

FAÇADISM: PRESERVE OR RENEW?

RIBA, Tuesday 22 November 2016

James Dixon

As a standing buildings archaeologist, I encounter buildings in a variety of different ways. When I started as an archaeologist I mostly drew them, recorded them in advance of their demolition. Now, I mainly work to understand the impact on them of planning proposals. But I'm also a contemporary archaeologist and spend a lot of my time working to create new kinds of archaeological investigation that can help us understand the present day. Because much of this involves walking, looking, it necessarily entails encountering a lot of buildings, which I always like to tell people are the most numerous and accessible archaeological object.

Just an aside: that is why I don't have any pictures. I think it's always nice when we talk about buildings for people to bring their own experiences to what I'm saying, so go ahead and imagine any buildings you want. In some cases what I'm saying will fit, in others it might not, and I hope to hear from some of you about your own thoughts and experiences later.

There are lots of ways in which archaeology connects to buildings and I think what may be best for me to do this evening is talk a little bit about how façades fit into all that and how the phenomenon of façadism might help or hinder archaeological understanding of the historic built environment.

I suppose it will drive discussion to be a little provocative and so I will start by saying that in a way, facades and façadism simply don't matter to an archaeologist. At the heart of buildings archaeology is the attempt to understand people through their uses of built space over time. And in general, life happens behind façades. Life in buildings is not walls and floors, not the structure, it is the spaces those walls define, notions of comfort and belonging, home. The object of buildings archaeology must always recognise the tension between intent – how an architect thinks people might live tomorrow – and actuality – what people do in built spaces as they live their own, individual, difficult and complicated lives.

Of course, architects are people too and so we don't reject façades entirely, but if we think about folding up that elevation drawing and looking instead at the plans and sections, we are getting somewhere closer to the stuff of archaeology. It's perhaps another talk for another time, but I think, for understandable reasons, buildings archaeology has come to rely too much on architecture as a guide to understanding. It may sound counter-intuitive, but I think buildings archaeology could gain a lot by rejecting architecture as an interpretive paradigm.

But of course that can't be the whole story. Because as much as people's lives play out behind façades, they play out on streets. And buildings archaeology is not just buildings, it is whole built landscapes, conservation areas, streetscapes and settings. And here we can see the importance of the phenomenon, because while we might argue that façades have very little to do with the archaeology of buildings, façadism, conscious or otherwise, is a real thing that happens in the world and which has its own distinct signatures in the built environment.

Again setting aside ideas of design, ethics, appropriateness, quality, we can instead locate a distinct archaeology of façadism. Picture, for instance, the retained façade standing, alone, propped up to stop it collapsing. Those moments of façades standing alone on our streets, allowing us to peer through windows and see...sky, a big empty hole or a parked JCB...serve to create a sense of temporal dislocation, perhaps even genuine unease. The very existence of that façade, divorced from its building, halfway through its façadectomy, is a really important little piece of now in the contemporary street.

But we can also think about when new façades are imposed. The clunky juxtaposition of old and new. Those sad instances of older windows losing their views and forcing people to gaze out onto walls. The placing of a new façade over the front of an older building is a phenomenon perhaps even more fascinating than retention and prompts us to think about ways in which the past is actively obscured, the idea that the appearance of newness is important, even if it is not genuine. There are examples too of where façades are retained AND new façades placed over them. This gives us a strange space in between the two façades, a liminal, yet real and physical, space between past and future.

Of course, new building behind a retained façade can also give new forms of life to buildings that have gone out of use. The relationship we see between newness and oldness is a really important one in understanding how the contemporary built environment sits between the past and the future. Again, regardless of any forms of critique of individual efforts, the very idea of retaining bits of an older building and incorporating them in a new one tells us some very important things about how society values the past and how we think it has a role to play in people's daily lives.

So those are some examples of what an archaeology of façadism might be and why it might be useful. If we ignore for a moment particular examples of the phenomenon and instead think of it as a category of archaeological thing, façadism becomes a really important way through which to understand not just the nature of contemporary streets, but the very relationship between past and present and what the people who build our streets think that should be now and tomorrow. Simply, façadism is an architectural response to certain conditions, but it is also independently creative in all sorts of ways that are not and could not be intended by the architect, because it needs the interaction between the process of retaining or imposing a façade and some of those individual, difficult, complicated people I mentioned earlier.

Now, this has been an attempt at a fairly dispassionate archaeological perspective on façadism, simply accepting the phenomenon as a thing that happens, not judging it as such. When we start to make value judgements on anything in the built environment is when that pure archaeology tips over into heritage and I think others on this panel will speak to us from that position in a way that I cannot.

But to conclude, I will do what we were asked to do in our speaker brief and take a position on façadism, whether façades should be retained or if we should accept how the cityscape evolves.

Truthfully, as to whether façades should, in general, be retained, we must look on a case-by-case basis, as is what will always happen. But when we are making these value judgements of individual projects, we ought to give more thought to the contemporary archaeology of façadism, the kinds of temporal juxtaposition the phenomenon creates and what that means for how we experience our

streets, even before we get to any issues of heritage and conservation, neither of which are primary concerns of the archaeologist. So here my position is that façades should be retained because the new contemporary archaeology that that act creates is fascinating in its own right.

Should we accept how the cityscape evolves? Well, this point speaks perhaps to activism. If there is such a thing as façadism, I suppose there must also be façadists. Here, my position is that, of course, we should never simply accept anything if we don't like it. There is much to be gained from the productive tensions between those who want it to happen and those who don't. Again, in making our cases and holding our positions on either side of the argument, might I suggest we look to the archaeology of façadism for our evidence base and take the argument beyond the tropes of architectural critique. So, no. We should not simply accept how the cityscape evolves.

But I must also return here to my starting position, that in a way, the archaeological position on façadism, façade replacement, façade retention, is that it simply doesn't matter, at least not insofar as archaeology would say the phenomenon is a negative or a positive one. For the archaeologist, contemporary-minded or otherwise, façadism is just another thing that happens, which creates its own archaeological signatures, affecting lives, creating present moments that make us read the landscape and our own places within it differently, and in a way that is highly temporally and spatially specific.

To end, I will reject the idea suggested in our brief that façadism makes our readings of the built environment somehow unreliable. That's a bit of a cop-out. What façadism might do is make our readings of the built environment not unreliable, but wrong. And that's our fault. It means we need different tools for understanding that recognise façadism and its impacts and effects in a different way. Contemporary archaeology, I suggest, is one such tool and I hope we get the chance later to talk a little bit more about how it could help.