Seeking Landmarks and Re-imagining Urban Architecture: achieving a balance of contemporary and historic solutions

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Abstract
Beyond the architectural historians view of the past as seen through the lens of categorization and the contemporary critics view of the present as distinctly different and unique we are also presented divergent views of the urban make up within which architecture exists. What has been accepted as a landmark for millennia may today be viewed as a hindrance to social forward thinking, while what is today newly designed to define the present may be seen as confused or non-participatory. Urban contrasts and the expanding definition of architecture as landmark will be the focus of this paper. Various oppositional views present themselves in this discussion: Should the intended design and meaning of a landmark be its sole reason for recognition? Can a landmark be re-defined through re-purposing? Do contemporary landmarks aid and excite the viewer? These questions will be addressed through the comparison, discussion and analysis of current design solutions initiated throughout the world with an intent to positively influence current planning processes.

Introduction: defining a landmark
Naturally, the definition of what a landmark is will change with each age and condition or place in which it occurred. Today's landmark has much the same meaning and function as those of the past, although, like language itself, the landmark has gone through iterations of purpose and interpretation and like a carved totem has had figures added while others have deteriorated and been lost to time. Landmarks acquire or are designed to give a special meaning. In simple terms, landmarks, in the practical sense, exists to provide information or to guide travelers through an environment. When landmarks exists over long periods of time they develop multiple or layered meanings. Landmarks can be: confirming or awe inspiring, "I have arrived at a special place". They can be re-assuring: "I know where I am because I recognize this place and feel safe". Landmarks can stimulate intellectually: "This is amazing" although the response can be positive or negative. The term landmark, then, is often changing and open to interpretation. As described by Kevin Lynch, landmarks can present themselves as "cognitive associations". Or, as author Jane Jacobs describes, landmarks can interrupt the "endlessness" of the visual landscape.

When researching the term Urban Landmark on-line, one is immediately struck that it is used more often as a marketing term and a means to sell a condo or real estate than as a defining term for important and contributing elements of the city.
In legal terms a landmark (building) is defined as: *A structure that has significant historical, architectural, or cultural meaning and that has been given protection from alteration and destruction.*

Age is not a pre-requisite for landmark status as new, iconic and memorable markers are created on a daily basis. The Apple Store (Bolin, Cywinski, Jackson 2000) has attained iconic status for being the sole distributor of the “new technology”. On New York’s Fifth Avenue the Apple Store is a sleek, ephemeral and clean glass cube that sits above the stepped entry to the enclave of communication and technology below. Ironically, it sits in the plaza in front of the iconic Chrysler Building and appears as a temporary footnote to the massive structure. None the less, the Apple cube has been one of the most photographed structures in the city in the year 2011 according to researcher Eric Fisher who created a heat map based on tracking of on-line images. If photography is a precursor to cognitive recognition and association, then the cube is very well an instant but likely transient urban landmark.

Landmarks were often built with a special purpose that expressed or demanded interpretation as a construction of purpose and intent such as cathedrals, fortified walled cities, or palaces such as the Forbidden City of Beijing. However, with time common and utilitarian fabrications such as Tiananmen Square or Times Square in New York can and have become landmarks through associations and events. Worse yet is when a landmark disappears. Bridges, buildings and monuments as landmarks of the urban environment are demolished or moved from their original context annually throughout the world apparently without discrimination. An odd example of a movable urban landmark would be that of the Badger ferry found on Lake Michigan. The ferry is an iconic and known landmark which can be found on either side of the lake as it picks up and delivers passenger cars and rail freight cars. The ferry is significant as it is the last of a kind still functioning on Lake Michigan and it is the only vessel remaining that makes use of coal fired power engineering that dates from 1953. Alteration to the vessel’s power system would reduce its historic engineering integrity and being decommissioned would remove it from the landscape as a landmark. The Badger would disappear if not granted special status as costs to alter the propulsion systems are prohibitively expensive.

Structural deficiencies, urban population pressures, military actions, and environmental catastrophe all act as contributing factors to the loss of the urban landmark. The ebb and flow of public opinion and the mood of the critic can also bring about the demise of a landmark. Recently, Ken Salazar, U. S. Secretary of the Interior, announced that 11 landmark buildings designed by architect Frank LLoyd Wright will be nominated for inclusion on the United Nations World Heritage List. In the not so distant past, Wright’s work was demeaned and considered outdated and his designs too dependent on the teleological tenets of classicism. Today, his works are generally respected.

