



The Purpose of the SPAB

An explanation of the SPAB conservation approach

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) is involved in all aspects of the survival of buildings which are old and interesting. Our principal concern is the nature of their 'restoration' or 'repair', because misguided work can be extremely destructive. To us the skill lies in mending them with the minimum loss of fabric and so of romance and authenticity. Old buildings cannot be preserved by making them new.

In the architectural context 'restoration' means work intended to return an old building to a perfect state. It can be the unnecessary renewal of worn features or the hypothetical reconstruction of whole or missing elements; in either case tidy reproduction is achieved at the expense of genuine but imperfect work. William Morris founded the SPAB in 1877 to defend old buildings from this treatment. He saw that the most vulnerable buildings were those of most eloquent craftsmanship, survivors from a time before mass-production took hold. In the manifesto which he wrote for the new Society, and which guides our work to this day, he put the strongest case against their restoration, proposing instead a policy of skilful repair.

We are constantly studying, developing and improving ways of putting this policy into practice through the advice, teaching and casework which we undertake. This is what sets the SPAB apart from other conservation societies. Ours is not a learned body, nor are we champions of any one style or period. Historic buildings cannot be made to last for ever, but, by the abstemious approach advocated by the Society, they will survive as long as possible, and suffer the least alteration.

Our work is guided by these principles:

Repair not restoration

Although no building can withstand decay, neglect and depredation entirely, neither can aesthetic judgement nor archaeological proof justify the reproduction of worn or missing parts. Only as a practical expedient on a small scale can a case for restoration be argued.

Responsible methods

A repair done today should not preclude treatment tomorrow, nor should it result in further loss of fabric.

Complement not parody

New work should express modern needs in a modern language. These are the only terms in which new can relate to old in a way which is positive and responsive at the same time. If an addition proves essential, it should not be made to out-do or out-last the original.

Regular maintenance

This is the most practical and economic form of preservation.

The Purpose of the SPAB

An explanation of the SPAB conservation approach

Information

To repair old buildings well, they must be understood. Appreciation of a building's particular architectural qualities and a study of its construction, use and social development are all enlightening. These factors also help us to see why decay sets in and how it may be put right.

Essential work

The only work which is unquestionably necessary (whether it be repair, renewal or addition) is that which is essential to a building's survival.

Integrity

As good buildings age, the bond with their sites strengthens. A beautiful, interesting or simple ancient building still belongs where it stands however, corrupted that place may have become. Use and adaptation of buildings leave their marks and these, in time, we also see as aspects of the building's integrity. This is why the Society will not condone the moving or gutting of buildings or their reduction to mere facades. Repairs carried out in place, rather than on elements dismantled and moved to the work-bench, help retain these qualities of veracity and continuity.

Fit new to old

When repairs are made, new material should always be fitted to the old and not the old adapted to accept the new. In this way more ancient fabric will survive.

Workmanship

Why try to hide good repairs? Careful, considered workmanship does justice to fine buildings, leaving the most durable and useful record of what has been done. On the other hand, work concealed deliberately or artificially aged, even with the best intentions, is bound to mislead.

Materials

The use of architectural features from elsewhere confuses the understanding and appreciation of a building, even making the untouched parts seem spurious. Trade in salvaged building materials encourages the destruction of old buildings, whereas demand for the same materials new helps keep them in production. The use of different but compatible materials can be an honest alternative.

Respect of age

Bulging, bowing, sagging and leaning are signs of age which deserve respect. Good repair will not officiously iron them out, smarten them or hide the imperfections. Age can confer a beauty of its own. These are qualities to care for, not blemishes to be eradicated.