realty, the new owners of the site, built a new building that houses a co-working space¹⁸. This is part of Brickstone’s redevelopment of the area into the kind of combination high-end retail, creative work-space, luxury apartment building projects that are currently being used to attract to downtown districts those that Richard Florida refers to as “the creative class”¹⁹. The Coward building’s 2014 demolition occurred despite it being one of the first modern buildings in Philadelphia’s center city, designed by two internationally-renowned architects, and the last surviving example of Kahn’s commercial sector architecture.

Yale University Art Gallery

The Kahn Building of the YUAG was completed in 1953. Considered Kahn’s first major commission, it marked a transition in the architectural history of museums in the United States. The building includes many innovative features, including the iconic window wall that is located on the west and north sides of the building, as well as at the entry on the east. The window wall (not technically a curtain-wall since the window framing rested on the slabs and did not span continuously past the slab edges), in contrast to Coward, was constructed of standard steel framing members such as rolled shapes, channels, angles and bar stock that included an integral slab edge cover; the whole of the wall was detailed so expertly that the humble nature of the materials was elevated in a unique and artful assembly. The signature window wall located on the west elevation set into a concrete frame that is interrupted by

limestone pilasters that clad the concrete columns. The north elevation continues the inventive window wall construction but in smaller horizontal proportions and longer expanses of glass that are bordered by the limestone pilasters.

From 2001 to 2006, the architectural firm of Polshek Partnership Architects (currently Ennead Architects) designed and replaced the steel window wall with a thermally-broken aluminum window wall that closely approximates the original glazing system (essay cover figure). The replacement repaired the dilapidated appearance of the building, accounted for excessive thermal expansion and allowed for the museum’s interior humidification without any degradation to the window wall. On the interior, condensation that was created when the cold steel frames came into contact with the humidity on the interior was eliminated due the thermally-broken window wall construction and mechanical interventions to adequately heat the window wall²⁰.

Many might have wondered why Kahn chose the seemingly impermanent window wall construction for his first great work, a monumental piece of architecture. A review of the design of Coward allows architectural historians and preservationists to access Kahn’s pre-YUAG experimentation with the use of glass walls. In the case of Coward, the glass wall was a true curtain-wall that spanned in front of the floor slab edge while at YUAG the glass wall is technically, as explained above, a window-wall because the floor slabs interrupt the plane of glass, albeit in an artful and sophisticated manner that conceals the simpler construction method. One was constructed with aluminum, the other with steel. Of his other notable works (The Salk Institute, Indian Institute of Management, Phillips Exeter Academy Library, Kimbell Art Museum, Yale British Art Center and Bangladesh National Assembly Building) none uses window wall construction that is as open and transparent as the curtain/window walls at Coward and YUAG. Moreover, in Coward we see some proportions that are like those used in YUAG but on the horizontal rather than vertical orientation and similar details at pilasters on the ends of the front façade. Lastly, Oscar Stonorov and Kahn designed their work to contrast with the surrounding older buildings. The simplicity of the Chestnut Street store not only signaled the arrival of

a post-war aesthetic but a change in retail architecture that would be followed by others for years to come and that was still apparent years later in the similar appearance of both: the Martin, Stewart and Noble-designed Mercantile Library project just down Chestnut Street and Kahn's YUAG in New Haven — projects completed in 1954 and 1953 respectively²¹.

Contribution to Debate

The above case studies beg a couple of questions: 1) Why there are different outcomes for different types of buildings, and 2) What we can learn from various cases with dramatically different outcomes?

The first question appears easy to answer by pointing to the relatively higher symbolic “heritage” value granted by critics and the public to YUAG than to Coward. This answer would discount the “heritage” significance of Coward compared to the YUAG, especially since it was not until YUAG that Kahn's work began to draw the attention of contemporary architects and critics. Moreover, this answer would highlight that Kahn's commercial work was not worthy of rescue because most of his work was for institutions. Kahn had few commercial clients because they were reportedly not patient enough to work with him. His work — beyond a few residences that were then not his most recognized work — consisted mostly of institutional and public buildings. Kahn preferred to think about how his architecture would influence public life and raise everyone up along with the level of civic life. He aimed to promote a level of belonging and responsibility through his work²².

However, to argue that Coward is not worthy of preservation is to discount the symbolic value of the store as a site that allows us to understand the relationship between mid-century built forms, consumer practices, and city planning. There are, in fact, good reasons for saving commercial buildings of less renown such as Coward. First, their role as models of mid-century commercial architecture is critical for preservationists, historians, social scientists and everyday citizens seeking to access the past to understand the present. Second, buildings such as Coward can be significant in understanding the evolution of modern architecture. As explained above, the store design prefigured Kahn's future designs, including YUAG, and thereby not to preserve the building was to ignore its importance to those interested in tracing the design evolution of one of Modern Movement's finest architects.

