

Siekkinen, George O. Jr. (1998 [2004]) 'The recognition of significant historic character and fabric', in *Disaster Management Programs for Historic Sites*, eds Dirk H. R. Spennemann & David W. Look. San Francisco and Albany: Association for Preservation Technology (Western Chapter) and The Johnstone Centre, Charles Sturt University. Pp. 45-48.

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The recognition of significant historic character and fabric

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When I first received the request to participate in this disaster symposium, I grappled with how to get a handle on the title in a meaningful fashion. I tried to determine what approach to take, how to discuss it and how to put into context so we can understand it. The concept of historic character and its relationship to the historic fabric of buildings and structures is probably a concept that we often do not think about, but there are other things that we think about and some comparison may prove beneficial to our understanding of the meaning of historic character and fabric for historic buildings.

How many of us are collectors? How many collect something? Just think about that in terms of the genre of whatever you collect. Do you collect antique cars, guns, stamps, books, works of art on paper, bronzes, oil paintings, antique furniture, or painted furniture? You get the nuances and ideas of that genre of collection and you very quickly become aware of the fact that original character, original fabric, original material adds greatly to the intrinsic value of the object you collect, which you love and which you spend time trying to find. The idea that you would change that character, alter that fabric, or modify that original material for a personal or aesthetic reason is something you would recognize today as being a great mistake. This is because most collectors know that such alterations or modifications to original character and fabric will most likely degrade the intrinsic value of the object and will probably lower the economic value of the object.

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Note: The text for this contribution was composed by the sessional organizer George Siekkinen, drawing on a videotape of the actual talk presented at the session. His contribution is expressly acknowledged.



Figure 7.1. St. John's Church, Inarajan, Guam, severely damaged in September 1992 by the dual effects of Typhoon Ross and an earthquake which occurred at the same time. This church is one of the few buildings surviving from the pre-World War II period of Guam and has a very high cultural and historic significance. Note toppled spire ornament and missing roof sections. (Photo: Dirk Spennemann 1994).

Let us say that you had a piece of painted furniture and you had stripped it of its original paint finish (from the 18th or early 19th century). On taking that piece to the market to sell, you would probably encounter someone who would say to you that you stripped the original paint off that 'Pennsylvania German cupboard' and stained it a dark walnut color, but underneath there is a remnant of the original blue paint. You would be accused of seriously degrading the piece and lowering the price you could have received for it.

Why we treat historic buildings differently is the next philosophical question. Continuing this line of logic, we have an object, we have collections, and we value those things 'as is'. We protect those things as is, so why do we treat historic buildings any differently? Why do we say, "Let's rip out the storefront; let's cover the cast iron columns of the storefront with some modern material. Let's take out the Luxfer prism transom lights and replace them with something different".

Why do we deal with historic buildings in such a different fashion? How do we make the connection for historic buildings with the idea that in protecting an antique we understand that protecting its intrinsic value will also protect its economic value to us? Part of the reason for treating buildings so differently, is that we view buildings as functional objects: we live in them, we work in them, we use them.



Figure 7.2. St. John's Church, Inarajan, Guam. Minor damage to reinforced concrete column. This damage is repairable and should not result in the loss of a historically significant structure. (Photo: Dirk Spennemann 1994).

So in a sense, on a depreciation schedule, we theoretically use the buildings up and then discard them. We need to expand our sense of how we approach historic buildings and how we look at their historic fabric, materials and systems.

These are the philosophical questions I wish to pose. My own progress in this has been greatly encouraged from my interactions with my colleagues at the National Trust, such as the curator and the archaeologist.



Figure 7.3. St. John's Church, Inarajan, Guam. The earthquake revealed an earlier attempt at seismic retrofitting the buttresses through reinforcement. (Photo: Dirk Spennemann 1994).