Landmarks can occur as waypoints between things. From the ground level a landmark may be interpreted on a human scale. From space, landmarks become more like geographical punctuations. The study of landmarks by behavioral
psychologists and urban environmentalists and planners has provided an interesting insight to landmarks but one that is typically couched in a western interpretation. In an effort to quantify the process of movement through paths and landmarks researchers Long, Baran and Moore describe the following:

“If people tend to use certain paths (ie. High integration, high connectivity) more often than the others, it is possible to assume that certain physical elements, such as landmarks and nodes that are on these paths, will be reflected clearly in their cognitive maps. thus, this in turn will contribute to people’s legibility and way-finding performance.” (Long, Baran, Moore, 2007)

Before leaving the subject of defining a landmark it would be beneficial to look at a hopeful landmark that goes beyond the normal qualifiers. Found outside of Washington D.C., the former Dorsch White Cross bakery today stands empty and abandoned awaiting the blessings of state and local agencies determining its future. The bakery, founded by the son of a German immigrant, was built in 1913 and over time expanded to include various facilities including retail shops, bake ovens, stables and delivery garages. Through mergers the bakery was acquired by the Wonder Bread Company which in turn closed the Dorsch Bakery due to consolidation. The building is significant as it inhabits nearly an entire city block. Architecturally the facade is an excellent example of early 20th century industrial design. Brick and original elements of the company’s logos, a white cross, are still intact on the façade. Due to its size and longevity as a business, it employed numerous members of the immediate community over several generations. The building and site meet many requirements as an urban landmark, but the most interesting aspect of the place are the memories of fresh baked bread described by members of the community.

“When I would take the streetcar to Griffith Stadium as a child from my Northeast neighborhood, you knew you were getting close when you began to smell the bread and the bakeries. You could close your eyes and know when you were within three blocks,” (Dr. Sandy Berk)

Historic Examples: the museum as landmark.

"Throughout the history of architecture, museums have always been directly or indirectly involved with the idea of monumentality and urban representation. If the history of museum architecture begins in the Renaissance, the autonomy of this building type was only achieved with the Enlightenment, with "the progressive affirmation of the grand architectural themes, in terms of places of 'public utility' which are part of a city and contribute to its embellishment". (Barranha 2009)

One of the most prevalent urban landmarks found throughout the world is that of the museum. The museum as a sepulcher or font of knowledge and culture is central to common histories and when it exists in an open society provides a showcase for the contemporary and a view of the future. Whether housed in a former palace, Versailles, (Le Vau, 1661) a former power station, Tate Modern
As a concept of 18th century Europe, the early museum expressed nationalism and superiority. In this time of the Enlightenment there was a rise in the number of dedicated structures as museums. The growth and importance of the museum inversely parallels that of the apparent waning importance of the cathedral. Both elements now exist as core embodiments of the concept of landmark and each meeting our definition of landmark. Without question, the routes of the pilgrim would not exist if it were not for the cathedral, church or shrine that awaited the journey. The cathedral or shrine served as both a cartographical and spiritual landmark. Yet, it is the museum that appears to have morphed and adapted from a center of nationalistic pride to something more engaged with aesthetics, social awareness and community. There are, however, many examples of landmark museums sites that will be incapable of change due to their history.

The Palace of Versailles stands today as a museum of history, culture, building and landscape design that has endured for and has been in continuous use for almost 400 years. Versailles also represents a landmark that, due to its incredible wealth of history will never change its reason for being in the global community. To the French, it stands more as a political statement of change and democracy rather than of a period example of design. For the commoners of the 18th century in their time the palace stood as an emblematic example of indulgence. For the empire expanding armies of Europe and the world of the 19th and 20th centuries the palace stood as a landmark of victory, if conquered. For the leaders of nations it represented a level of grandeur to be imagined. Today, Versailles stands as a historic urban landmark that draws between 6 and 10 million visitors annually. Revenue is estimated to be about 120 million dollars, US. All proceeds are reinvested in the property in the form of maintenance, repairs and staff. No funds leave the control of the palace by design. Versailles stands as a landmark in the truest sense of the word as it appears that it will be a touchstone for cultural tourism that will never change.

