



CAF 2022 Distinguished Leadership Award Dinner

Discussing Docomomo and Modernism with Dr. Theodore Prudon

By Nancy Clayton, AIA

On October 18th, over 100 architects and friends joined the Connecticut Architecture Foundation to honor Dr. Theodore Prudon, FAIA, with the 2022 Distinguished Leadership Award.

Hotel Marcel, Becker + Becker's recent transformation of Marcel Breuer's Armstrong Rubber Company Building (later Pirelli Tire) was a most-fitting venue, considering Dr. Prudon is a preservationist of Modern architecture, and Founding President of Docomomo US, the international organization dedicated to DOCUMENTATION and CONSERVATION of the MODERN MOVEMENT.

The following are edited and condensed highlights from that evening's conversation between Dr. Prudon and CAF Board Member and University of Hartford professor Michael J. Crosbie, PhD, FAIA.

Michael J. Crosbie (MJC): In the US, the public has never quite fallen in love with Modern architecture. How do you convince somebody who hates Modern architecture that we should save it?

Theodore Prudon (TP): I've never been successful! The level of appreciation has gone up in response to outreach and education. But Modernism has never been a popular movement with the general public. Modernism [in Europe] in the inter-war period had a significant social agenda. That was not the way Modernism presented itself in the US. Here

there's a romance of old architecture: every courthouse has to have classical columns.

MJC: How would you describe awareness among the general public of Modern architecture at the start of Docomomo more than 30 years ago, compared to today?

TP: I wouldn't be talking to someone like you. In the early '90s people would tell me to go away. Ironically, the discussion today is whether we should preserve Post-modernism. We're clearly past that with Modernism—we are having this discussion in a Modernist building that has been renovated from an office into a hotel. For conservation, 25 to 40 years is a gray period when major changes get made, but it's before the building becomes significant.

MJC: How would one define "significant"?

TP: That's an age-old discussion. What's really significant when considering Modern architecture is less about materiality and more about the concept. With a Gothic church, you can't really change it. But with a building like Breuer's, designed as office space, to maintain the concept when modifying it for a hotel, you must be very careful how you fit that new use in.

MJC: Does the preservation of a Modern building present challenges that an 18th or 19th-century building doesn't?

TP: Yes, very much. Part of it has to do with the physical condition. If

you look at 17th, 18th, 19th-century buildings, the solidity of the materiality will survive. With Modern buildings, the materiality is much less substantial. A brick is a brick, 17th century or 19th century. But sheetrock is anonymous. The level of craftsmanship that goes into it is different. Historic architecture used the cornice to hide things. In Modern architecture there is no place to hide. The reveal and details become much more complicated.

MJC: What are the most pressing issues in restoring and preserving Modern buildings?

TP: Modern houses from the 1950s and '60s were built in prime locations. Appreciation for the architecture has gone up, but pressure from the real estate industry is there for the sites. Corporate buildings also continue to be under pressure, because of the commercial real estate market.

MJC: Kevin Roche's lobby at 60 Wall Street in New York—a Post-modern interior that's open to the public—is threatened and has been receiving a lot of attention. What can be done?

TP: Roche's portfolio is in the 30- to 50-year danger zone. We've seen what's happened to some of Paul Rudolph's and Edward Durrell Stone's projects. The danger has shifted to the next generation. The UN hotel, where Roche did some interiors, was saved. But 60 Wall Street is not a landmark, and interior landmarks in New York



Pictured: CAF President, Stephanie Degen-Monroe, AIA; Dr. Theodore Prudon, FAIA, CAF Board member, Michael J. Crosbie, PhD, FAIA.

are exceedingly difficult because of private property issues. We shall see.

MJC: What makes this Breuer building, a 2022 Docomomo award winner, a role model for Modern preservation?

TP: It's the level of respect for the original architecture, taking into account the intent of Breuer's design, its structure, the architecture's "DNA," and blending the new use into it. I think it's been done very successfully.

MJC: We're sitting in the city of New Haven. How would you characterize the wealth of Modern architecture here that has been saved, restored, and preserved—and those buildings that are still in danger?

TP: It's a mecca. Look at Louis Kahn's work, the Rudolph buildings.... It's really an ideal location. Docomomo's next annual National Symposium will be in New Haven [June 21-24, 2023], recognizing that fact.

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