Interestingly, Brickstone, the developer behind the demolition of Coward, decided to incorporate the Martin, Stewart and Noble 1954 Mercantile Library building into their new project. This building replaced the library's former Greek Revival home and was well-known for its 36-foot glass and aluminum façade²³, which William Whitaker has noted echoes Oscar Stonorov and Kahn's design for the Coward store²⁴. Like the new building on the Coward site, the preserved Mercantile Library is to serve as a co-working space. The preservation of the library speaks to how some kinds of buildings come to assume symbolic value over others. Libraries and museums, as cultural centers, hold higher value and are therefore deemed worthier of preservation compared to commercial buildings²⁵.

In her article on the demolition of Coward, Allison Meier notes how Ben Leech, of the Preservation Alliance of Greater

Philadelphia, pointed to how symbolic value considerations played out in the Coward case to hamper its preservation: “From our perspective at the Alliance and speaking personally as someone who values the hodge-podge diversity of architectural forms and styles you often find along commercial corridors, it's a big loss when buildings from the more recent past get scrapped before being given a chance at rehabilitation”. [Leech] notes that while the Kahn association was important, it was “hard to argue that this was an architectural masterpiece”, especially after the decades of dilapidation. “But it doesn't have to be a masterpiece to have value”, he added. “Given more time, these ‘everyday’ commercial buildings will start to accrue more of the charm and interest that buildings from earlier eras have, and smart designers and tenants will be able to take advantage”²⁶.

Beyond these symbolic factors playing a role in how buildings come to be valued or not as part of our “heritage”, economic factors also play a role. As William Whitaker points out the nature of commercial real estate is to focus on the constant transformation of the built environment in ways that make the expensive preservation of modern buildings less attractive to private developers than the cheaper construction of new “signature” buildings. “Change is relentless” in the commercial sector and it is driven by other factors such as the real estate market and schedule pressures that hamper the recognition of recent-past modern buildings as worthy contributions to cultural heritage. However, William Whitaker also argues that such buildings are necessary to preserve the “urbanity” of city streets. “What makes a neighborhood urbane, to quote Robert Venturi, ‘is lots of many things which are very different which are close together’. As of today, this certainly remains true of Chestnut Street. Chestnut's constant is the contrast of old buildings with very new buildings and the variety of uses found along its sidewalk-friendly length. The close proximities, the interlacing of architectural styles and scales — grand and small, Queen Anne to Moderne, are ingredients that, for now, make Chestnut Street a model of Philadelphia's genteel urbanity”²⁷.

Stewardship of buildings is important in their preservation. Commercial real estate pressures, argue Angel Ayon and Uta Pottgiesser, make it hard to preserve such buildings to the degree that institutional buildings like YUAG are preserved, if at all²⁸. No commercial building by Kahn survives while all his institutional buildings have been or are being preserved, even in poorer countries where there is a struggle for funds. In YUAG's case, the building was a symbol of the institution and its largest piece of “artwork”. The building was also fortunate to be in the hands of a wealthy owner.

Solutions and Suggestions

*What are we going to do with the recent past in the not-too-distant future?*²⁹.

There is a tremendous and immediate need to re-evaluate how we determine building heritage and significance, and extending from this, their worthiness for preservation. Preservation-focused groups should think more about how

to conserve buildings whose owners have no interest in preservation given real estate market pressures and schedules. Perhaps building constituencies advocating for tax incentives alone are not enough.

I argue that international and national advocacy and preservation groups should take a more active role in local preservation societies (like the Greater Philadelphia Preservation Society). By active I mean the encouragement of foundations to administer fund-raising development to acquire and preserve significant buildings before they end up on the lists of endangered buildings, just a few steps away from the wrecking ball. By active I also mean more concerted public education campaigns to build and mobilize coalitions of public, professional, and political actors to support such efforts to stop the demolitions. None of this happened in any significant and sustained manner with Coward and as a result, in 2014, the wrecking ball destroyed a valuable link to our recent past and our understanding the later work of Kahn. As Peter Woodall, co-editor of Philadelphia's *Hidden City Daily*, explained in light of Coward's demolition: "The hope is that the next time something like this comes up, people will be a little bit more ready and a little more open to thinking of these buildings as important and historic, even though they are commercial and are modernist, and if they have been altered in unfortunate ways... Perhaps if more people notice its slow demise, and the quiet loss of similar mid-century architecture around the country, more of these structures can get on local preservation lists and attract the supporters they need to survive as part of 20th-century architectural history"³⁰.

Our built heritage deserves nothing less. Otherwise we risk not listening to Kahn's admonition that we "not discard the lessons these buildings teach for they have the common characteristics of greatness upon which the buildings of our future must, on one sense or another, rely"³¹.