With the advent of heritage and cultural tourism many city museums, landmarks, now are held responsible for both the benefits of exposure, tax and accommodation revenue, as well as the detriments: overcrowding, gentrification of environment and increased living costs resulting in displacement of lower income households. Tourism, as a green service industry, was seen as a means to stabilize a community’s economy. Yet, successful tourism is now seen as an unsettling aspect of urban growth.

Twenty years ago the City of London set out to review its city plan and to improve impoverished neighborhoods, add cultural and sporting venues and to
ensure world class status for the financial capitol. During this period of review and reflection the former Bankside Power Station (Scott 1947) was decommissioned, 1981, and became available for development. In need of larger space, the Tate Millbank gallery secured the former power station and transformed the former coal burning facility into the Tate Modern. Repurposed by the firm Herzog and de Meuron in 1995 the massive structure was minimally altered and remains as an almost gross urban landmark overlooking the Thames of London. Nearly as monumental in its scale and impact as Versailles, the Tate building will remain a visual and intellectual fixture on the landscape presumably for centuries. The main chimney of the Tate stands nearly 99 meters and was intentionally built to a lower height than that of the dome of St. Pauls Cathedral. The cathedral sits within a visual axis, across the river, to the former power plant. In 2010, the Tate had over 5 million visitors to its exhibitions.

For sheer scale and impact both the Tate and Versailles are overpowering as landmarks in the urban context. And, due to the apparent security of the nations within which they occur, their future seems reliable.

The recently completed SCAD (Savannah College of Art and Design) Museum of Art (SMOA) found in Savannah Georgia presents a design and adaptive re-use of a historic site that could be classified as a re-awakening of a forgotten urban landmark. The site, a former 1853-56 railroad freight depot had been vacant and deteriorating for decades. Built in sections and first as a passenger depot for the city’s budding railroad industry, the building grew and served many generations for many purposes. Being over 800 feet long and 60 feet wide the depot and later added sheds stored goods and materials that were shipped throughout the world. During the nation’s civil war, the sheds housed Union soldiers and later provided housing for materials and soldiers of both WWI and II. Simplistic in design and marginal in construction the building stands on a commanding corner of an intact 35 acre railroad complex on a central artery to the city.

With a growing need for gallery, storage and conservation space the university looked to the ruined shed as a potential museum site. Prior to the design phase an intensive survey and structures report, similar to the HIA, was completed. Design then focused on preserving as much of the ruin as possible, yet inserting contemporary museum design solutions. The outcome is a leading edge interior space with masonry references to the buildings past. The exterior retains the mass and horizontality of the original wall profile and the insertion of a monolithic concrete wall system behind the original masonry walls provides lasting support to the historic building and a structural platform for the new multi level museum. As a design addition to the monumental lineal scale of the former sheds, the architect placed a white, vertical lantern (illuminated shaft) in the main entry vestibule. The lantern, which stands nearly 90 feet, serves as a beacon and landmark drawing visitors to the re-purposed site.

Another dimension of the SMOA that further defines it as an urban landmark is the historic fact that the mortar and bricks for the walls of the original building were fabricated on nearby plantations by slave labor. The walls themselves were built by slave labor. Wood for the timber floors was harvested and milled
by slave labor. It is ironic and unique that the completed museum now houses the wing of the Walter Evans Collection of African American Art compromised of early American works through the present bringing a new purpose and layered dimension to the mission of the former antebellum railroad landmark.

**Urban Landmark: Static and changing**

Several examples of urban landmarks have been provided that display the broad diversity of the subject. The approach to this analysis has been to define the subject and discuss landmarks in a historic and qualitative sense or a more user friendly sense. We have not even touched the subject of cognitive mapping, fractal analysis and interpretation or syntactical spatial cognition that underlies the questions of how and why we follow landmarks and what impact they have on the viewer. We cannot draw any consistent facts from this review other than the notion that urban landmarks are essential to movement, the understanding of place and the transmission of cultural and social information and heritage. In addition, urban landmarks, in the form of buildings and sites, appear to have a stronger and more defined and layered influence on the dweller.

**References:**


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