

WAR AND PIECES

Social history, and particularly the profound effects of military conflict, create pressures that support a more invasive approach to protecting buildings, writes **Peter Jamieson**



© SPK UTE ZSCHAHNT FOR DAVID CHIPPERFIELD ARCHITECTS

Stairs were inserted inside Munich's bomb-damaged Alte Pinakothek during sensitive conservation work in the 1950s. This was reflected in British architect David Chipperfield's recent work at the Neues Museum in Berlin, inset

PHOTO: BAYERISCHE STAATSGEMALDESAMMLUNGEN MÜNCHEN

Viewpoint

In 1989 Uppark, the important 17th-century country house in West Sussex, belonging to the National Trust, was gutted by fire. Following this disastrous event the decision was taken to restore the house through an exhaustive forensic study of the debris that remained.

For the way that the floors had collapsed meant that the fragments of the building and its contents could be studied in great detail and their former location pinpointed. In terms of the insurance, it was cheaper to rebuild than declare it a total write-off. In addition the restoration work provided an opportunity for traditional skills to be disseminated.

Visiting the restored house is a strange experience. On the one hand there is the prior knowledge of its trauma and, on the other, without an expert's eye, it is easy to pass from room to room oblivious to the reality of its current state. But, as has been pointed out, such rebuilds lack the patina and aroma that time allows.

Such an approach was not possible at Clondon, also a National Trust property, following the recent fire which gutted the building. Here it could be more in line with the “accepted” practice of conserving what remains and any “interventions” being clearly of their time.

This was the approach that my architectural practice adopted in the Historic Dockyard at Portsmouth where we inserted an auditorium and exhibition spaces into a 19th-century, cast-iron framed store, which had been partially destroyed in the Second World War. The auditorium sits suspended above the frame like the hull section of a warship. It is truly an “intervention”.

The decision to rebuild Uppark was a significant departure from attitudes to such events in the UK, which, following the precepts of William Morris in his Manifesto and subsequent conservation “philosophy”, holds that historic buildings, once lost, should not be rebuilt “restored”. It is interesting to note that in the Manifesto we are encouraged to leave buildings unaltered if they no longer suit our needs and to build another elsewhere which does. There is no mention of how to approach alterations or additions.

The moving of a historic building from one site to another is considered to be unacceptable because the building is the response to a unique set of circumstances. In moving it, this attachment to a particular location and all its historic associations is lost. This has not stopped this happening for various reasons – for instance, the desire to preserve a threatened building's type of construction. The Weald and Downland Museum at Singleton, West Sussex, has assembled a large collection of rural buildings that would otherwise have been lost.

In the Czech Republic similar pressures prevail. The Friends of Czech Heritage have recently been involved in the conservation of a

