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Essay
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Requiem for a Relic: The Case of the Great Northern Grain Elevator

ABSTRACT: Works of architecture are frequently valued for the distinctive profiles they lend to a cityscape, and when beautiful buildings fall into disrepair, reference to their aesthetic merit can support efforts for preservation and restoration. However, many historically important structures, such as industrial buildings, do not possess obvious aesthetic virtues, in the sense that their appearance is not immediately appealing. Consider an object such as the gigantic Great Northern grain elevator, which was built in 1897 and stood near the western terminus of the Erie Canal. This last of the "brick box" elevators was demolished in 2023 after preservation efforts mobilized on its behalf failed. It was not obviously beautiful, but its historical position conferred significant aesthetic merits.

KEYWORDS: historical preservation, architectural preservation, grain elevators, irreplaceability, relics

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Introduction

A "relic" is an artifact from the past that no longer performs its original function. Although it may be worn out or even fragmentary, it is more than trash. As an emblem of history, it merits preservation, pondering, admiration, even veneration. If a relic is small enough, it can be dispatched to a museum or historical collection. But if it is as large as a building, it is likely to be inconvenient and in the way, its shabby state a blight to the eye.

In addition to diminished practical function, an old building might have deteriorated to a point that there is risk to those who want to explore its remains. It might have been constructed with materials that no longer meet safety standards, and its size, shape, and interior may resist repurposing for contemporary use. As a consequence, old buildings often become marked for demolition, sometimes too quickly to assess their value with sufficient care. The promised gains of demolishing the old to make way for the new are immediate and obvious: productive development for neighborhoods, cities, regions. What is lost may be harder to detect. Hence the continuing, and often losing, battles for historic preservation.

Considering buildings no longer in use addresses aesthetic concerns of architecture from a backward-looking direction, assessing what valuable features remain that demand protection. If a building represents a period of innovative design or technology, arguments for its preservation can invoke its historical importance. Works of architecture frequently provide distinctive aesthetic attributes to a cityscape, and when especially beautiful buildings fall into disrepair, reference to their aesthetic merit can support efforts for their retention and maintenance. Historical and aesthetic values, unfortunately, provide relatively weak grounds for preservation, because potential (or promised) economic benefits for demolition and redevelopment are apt to command loud voices and financial muscle. Thus ethical, political, and economic matters are also in play, along with questions of responsibility to communities and to future generations.[1]

This already weak position is magnified by the fact that many historically important buildings do not possess obvious aesthetic virtues,

[1] For a review of the ethical, political, and economic factors that over-determined the fate of the Great Northern, see D. A. Gerber and C. Korsmeyer, "When Memory Fades and Resources Run Dry," in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Architectural Reconstruction,* Z. Somhegyi and L. Giombini, (eds.), Routledge, London/New York, 2024, pp. 345–359.

in the sense that their appearance is not immediately appealing. To put it bluntly, they are not "beautiful." This essay concerns one such structure, the Great Northern grain elevator that once stood along the Buffalo River. After the failure of legal attempts to block its demolition, this last of the brick box elevators was destroyed in 2023, a clear loss of an object with historical importance. Its aesthetic significance was equally deep although less evident to the eye.

Grain Elevators

First, what is a grain elevator? Farm silos are tiny versions, those tall cylinders adjacent to barns that hold feed for cattle and horses. Commercial grain elevators are mammoth structures containing numerous silos as well as mechanisms for raising and lowering ("elevating") shipments of grain for storage and further transporting by serial conveyances. Large numbers were constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries along the waterways connecting cities on the American Great Lakes. Wheat, corn, and rye from the highly productive farms of the midwestern states were loaded onto ships heading east. Those shipments landed at the eastern end of Lake Erie, where a man-made waterway, the Erie Canal, carried them further east, eventually to Atlantic ports. The construction of the canal in 1825 brought about an explosion of commerce, population shifts, and sudden expansion of cities, including Buffalo, New York, which at one point had over thirty of the immense structures clustered along its waterways.

