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From Bob Perrin

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Existing Buildings: The Elephant in the Room

The need to preserve, conserve, restore, and adapt.

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For those who knew of me before I became AIA President, it is probably for coining the phrase: “The greenest building is ... one that is already built.” For more than 20 years I have devoted myself to articulating the relevance of existing buildings to sustainability, resiliency, climate change, and livable communities. In the early years of my quest, it was common to hear statements like “What do existing buildings have to do with [fill in the blank]?” While discourse has progressed considerably, recognition of the importance of existing buildings is far from mainstream in the architectural profession today.

Building-sector statistics are compelling. Architects have been busy beavers since World War II. From coast to coast, the United States has accumulated so many buildings that economic projections estimate that over the next 30 years more than twice as many will be renovated than newly constructed. To put it another way, today’s early-career architects will spend substantially more time renovating buildings than designing new ones. And yet few firms—and even fewer architecture schools—take seriously the opportunities and challenges of existing buildings.

There is plenty of architecture to be found working with existing buildings. First and foremost, existing buildings must be maintained or—using terms from the field—preserved, conserved, or restored. In addition, after generations of use many existing buildings also need to be adapted to new uses, that is,

rehabilitated or renovated. Increasingly, existing buildings are expected to meet entirely new criteria, requiring their transformation. Ideas about existing buildings are evolving. Like water and energy, existing buildings are a resource to be used purposefully and managed.

Existing buildings are a resource for growth. Every city and town in the nation has dozens, hundreds, even thousands of abandoned and partially occupied buildings. Simply occupying every floor of every existing building would absorb years of demand for growth and revitalize countless neighborhoods. Renewing existing buildings is the smartest smart-growth strategy.

Existing buildings are a resource for tackling climate change. Buildings represent “embodied carbon.” Keeping and using existing buildings avoids the release of massive quantities of greenhouse gases, emissions caused by needlessly demolishing and replacing existing buildings. Retrofitting existing buildings to meet high-performance standards is the most effective strategy for reducing near- and mid-term carbon emissions, the most important step in limiting climate disruption.

Existing buildings are also a resource for learning about life before buildings were addicted to fossil fuels, and cities and towns were addicted to automobiles in the name of progress. Existing buildings are cultural and historic resources. What interest would our cities and towns have without the layering of generation upon generation of building? Who would we be without places passed down from parent to child to grandchild and beyond?

For the next generation of architects, embracing the opportunities and challenges of existing buildings is the elephant in the room. How long before our profession notices?

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