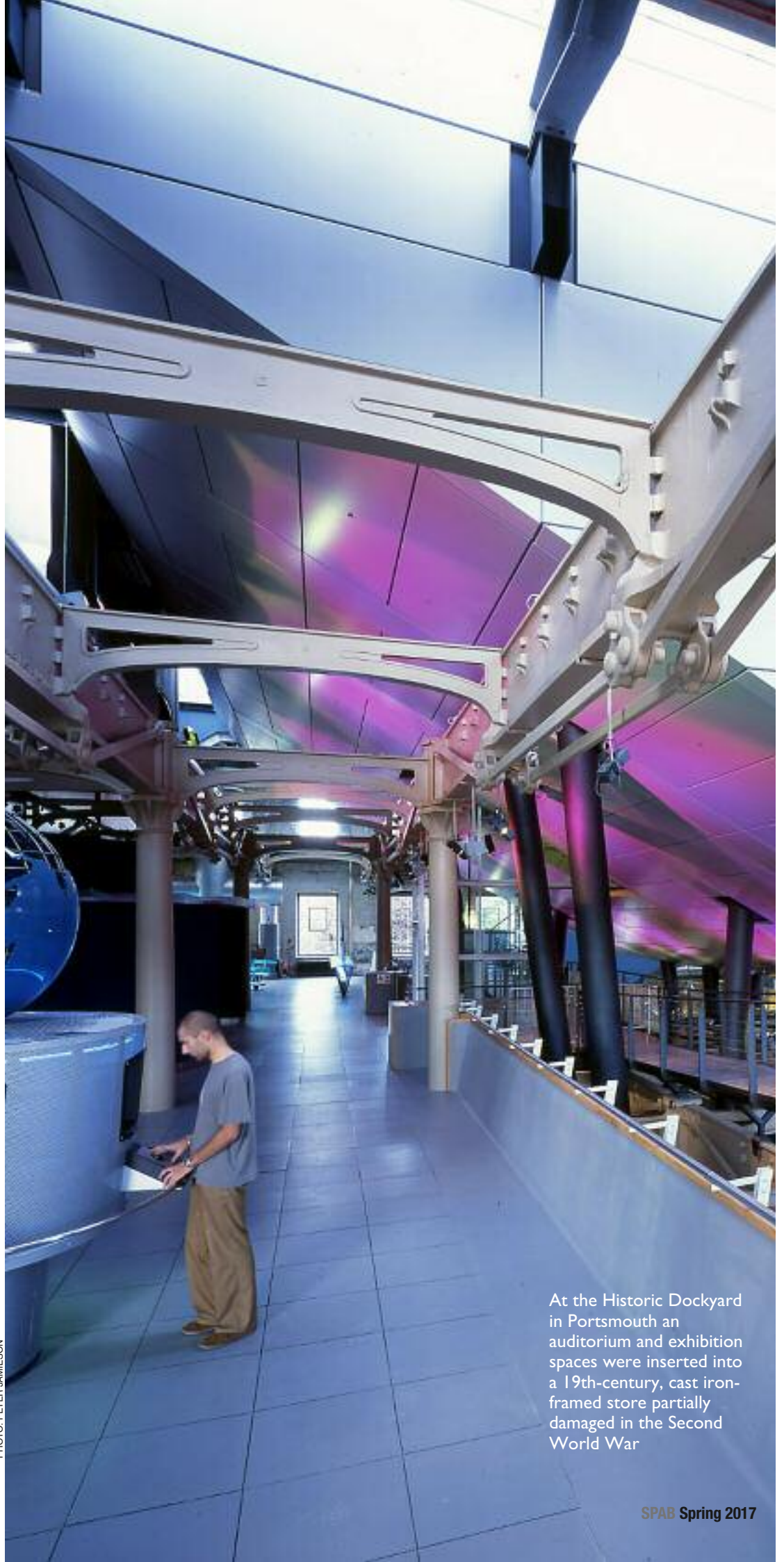


PHOTO: PETER JAMIESON

At the Historic Dockyard in Portsmouth an auditorium and exhibition spaces were inserted into a 19th-century, cast-iron framed store partially damaged in the Second World War



The Watchman's Cottage at Cervrney Dvur was the subject of a Friends of Czech Heritage project; inset: The original architect's drawing for the cottage in 1845

field barn at the open-air museum at Chanovice in South Western Bohemia. Like the Weald and Downland Museum it is intent on preserving rural buildings at risk, which can only survive in a museum like some endangered species. In the Czech Republic this is more urgent because of its history of collectivisation during Communist times that revolutionised farming methods. Much has been lost and few examples survive.

Perhaps more common is the temptation to replace missing parts of buildings that have been lost in an attempt to return them to some pre-existing state for which generally no firm records exist. The Friends of Czech Heritage project at Cerveny Dvur in Southern Bohemia is a case in point. The Watchman's Cottage is an important feature in the English Landscape park where only the walls and the original design drawing survived. Our approach has been to put back the lost elements using standard craft techniques, which are still practised regularly in the Czech Republic. The building thus appears in a reconstructed form similar to the original, but is clearly going to be a product of its time when completed. Perhaps this is a form of "creative restoration"?

The temptation to rebuild buildings lost in some catastrophic event is very strong. In the UK, despite the losses we have sustained – particularly during the Second World War – we have by and large not followed this route. An example of our caution was the decision to leave Coventry Cathedral as a ruin and to build the new Cathedral alongside it. The tension resulting from this juxtaposition perhaps reveals more about the loss and resurgence than by simply rebuilding the skeletal remains.

But others take a different view and their national trauma has resulted in a more radical outcome. I recently visited the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, outside St Petersburg, which was stripped and left a hulk by the retreating German forces in 1943. As at Uppark it is easy to follow



The Czech Republic's Museum of Rural Buildings



Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, outside St Petersburg, was stripped by retreating German forces

Viewpoint

the guide through the glittering enfilade of grand rooms where the descendants of Peter the Great entertained, and to be seduced into accepting the timelessness of the experience. Yet beneath this lies the need to acknowledge the heroism of the Russian “people”, their defence of their cultural roots and the overriding need for the Soviet regime to demonstrate its historic legitimacy. The regime believed that only by reinstating an accurate facsimile of what had been there originally could this be achieved.

Similarly the Poles’ rebuilding of the Old City of Warsaw was necessary for them to reestablish their historic identity following the near-total destruction of the city by the Germans. Strangely the Germans themselves have also felt the need to repossess their past by the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, which was only completed in 2005. This is in contrast to the approach they adopted at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin, completed in 1963, where the bombed-out hulk, like Coventry, stands in contrast to the modern church that surrounds it. But in both cases the loss was an event that continues to resonate through German communal memory of the Second World War and, as with the new Coventry Cathedral, part of the imperative for the rebuilding was the need for healing and reconciliation. Thus for many people buildings, though they may only have the appearance of the original, continue to be hugely important to their cultural identity and a sense of continuity.

One of the most sensitive post-war reconstructions in Germany was that of the bomb-damaged Alte Pinakothek in Munich, carried out by Hans Dollgast in the 1950s. The replanning and the new interventions were balanced by a sensitive conservation of the surviving structure, which predated David Chipperfield’s and Julian Harrap’s similar approach to the Neues Museum in Berlin by some 50 years.

The techniques now available increasingly make the reinvention of lost buildings possible, either in a real or virtual world. The recent laser-cut stone reproduction of a portion of the stone arch from Palmyra destroyed by ISIS, which was put on display in Trafalgar Square, points the way. To knowledgeable observers its crudity was obvious, but this is just the beginning of what might be possible with developing technology.

We of the SPAB tend towards an attitude to conservation and “restoration” that is enshrined in Morris’s Manifesto and generally prevails in the UK. But at the edges of this there are other pressures that support a more invasive approach and the boundary can become blurred. At the SPAB we have to defend our core beliefs but we cannot avoid engaging with those of different persuasion.

● *Peter Jamieson is a SPAB volunteer caseworker, former partner of MacCormac Jamieson Prichard and chairman of The Friends of Czech Heritage.*



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Above: Alte Pinakothek in Munich, following sensitive restoration work by Hans Dollgast in the 1950s.
Below: an image showing how it was affected by bombing during the Second World War



Reconstruction work has also taken place in Dresden

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