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What place does permanence have in sustainability?

By Linda Burnett

When we think of the woeful destruction of our environment, one of the first images that comes to mind—after, perhaps, the gapping hole in the ozone—is piles of garbage, mounds of things that won't go away, stuff that is rooted to earth and rejects degradation or recycling. The impermanent, then, seems to be the hero of sustainability: materials that can be transformed into other materials or that can be reused, renewed, or returned to the ground from which they came. But designing for the permanent doesn't necessarily contradict green principles.

Buildings can be evaluated along a continuum of permanence with furniture considered the least-lasting element, followed by the skin of the building, systems, structure, and site. Architects and designers can approach each aspect of a design with an appropriate level of expectation for how long each component should exist. Since furniture, wallcoverings, and floorcoverings are expected to be swapped out fairly regularly—due to whims of taste and everyday wear and tear—the most sustainable interior parts should be biodegradable and/or recyclable. If we don't want the world to be a giant garbage can, then we shouldn't want a carpet tile to outlive a building's site.

But then what do we do with the parts of the building that are more permanent? One answer is to embrace that permanence and use it as a strategy toward sustainability. This means designing buildings that are intentionally made to last, which in turn means creating buildings that people want to use today as well as half a century or even a century from now. Sim Van der Ryn, architect and principal of his own Sausilto, Calif. firm, and a renowned leader in sustainable architecture, suggests that only buildings that provoke “a lump in your throat and make you think ‘now here’s a building’” are the kinds that are built for permanence. “The building has to have emotional content,” he says. “If what drives the design is spirit, vision, caring, and love, then people will want to maintain it and will continually find uses for it.”

Harry Kendall, principal at New York-based BSKS, also sees incredible sustainability merit in designing buildings to stay put. “A lot of work and energy has been put into making a brick, so keep it where it is as long as you can,” he points out. “Sustainability absolutely dovetails with the idea of permanence.” One of the best ways of applying this is in designing buildings that are inherently flexible and can be easily adapted. “A building should be built with a more natural assumption of longevity that accepts that it will need to change over time,” Kendall further explains. “Recycling” a building doesn't necessarily mean disassembling it (although the Big Dig House built by Single Speed Design in Cambridge, Mass., was built from steel and concrete salvaged from Boston's Big Dig project); it can also mean repurposing it for a new use, thereby saving the energy and materials required to destroy the building and put up a new one.

One firm that associates itself with permanence is Holabird & Root, a 127-year old architectural practice in Chicago. Many buildings that the firm designed in its early days are still in operation today, such as the Palmolive building, a 1929 office building that has been transformed into high-end condos. Greg Cook, a principal



Holabird & Root planned, programmed, and rehabilitated a 30,000-sq.-ft. former Catholic school and church (above) to convert it into the Concordia Avondale Campus Community Center (top) with an early childhood education program as well as multipurpose spaces for school-aged children, teens, and seniors. Photography by James Steinkamp.

at Holabird & Root, whose father was a principal at the firm for 42 years, has long believed in recycling buildings. For Cook, the key lies in involving the engineer earlier on in the design phase. “Better living comes through the collaboration of architects and engineers so that we can create something that can be maintained over time,” Cook says. The point is that a building that is easily maintainable in terms of cost and efficiency will be more likely to be cared for.

Permanence complements sustainability as long as the building is well designed in an appropriate location with good materials. What needs to be more prominently featured in assessing a sustainable building is this idea of permanence and the use of existing materials. Architects and designers might find themselves frustrated that the LEED certification process does not reward a building that is designed to last longer. And if a building is designed to maintain itself without the need for a mechanical system, a project does not get more points than when using an energy-efficient HVAC system.

Still, architects and designers are continuing to push for using what we already have as long as what we have continues to be useful and important. “The best example of good design is to make something people love,” says Van der Ryn. People will fight for what they love. ■

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