The grain elevators were planned for efficiency and represent impressive engineering inventiveness. Their aesthetic impact was hardly at the forefront of their fabrication. Nonetheless, their immensity and unusual shapes played a role in the history of architectural design, as modernist architects, including Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, were inspired by their relative simplicity of appearance and by the curving outlines that trace the cylindrical silos housed within (figure 1). Their grand size is awe-inspiring. After a visit to Buffalo in 1924, Erich Mendelsohn wrote a letter home to Berlin exclaiming at his first encounter with these structures amid the bustle of their operation:

> Mountainous silos, incredibly space-conscious, but creating space. A random confusion amidst the chaos of loading and unloading of corn ships, of railways and bridges, crane monsters with live gestures,

Figure 1. Buffalo, New York. Grain boats and grain elevators on the Erie Canal. Photograph by Marjory Collins, 1943. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USW3-029164-C.

> hordes of silo cells in concrete, stone and glazed brick. Then suddenly a silo with administrative buildings, closed horizontal fronts against the stupendous verticals of fifty to a hundred cylinders, and all this in the sharp evening light. I took photographs like mad. Everything else so far now seemed to have been shaped interim to my silo dreams. Everything else was merely a beginning.[2]

So marvelous did these behemoths appear to architects pursuing the idiom of modernism, that many saw in the grain elevators a symbol of America itself. Much as the gothic cathedral defined the European Middle Ages, they enthused, so did the equally enormous silos emblematize the youth and progressive vigor of the United States. The sheer size of the elevators additionally inspired Gropius to compare them to ancient Egyptian architecture—presumably the pyramids and giant temples.[3] While these somewhat gushing reactions may seem overwrought, they persist to this day, as we shall see shortly.

By 1900, Buffalo had claims to be the largest grain port in the world, and it remained a major milling center into the nineteen forties. However, shifts in modes of distribution that began in the nineteenth century diminished the boom that had prompted rapid development along the Erie Canal, and economic decline in the mid-twentieth century removed many industries from the city. The architectural legacy of this short-lived prosperity remains in clusters of immense concrete and steel buildings that now stand looming and largely empty. A few continue to serve their original function, a few more have been repurposed as arts and entertainment venues, but most are shuttered. Their removal is costly, which probably accounts for the fact that so many are left. They are not easy to redesign for other uses such as apartment buildings or shops, although making the best of their distinctive profiles, the city of Buffalo now casts dramatic lights on them to decorate the night.

Most of the elevators have regular, repeated curves, which trace the shapes of the silos within. These especially have claims for a mammoth grace and splendor, even beauty. Le Corbusier, indeed, praised their "beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms."[4] But there was one kind of

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[2] Quoted in R. Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture,* MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, p. 6. Much of my discussion of grain elevators, including the Great Northern, is indebted to Banham's study.

[3] *Ibid.,* pp. 20–21.

[4] Quoted in *ibid.,* p. 136.

elevator that presented an exterior that was simply an immense cube. The so-called "brick box" elevator was a marvel of engineering, but it lacked the intriguing exterior weirdness of other designs, as the silos stood by themselves inside, the blank brick walls merely shielding the immense machinery within. Such was the Great Northern.

The Great Northern

The story in brief: the Great Northern grain elevator was built in 1897 in Buffalo for the transshipment of grain on the Erie Canal from ships working the Great Lakes (figure 2).[5] By the 1970s, its role in shipping had lapsed, and the Pillsbury Company used it only for flour storage. It was finally shuttered in 1982, and for forty years it stood empty between a railroad track and the Buffalo River, across the street from another industrial building that has been repurposed for sports and arts events. It could not be entered safely and was admired from afar, but it stood as an emblem of a vigorous economic past. And so it might still, but for a violent windstorm in December of 2021, which blew some of the bricks off the end of the building (figure 3). The owners, Archer-Daniels-Midland Company (based in Chicago), immediately applied for permission to demolish the whole thing, arguing that it posed a danger to the public. It seems likely that the owners were waiting for an opportunity to repurpose or sell the site.

The Great Northern immediately became a topic of intense public debate. Preservation groups rose up in protest, arguing—correctly—that since the exterior brick did not comprise supporting walls but was merely a protective shell surrounding the interior silos, there was no danger, and the hole could be easily repaired. Moreover, echoing the admiration expressed a century earlier, at least one architect compared the Great Northern to a medieval cathedral: "It's a building that is at the same scale as a great medieval cathedral, with a similar kind of monumental power."[6] Despite public outcry and assiduous efforts in the courts to protect the building, preservation efforts failed. The Great Northern was razed in

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[5] Grain elevators and silos sometimes took their names from the companies that manufactured cereals (Cargill, Pillsbury) and sometimes from the shipping lines that transported grains. "Great Northern" was a major railroad company, and several of their elevators along the Great Lakes bore the same name.

