

# I · N · T · B · A · U

International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture & Urbanism  
PATRON: HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE OF WALES

## Tradition as Collective Intelligence

### The Launch of INTBAU USA

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It's fitting, I think, that we launch INTBAU USA here in this beautiful, bedraggled city, where so many of the issues of concern to INTBAU come home – and that we explore ways to collaborate with its residents, and stand with them in what they are still going through. Their resilience is inspiring, but frankly the lack of support they are getting from much of the rest of the world today is troubling at best.

But I'd like to suggest to you that what's at stake here is not just New Orleans' problem. There are issues here that exist, in one degree or another, in our own communities, and elsewhere around the world – not least, the issue of how to build and to rebuild more sustainably. And if we don't learn to address these issues here, there's not much reason to think we can do so elsewhere either. So I think we need to recognize how much is still at stake in the death and life of this great American city.

In New Orleans, I think it's very easy to see the value of cultural tradition as a kind of growing evolutionary repository of “good stuff” – good solutions to how to live well together. You see it everywhere here: in the food, in the music, and in the architecture and in the urbanism, this incredible sense of place, this rich local identity.

And you notice, a lot of things get re-used here – you can easily see what Borges called the “knitwork of centuries of adventure”. And there's no real opposition between the traditional and the new: the two work very well together. And in some important sense from that emerges a genuineness, that's rooted in this local place and this local culture.

I suggest to you that, in an increasingly global world, that kind of local identity is a very precious commodity. But there are other ways in which traditional building is more valuable than we may realize – especially so in the quest for a more sustainable built environment.

Let's start with the obvious fact that historic and traditional structures comprise a significant percentage of existing buildings in many cities. So that means they represent enormous embodied energy and materials, and that means there is significant resource conservation to be had simply by re-using them instead of building new buildings. You know, up to half the energy a building will use in its lifetime is in its construction – so the longer they endure, the better.

And these buildings have endured – they've “sustained” - and passed the test of time over many decades and even centuries. Whereas we think we are lucky to get 60 years out of modern buildings, historic buildings are often many times that age, and likely to last much longer still.

The economists are also reminding us of the great economic capital we have in our older buildings, and in their conservation and repair. And that repair creates sustainable local jobs, and generates a local economic “multiplier” effect. In many cases they’re relatively easy to adapt to new uses, and that too creates local jobs. Often they can use local materials that can be more ecologically benign as well.

Perhaps even more important, these buildings, and these neighborhoods, are living repositories of solutions developed and refined over the years to the universal need for people to live well together. And as we see here in this beautiful city, often they’re damn good solutions. They give us tips on how to live well in a pre-carbon or a low-carbon world. They show us useful strategies to make neighborhoods walkable, with great appealing streetscapes and convivial arrangements of public and private – and very subtle and complex gradations between the two. And these patterns still work very well in a modern context – from the large urban patterns, right on down to the delightful pedestrian-friendly details. And the way those scales link together cohesively is a very important lesson for us today too, whatever particular styles we may prefer.

Today we’re all faced with the question of what a post-carbon world is going to look like. Some argue that we really don’t need to worry much about all this old stuff – that we can pretty much scrap everything, except perhaps, keep a few museum pieces here and there, and replace the rest with sleek new technology, and with all-new iconic architectural forms to match. (This is a proposal for New Orleans, by the way.) Some even think we can just leave the Earth, and start over on some other poor planet.

But before we “bet the farm” on that proposition, it’s worth noting that our own recent history is full of unhappy lessons, of projects that attempt just that sort of bold “blank slate” approach, replacing natural systems with all-new artificially designed ones – and in too many cases, nature has come roaring back with a vengeance.

As a good case in point from this region, we thought we could “improve” on the squiggly and messy old contours of the Mississippi River with modern, razor-straight canals like the infamous “MR. GO” canal – the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet -- and as a result we inadvertently destroyed vast stretches of protective wetland buffer, and set the stage for far more devastation from storms like Katrina. What we didn’t realize was that there was a lot of important stuff in those messy old patterns built up on that delta, a lot of careful adaptation over time, where natural and ecological systems gradually fitted things into a pattern of relationships that kept everything in balance.

Well, let me suggest to you that things operate in a very similar way in human environments too – in human cultures -- that is, if we let them. And that, in a nutshell, is what traditional architecture is, or should be, all about. That’s what tradition is – a process of sharable, improvable, cultural refinements. By the way, that’s the way our great scientific institutions work, too, when they’re working at their best. So this is actually a very modern way of looking at things.

One of the things that’s clouded the rebuilding picture is the perception that the patterns of tradition belong only to the past, not to our own technological age. After all, we do

have entirely different economic conditions, technological realities, political realities. Right? Well, yes and no. Our cultural legacy, like our natural legacy, is more important than we may realize. Things do change, but some things stay the same: the general size and walking speed of a human being, for example, or the need for air and light, or the need for environmental coherence and legibility, or the need for social contact and interaction. As I alluded to earlier, we can learn very useful solutions to these timeless problems in the study of our own history.

