



Preserving historical buildings: Balancing restoration and conservation after fire damage - by Ron Fanish

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Fire damage can be catastrophic to any structure, but perhaps most so to historic buildings. Oftentimes, a blaze will destroy what cannot easily be replaced (or replaced at all, for that matter) — original materials, custom millwork, classic character, and hard-to-replicate workmanship.

As a result, preserving historical buildings in the aftermath of a fire requires a careful mix of restoration and conservation techniques. Restoration is the process of restoring a building to match its original time period, which can entail working with existing materials or adapting new ones. Conservation, meanwhile, is the process of conserving a building's original history and character, stabilizing what's already there.

To return a damaged building to its full glory, building owners and property managers can follow these steps:

Determine the scope of the damage. Before starting any restoration or conservation work, it's crucial to gain a full understanding of the fire's damage. Did the fire cause superficial issues, like smoke and scorch marks? Or did it compromise the integrity of the structure, by damaging joists and studs? The severity of the damage will determine which approaches will work best. At this stage, safety is the first priority. Work with fire authorities, architects, inspectors, and other professionals to carry out a comprehensive assessment.

Balance restoration with conservation. Assuming the building can be rehabilitated, it's time to strike a balance between restoration and conservation. First, determine the building's key details: When was it built? In what style? With what materials and techniques? If the damage is more superficial, building owners and property managers can likely take a conservation approach: removing smoke and scorch marks, while retaining all the original materials and character. New technologies like laser cleaning make this easier than ever before. Conservation allows buildings to retain materials that may be hard to replicate today, like mahogany or old growth pine. It also allows the building to retain character that is hard to replicate today, like hand-carved wood or hand-chiseled stone.

If the damage is more severe, building owners and property managers can take a restoration approach: removing damaged materials, but replacing them with accurate reproductions. For example, original pine millwork should be reproduced using a similar type of pine with the same routing techniques. And original oak floors should be replaced with oak of the same dimensions — not a new material like laminate or vinyl. Building owners and property managers can use a number of guides when restoring a building, like old photographs and blueprints. Whether restoring or conserving, the objective should be the same: preserving character.

Follow all local regulations and codes. Restoring or conserving an historic building should never

come at the expense of safety or compliance. It's crucial that building owners and property managers not only balance restoration with conservation, but also ensure all applicable rules are being followed in the process. Frequently, historic buildings have specific codes and regulations governing what can and cannot be done. During the rebuilding process, building owners and property managers should familiarize themselves with local building codes, work alongside municipal authorities, and collaborate with historic building restoration companies and architects.

Recovery in the aftermath of a fire is never easy — especially if the building is several decades (or even centuries) old. But building owners and property managers can use a mix of restoration and conservation techniques to return many damaged structures to their former glory.

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