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Notes

- 1 Louis Kahn, "On Monumentality", in Robert Twombly (ed.), *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 2003, 22-23.
- 2 "Mid-century" refers to the period of development after WWII in the 20th century.
- 3 Lloyd L. DesBrisay, "Yale University Art Gallery: Louis I. Kahn: Challenges for the Rehabilitation of Modern Museum Buildings", in Susan Macdonald, Kyle Normandin and Bob Kindred (ed.), *Conservation of Modern Architecture*, Shaftesbury, Donhead Publishing, 2007.
- 4 William Whitaker, "The Other Shoe Drops on Modernist Landmark", *Hidden City Philadelphia*, 13 August 2014.
- 5 This article which is meant as a provocation to stimulate further debate and, perhaps, new thoughts and solutions regarding the questions above. I am no longer employed at the architect-of-record for the YUAG renovation and I do not speak for that office. Instead I write from a qualified position as the project architect for the construction phase during the three-year long rehabilitation of YUAG and the author of a technical case study of that project. See Lloyd L. DesBrisay, *op. cit.*
- 6 Angel Ayon and Uta Pottgiesser, "The American Experience with Steel-Frame Assemblies to Date", *Facade Tectonics World Congress*, Los Angeles, 10-11 October 2016; Susan B. Bronson and Thomas C. Jester, "Conserving the Built Heritage of the Modern Era: Recent Developments and Ongoing Challenges", *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 28:4 – Mending the Modern, 1997, 4-12; Allison Meier, "How Louis Kahn's Last Commercial Work Fell Quietly in Philadelphia", *Hyperallergic*, 4 February

- 2014; William Whitaker, *op. cit.*
- 7 Susan B. Bronson and Thomas C. Jester, "Conserving the Built Heritage of the Modern Era: Recent Developments and Ongoing Challenges", *op. cit.*
- 8 Louis Kahn, *op. cit.*
- 9 Thomas C. Jester and David N. Fixler, "Modern Heritage: Progress, Priorities, and Prognosis", *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 42:2/3 – Special Issue on Modern Heritage, 2011, 6.
- 10 Susan D. Bronson, "Authenticity Considerations for Curtain-Wall Buildings: Seminar Summary", *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 31:2, 2001, 5-8; Michael McClelland, Graeme Stewart and Asrai Ord, "Reassessing the Recent Past: Tower Neighborhood Renewal in Toronto", *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 42:3 – Special Issue on Modern Heritage, 2011, 9-14.
- 11 William Whitaker, *op. cit.*
- 12 Michael McClelland, Graeme Stewart and Asrai Ord, *op. cit.*
- 13 William Whitaker, *op. cit.*
- 14 *Id.*
- 15 Pamela Jerome and Angel Ayon, "Can the 1960s Single-Glazed Curtain be Saved?", *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology*, 45: 4, 2014, 60-62.
- 16 Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987; Lisabeth Cohen, "From Towncenter to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Market Practices in Postwar America", *American Historical Review* 101:4, 1996, 1050-1087; Lisabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America*, New York, Vintage Books, 2003.
- 17 Allison Meier, "How Louis Kahn's Last Commercial Work Fell Quietly in Philadelphia", *Hyperallergic*, 4 February 2014.
- 18 *Id.*; James Jennings, "Brickstone is Buying Up the Block Near East Market Project", *Curbed*, 30 October 2014.
- 19 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class And How Its Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*, New York, Basic Books, 2003.
- 20 For a more detailed case study of the technical matters, see: Lloyd L. DesBrisay, *op. cit.*
- 21 William Whitaker, *op. cit.*
- 22 Paul Golberger, "The Mystic", *The Nation*, 5-12 June 2017. On Louis Kahn's relationship with commercial as opposed to institutional clients and to his views on public architecture also see: Robert McCarter, *Louis I. Kahn*, London, Phaidon Press, 2005; and Sarah Williams Goldhagen, *Louis Kahn's Situated Modernism*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2001.
- 23 Ben Leech, "Almost Nude", *Hidden City Philadelphia*, 12 January 2012; Sandy Smith, "Buildings Then and Now: The Mercantile Library awaits the next chapter of its story", *PhillyLiving*, 10 August 2014.
- 24 William Whitaker, *op. cit.*
- 25 It is important to note that another commercial building using glass (and granite) that Louis Kahn designed in Philadelphia at the time (designed in 1954 and built in 1957), the American Federation of Labor Medical Service Building, was demolished in 1973. Russell Trzaska, "Remembering Louis Kahn's Demolished Work in Philadelphia", *MyPhillyCondo*, 20 February 2017.
- 26 Allison Meier, *op. cit.*
- 27 William Whitaker, *op. cit.*
- 28 Angel Ayon and Uta Pottgiesser, *op. cit.*
- 29 Michael Lynch as cited in Thomas C. Jester and David N. Fixler, *op. cit.*, 3.
- 30 Allison Meier, *op. cit.*
- 31 Louis Kahn, *op. cit.*

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