Moreover, as Stuart Brand and Robert Adam have both noted, different things change at different rates, and it's important to calibrate the rate of change to the system: a fashion print on a shirt can change a lot faster than, say, the buildings within a sustainable city. To be sustainable, to really be scientifically modern, we need to study and to re-incorporate these older, slower systems too. Along with the fast world, we need to savor the slow one too: its slow food, and its slow cities.

Yet I suggest to you that we've let things get far out of balance, and neglected these slower, deeper lessons. For example, as you may know there's been an alarming decline of education in architectural history and conservation, and a growing and now almost exclusive emphasis on innovation, individuality and novelty – often with the insistence that it come only in the fashionable clothing of the latest technology.

There is a related way of thinking, I suggest, that seeks to categorize history into neatly defined compartments, of historical periods, styles, influences and so on – ergo we are only interested today in the very latest thing, which is the only one that belongs to this moment. That's all we can build today, and the rest belongs in a museum case. But note that this is NOT the way New Orleans was built, or many other cities – they freely appropriated the elements of their own past. In fact that's a narrow linear model that owes more to the linear engineering sciences of the early twentieth century – the sciences that confidently built the MR. GO Canals of their day - than to the more circumspect biological sciences of today: the ones that acknowledge an organic mix of the old and the new.

Much of that earlier mechanical logic is embodied in the 1964 Venice Charter on the Conservation of Monuments, a seminal guide to the management of historic buildings and districts, which I suspect many of you are familiar with. There it is, the whole thing – not very long. Now I think we must acknowledge a debt of gratitude to the Venice Charter for recognizing the value of historic monuments and districts, and guiding some very good work over the years. In a similar vein we can acknowledge that the engineering sciences that shaped it have produced great progress in industrial capacity and prosperity, in sanitation, health, economic prosperity and other areas.

But of course we need to strike a balance. There have been some unintended consequences of our earlier zeal, and we're having to re-think some of the earlier naïve assumptions, and make some advancements to correct our earlier errors.

One of the things that the Venice Charter noted was the need for such a document to be updated from time to time, as new scientific knowledge and understanding comes to the

fore. The Venice Charter was just such an update of the Athens Charter of some 33 years earlier.

Today, 43 years later, what can we say about the status of the Venice Charter? In Venice in November of last year, INTBAU held a conference on the Venice Charter, which resulted in the INTBAU Venice Declaration. We have copies in the back, and I would encourage you to read the full document and, if desired, add your signature.

Our world is changing. Our understanding about what we have to do to be well in the future is changing. Slowly, I suggest, it is dawning on us that the very nature of our thinking about culture, and about tradition and about modernity is going to have to change, as the Prince of Wales has been trying to tell us for a long time. In place of the hyper-specialization, we need the common sense, the integrated thinking, that cultural traditions and traditional systems have achieved on a regular basis.

It's not that modern global trade is a bad thing – when it's in a sustainable balance. But we need to be more aware of the hidden costs when we buy widgets from China, or beef from Brazil: the hidden cost in food miles or soil erosion or horrendous pollution that we don't see – the so-called “externalities”. Not factoring in these costs in natural capital results in what the economists call a false economy – the very definition of unsustainability.

We need to be more aware of the externalities in the global system of sprawl, too – the highly inefficient pattern of consumption built on extravagant use of fossil fuels. And it's spreading around the world, unzipping like enzymes the more sustainable traditional cities before it. We in the US I think have a special role in creating and exporting this phenomenon around the world, and therefore, I think, a special responsibility to think more deeply about it, to re-assess it, and to help to reform it.

But to do so, it won't be enough to just specify a new design, a new packaging, for the same old economic and social processes. We have to develop new models of integrated development process, integrated economic prosperity, and integrated, sustainable place-making. We have to develop, I think, a new kind of “operating system for growth,” if you will, more willing to learn from and to incorporate lessons from the organic traditions of the past. And that is not a backward view, but in fact, the very essence of a forward-looking view.

So let me suggest that this is where the “collective intelligence” of organic tradition is most valuable -- and where INTBAU USA can in particular play a role in applying its lessons in a modern context. As we see here, it can provide an opportunity to hold timely conferences on important issues, and useful new methods. It can provide cultural exchanges with other parts of the world, where we can also see our own culture more clearly through others' eyes. We can see how places as diverse as Romania and Cuba are developing innovative economic strategies around sustainable tourism, using the proceeds to regenerate their historic, more sustainable, city cores.

INTBAU USA gives us all an opportunity to help with the safeguarding of the world's traditional treasures, in both built form and in skills and knowledge – the world's “collective

intelligence” gathered over the centuries about building beautifully and sustainably. We can share educational resources; we can connect with one another, and with one another’s lessons; and we can stand together and speak more powerfully about the important policy issues bound up with sustainable building traditions, as well as the battles still sadly necessary, to prevent the senseless destruction of our collective treasures for the sake of a quick buck or a shiny new trinket.

So let me leave you with the suggestion that as we all increasingly understand the need for a more sustainable and more livable world, this work we can do together is a vital part of the transformation that must come, and is coming. In this work we are not seeking to preserve a few nice buildings. We are seeking to preserve the collected intelligence of humanity, about how to build a civilization.

Thank you.