[6] G. Delaney, quoted in J. McKinley, "Flighting to Preserve Towering Testament to Buffalo's History," *The New York Times,* January 23, 2022, p. 21.

2023. The losses that this destruction brought about are many-faceted, and among them one can discern aesthetic attributes that, in a sense, bind those losses together.

When considering an artifact's aesthetic features, the most obvious place to begin is appearance. Consider the claim that grain elevators are aesthetically akin to European medieval cathedrals. Except for their monumentality, the appearance of cathedrals and grain elevators is hardly similar, a fact dramatized when they fall prey to disaster and their loss is imminent. In 2019, the world stood aghast as Notre Dame Cathedral burned, and there was a global sigh of relief when the fire was extinguished. When restoration was underway, workers labored hard to restore its beauty. Philippe Jost, head of the restoration task force, granted that there were many difficulties involved in this undertaking, adding: "But it's different when you work on a building that has a soul. Beauty makes everything easier."[7]

Unlike Notre Dame, the Great Northern had few claims to beauty—at least to the non-expert eye. And this represents a real problem for buildings that were constructed for the practical needs of industry: appreciating their design is likely to require a good deal of knowledge, including technical understanding of how they functioned. Nonetheless, even to the non-expert, the size of a structure like the Great Northern is impressive. Here are a few of Banham's descriptions in the years after it ceased to function but well before the damage that precipitated its destruction:

> Externally it is a huge brown brick box, the equivalent of ten regular stories high and long to match, at just over three hundred feet. [...] The landward side of the Great Northern [...] still demonstrates the sheer artistry of the industrial brickwork of the former tradition at its late best—a pure wall, almost uninterrupted by openings and barely modeled by the necessities of buttressing and corbelling [...] completed by a low-pitched roof whose central part suddenly rises in a steep clerestory that must, one realizes from counting the superimposed ranges of regular industrial windows, be as tall as a four-story building.[8]

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[7] Quoted in M. Kimmelman, "Making the Heart of Paris Beat Anew," *New York Times,* December 29, 2024, p. 11.

[8] R. Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis,* pp. 118–119.

Figure 2. The Great Northern elevator, Buffalo, New York. Photograph taken c. 1900. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, LC-DIG-det-4a08420.

Figure 3. The Great Northern grain elevator. Photograph taken by C. Korsmeyer, December 2021. The interior silos can be seen through the hole caused by wind damage.

His description continues of the inside of the building, where again he compares the Great Northern to a cathedral.

> Weird as this may sound, it is a highly impressive space, monumental in scale and in the quality of the work, and that is a rare experience in the world of grain elevators, which are not usually, nor need be, provided with anything like public spaces. The head-house too is almost cathedral-like: long, lit by ranks of industrial windows in the corrugated roofing on either side, filled with a golden-gray atmosphere of flying grain dust sliced by low shafts of sunlight[...][9]

Is sheer size of aesthetic significance? Of all the familiar terms that indicate aesthetic value (beautiful, sublime, picturesque) the one that the Great Northern has the most claim to is monumentality. Sandra Shapshay argues that monumental size is an aesthetic characteristic that is akin to but distinct from the sublime. The kinship has to do with both the size of the object of attention ("size is a very important element of the monumental aesthetic response") and its ability to inspire a kind of awe.[10] She has in mind edifices such as the Washington Monument that are deliberately designed for a social or political purpose and that enjoin shared values and respect, so the concept requires adjusting to include the monumentality of grain elevators. It is doubtful that builders had any particular political message in mind, being far more occupied with engineering matters. Still, the presence of gargantuan structures in the service of production and transportation has a social context with implicit political values: progress, development, power. Standing in the shadow of a grain elevator is indeed awe-inspiring.[11] The aesthetic power of its size thus matches and highlights the historical significance of grain elevators in the development of the American economy and the national standing that ensued.

The Great Northern was also clearly an object of historical and cultural importance. Grain elevators represent, indeed embody, periods of stunning economic vigor that came to identify their places, situating cities and regions—and their inhabitants—in history in ways that perhaps

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[9] R. Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis,* p. 121.

