A PLEA FOR COMPUTERISED LISTING

by Sir Bernard Feilden

Conservation of historic buildings has moved from consideration of individual cases through the field of planning into that of management of our cultural resources. Criteria for listing and recording have changed and expanded as our knowledge and expertise increase. The new listing, when completed in the foreseeable future, will provide a datum for future activities which it is hoped will provide employment for those engaged in the present listing programme. These activities should concentrate on recording the most interesting and significant examples of our historic buildings.

The old lists, several of them differing, held by planning authorities simultaneously, presented enough in the way of clerical headaches and administrative confusion. Now, with expanded lists is the same situation to repeat itself? It need not if the lists are computerised and if all the computers used are truly compatible. The computer is essentially a management tool. In the field of conservation of historic buildings we will always be working with insufficient funding; perhaps this is no bad thing because it means that we will concentrate on necessary work and not be tempted to over restore. However, with such a large area of need we must get our priorities right. To achieve this we need a computerised system.

In a fully developed system the following typical questions amongst many others could be answered immediately:

1. Who owns the building? Is it occupied? By whom?
2. Who built the building? When?
3. Who was the architect? How many other examples of this architect's work exist in your area?
4. What documents relate to the building? Where are they to be found?
5. What are the special features of the building? How many examples of these features exist in your area? Are there any similar buildings?
6. Did any historical events take place in or near the building?
7. Have any alterations been made?
8. What materials are used in the building's construction? Do these represent special workmanship or techniques such as timber jointing?
9. Is the building subject to any threats? Pollution? Traffic? Neglect? Vandalism?
10. What is the cost of repairs and maintenance? Subdivided into the standardised categories of, Immediate, Urgent, Necessary, and Desirable.

11.   What grants have been made in the past? Is grant aided work in progress? or has a grant been promised?

Collation of the answers to the relevant questions would enable the Local Authority to plan its conservation policies based on exact, up to date and complete information.

The first eight questions are a valuable data base for planners and architects. In addition the system could answer a further nine questions for the archaeologist:

1.   What sites or buildings are threatened by road plans, building operations or other causes?
2.   What building projects affect archaeological areas?
3.   How many sites in the area belong to specific archaeological periods?
4.   How many sites are scheduled?
5.   How many known sites have not been scheduled?
6.   How many sites are under guardianship?
7.   What sites are subject to agricultural agreements?
8.   What sites are subject to vandalism and theft?
9.   What sites are priority for excavation or investigation?

The number of questions an Art Historian could ask is legion. The data base would however, save him tedious chores. In fact the computerised data base is the ideal recipient for historian's researches, published or otherwise, as it is a vehicle by which his specialised knowledge can be made immediately and widely available to those who can make good use of this knowledge.

There are many pitfalls in the use of computers. Often there is a wide gap between the knowledge of computer manufacturers, their salesmen and programmers and the users of computers. Is the computer user friendly? Is it truly compatible with other systems? Which is the best buy? A computer consultant who understands historic buildings in all their complexity, is a rare man but he exists in John Franklin, the inventor of the Inter-building Record System (IBR) which has been successfully tested in Italy, Turkey and Sri Lanka and is currently being assessed in Finland.

Using the IBR System, 140,000 sites have already been recorded from ordnance survey cards and are held by the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments; those sites could be transferred in a County or District to your own "personal" computer. This is only a skeleton of information which could receive flesh and clothing. Obviously the system is only as complete and reliable as the information with which it is fed.

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