
Architectural conservation has come a long way during the last fifty years, and this book, celebrating half a century of Donald Insall’s architectural practice, admirably charts this progress. Insall, one of the leading conservation architects of his generation, is a principal driver behind the modern conservation movement. Operating from London, but with seven regional offices, his architectural practice, Donald Insall Associates, currently employs forty architects and has undertaken some of the highest-profile conservation projects in Britain and overseas. The breadth and quality of this work is highlighted throughout the book, which cites a truly impressive range of projects, illustrated with excellently reproduced photographs and exquisitely executed plans, elevations, sketches and axonometric projects by Insall and members of his practice.

Yet *Living Buildings* is far more than a glorified glossy brochure showcasing the achievements of a single architectural practise. Its central ethos is that buildings are ‘alive’ and that we must get to know and understand their individual essential character in order to allow us to make appropriate decisions to ensure their conservation. This philosophical approach is a constant theme throughout the book. In a myriad of practical examples, encompassing some the most important buildings in the country, Insall shows how it underpins the thought processes necessary before practical interventions into the fabric of historic buildings are carried out.

It is enlightening to compare this approach with Insall’s previous offering *The Care of Old Buildings Today: A Practical Guide*. Published in 1972, this was a pioneering work and one of the rare books aimed at the practitioner since A.R. Powys’s *Repair of Ancient Buildings* of 1929 first sought to ally conservation techniques with the principles embodied in Morris’s 1877 SPAB Manifesto. As a practical handbook, *The Care of Old Buildings Today* deals in-depth with the legal and financial aspects of a conservation project and the techniques and methods
involved in carrying out the work. The intervening thirty-eight years since it appeared has seen a proliferation of publications dealing with these issues. As a consequence, in Living Buildings, Insall does not need greatly to concern the reader with this fine detail, although a bibliography or further reading section referring to some of these might have been helpful for the non-specialist. It might also have been useful to include a greater acknowledgement of the legal restrictions governing work on some of country’s most important historic buildings, of which, as a founder-commissioner of English Heritage, Insall is fully aware. Whilst this may have toned down the slightly swashbuckling tone which surfaces from time to time throughout the text, readers might on occasion need to be reminded that such considerations often affect the choices made, and in many cases can be an overriding factor.

Freed from the necessity of providing a detailed administrative framework and technical guidance, Insall instead offers fascinating insights into how the solutions to the buildings problems or requirements may be informed by ‘understanding’, or as he terms it, ‘befriending’, the building. In the case of Kelmscott Manor, where he carried out repairs and reordering between 1965 and 1967, a key clue to decisions was the important question ‘what would Morris himself, if he lived today, have wished to do?’ This essential pre-intervention assessment stage was implicit in Insall’s work at the time but was seldom articulated in print before the Australian ICOMOS Burra Charter of 1981 codified the concept of ‘understanding significance’. The idea that a building must be ‘understood’ and a conservation plan formulated before any intervention takes place, has since been adapted and enthusiastically taken up by the major heritage bodies in the UK, forming the philosophical basis for much of the intervening policy and guidance. Essential as these documents are, they often seem divorced from the first-hand experience and insights which he is able to call upon.

Insall’s guiding voice comes through strongly throughout. Although not a practical handbook, Living Buildings does include some sections on project-management and these are instructive. As a practising architect, mindful of his client’s interests, he offers valuable guidance on assessing the needs of owners, such as HRH the Prince of Wales (who contributes the Foreword) at Chevening House, Kent, as well as those of the building, and gives useful advice on report preparation, project-planning and working on-site with contractors.

The bulk of Living Buildings, and I suspect for many readers its main interest, lies with what Insall terms as the ‘Ten Degrees of Intervention’. Here he uses his vast experience of engaging with sometimes seemingly insurmountable issues to produce a challenging and coherently argued rationale behind his conservation works. It opens with sections on daily and programmed maintenance, resonating with the prescient words of Morris to ‘stave off decay with daily care’. Despite the best intentions, however, unexpected events often trigger conservation works.
One memorable example is the Lords’ Chamber in the Palace of Westminster, where Insall was called in after a late-night debate was interrupted by a heavy wooden pendant falling and narrowly missing a sitting peer. The resulting remedial works involved Pugin’s richly decorated ceiling being disassembled, then carefully conserved, with new elements introduced where necessary. An even more extensive project was the post-fire restoration at Windsor Castle during the 1990s, the importance of which is reflected in the extended treatment it receives in the book.

Change is the mainstay of even those architectural practices specialising in conservation, and half of Insall’s ‘Ten Degrees of Intervention’ are concerned with alteration, improvement and adaptation of historic buildings to suit clients’ needs. This is an area where the conservation movement has partially drawn back from Morris in his assertion that it is preferable to ‘raise another building rather than alter or enlarge an old one’. Closer to Morris’s original Manifesto is the section dealing with new build in an historic context. Among many examples this includes The Stephen Hawking Building at Cambridge University, where the sensitivity of the site was heightened by the presence of modern buildings by notable British architects.

The final ‘degree of intervention’ introduces the concept that it is not just buildings but also the built environment which can be viewed as a living organism. This section highlights Insall’s long involvement with the historic city of Chester. It was here during the late 1960s that he pioneered area-based assessments, which at his instigation led to the appointment of the country’s first local authority Conservation Officer. Area assessments and conservation-led regeneration and enhancement are now a mainstay of local and national planning policy and practice, but Insall’s work at Chester helped the city to be among the first historic urban centres to demonstrate how the long-term prosperity of an area could be secured through conservation works.

The book concludes with an appendix containing themed casework, including a very brief synopsis of Insall’s work at Kelmscott Manor. We are also presented with his wide-ranging personal views on past, present and future issues affecting conservation. With half-a-century as a pioneering conservation architect, Insall is uniquely positioned to ponder these. It is this experience and the marrying of the philosophical and practical aspects of building conservation, which has produced an inspiring and rare book in a field dominated by worthy, but often grey, government-guidance, text and reference books. With Living Buildings, Donald Insall has succeeded not only in putting life into the buildings but has accomplished the almost singular feat of bringing personality and colour to a building conservation publication.

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