[10] S. Shapshay, "What Is the Monumental?," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 79, 1, 2021, p. 153.

[11] R. R. Clewes, "Why the Sublime is Aesthetic Awe," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 79, 3, 2021, pp. 301–314.

only buildings can achieve. Robert Hopkins observes that architecture in general is a vehicle of cultural memory, so that when we lose significant buildings,

> we will also lose the experiences [...] that capture the past for us. [...] [T]he durability of buildings, and their central place in the self-conception of many a culture, mean that they will often be the only repositories of cultural memory ... To lose the buildings is thus to lose our cultural memory for the tenor of previous forms of life. To the extent that we lack other sources of information [...] it will be lost to us altogether. To the extent that we do have such sources, we may retain knowledge of it. But while knowledge may survive, memory will not. We will have suffered a distinctive kind of loss.[12]

Of course, there are still photographs of the Great Northern, as well as detailed descriptions and contemporary documents that trace its design and its fate. So historically important *information* about grain elevators of its type remains available. What is lost, however, is the *immediate experience* of such a building, the sense of overwhelming size and energy—an aesthetic apprehension, a direct affective experience. (Indeed, visitors celebrating the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Erie Canal in 2025 floated past a vast empty lot instead of the towering Great Northern.)

Hopkins also notes that "The seriousness of the loss depends in part on what other vehicles for memory are available."[13] That is, if there are other buildings of a similar sort, the loss is somewhat less than if there are none such. The Great Northern was the last brick box elevator left standing in the world, making it *irreplaceable*. The adjective "irreplaceable" is not merely descriptive; if it were, almost anything, if described with sufficiently granular detail, would also be irreplaceable. Designating something "irreplaceable" implies importance—in this case clearly historical and technological importance. The notion of irreplaceability is complicated and challengeable, but in this case I think what is meant is pretty straightforward: a historical object that was constructed for a purpose that once was significant and that is the only one left of its kind cannot be substituted with anything else. If there were other brick box

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[12] R. Hopkins, "Architecture and Cultural Memory," in W. Bülow *et al.* (eds.) *Heritage and War: Ethical Issues,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2023, p. 171.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 172.

elevators still in existence, one could at least find some comfort in the fact that there would be others to visit and appreciate. But that is not the case here. The decision to demolish ignored the "reasons to preserve, honor, and cherish objects that have irreplaceable value."[14] Even if one resists calling irreplaceability an aesthetic quality in itself, the fact that a significant object is irreplaceable clearly has the capacity to deliver understanding made vivid with affective valence. Saving the Great Northern was a last chance, and it was lost.

Concluding thoughts

Although far from beautiful in any obvious or conventional sense, the aesthetic value of the Great Northern is amply supported by its expressive meaning as an emblem of productive vitality and by its monumentality. Those traits described the building since its first construction. However, note the backward direction we have taken when considering its preservation, for many of the most important aspects of this building only accrued with age and were not part of its original features. The Great Northern's historical significance increased over time, and it became irreplaceable when others of its kind fell to the wrecking ball. The latter are the chief grounds for its preservation.

Efforts to preserve historic structures often make their case based on repurposing a building no longer in use, but defense of the Great Northern could not have adopted that strategy. Or rather, that strategy would have been self-defeating. Repurposing this particular building would destroy the very reasons it should have been preserved.

Conceivably, the exterior brick wall of the Great Northern could have been salvaged, the interior silos and machinery removed, and apartment dwellings and shops inserted in their place. (If, that is, there were enough people who wanted to live mere feet from a railroad track along a polluted ship canal and without a trace of greenery in sight.) However, that kind of change violates the preservation of something unique and irreplaceable. What gave the Great Northern that status was its entirety—inside, outside, situation in place. If irreplaceability, uniqueness, being the last of its kind, and so forth are to be valued as reasons for preservation of a building, then they also foreclose repurposing of any kind. Therefore,

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[14] G. Bradford, "Irreplaceable Value," in R. Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* vol. 19, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2024, p. 155.

if my position here is persuasive, it has an impractical consequence that must be accepted if we truly value buildings both for what they were in the past and what they continue to offer us today.

So, what could have been done with the Great Northern? Beyond necessary repair and stabilization: Nothing. It could—and I believe it should—have been preserved intact as a relic of its past. A gargantuan relic, to be sure; but its awesome size was part of its enduring aesthetic merit.

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