The Paradigm Shift in Preventive Conservation

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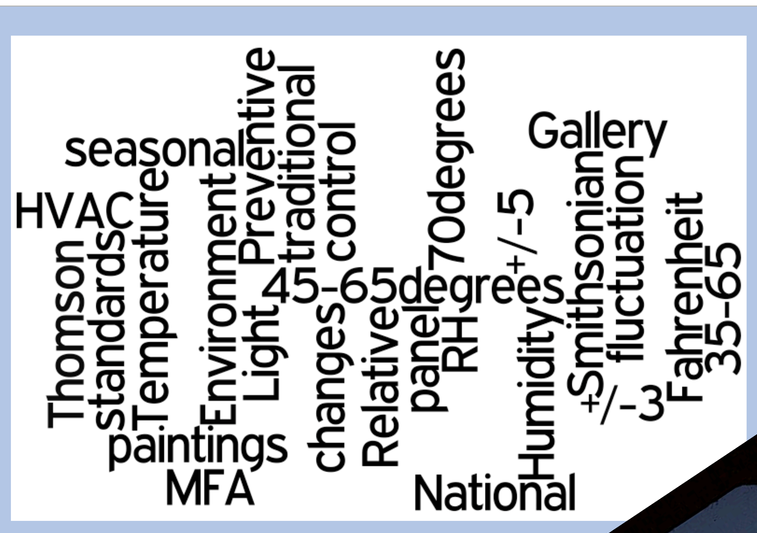
"A paradigm is what members of a scientific community, and they alone, share."
(Thomas Kuhn, The Essential Tension, 1977)

The international economic downturn coupled with rising energy costs has begun to put a great deal of stress on the cultural heritage sector. The period of changing economics coincides with a growing sense of environmental responsibility among preventive conservators and heritage professionals.

This feeling of responsibility is demonstrated in a wish to extend stewardship of collections to include stewardship of the environment. This has impacted preventive conservation through the incorporation of a philosophy of sustainability.

This poster demonstrates the shifting paradigm in preventive conservation, highlighting workshops, symposia, individual and institutional projects that have played a part in the adoption of a more sustainable approach.

Former Paradigm



Climate control has since the birth of preventive conservation been an essential part of the responsibilities of a preventive conservator. The maintenance of correct environmental conditions can prevent the need for expensive conservation intervention and is a more cost-effective way to manage a collection. Conservators have sought to suggest ideal conditions for materials storage and exhibit.

The perfect environmental conditions for a collection would include: no fluctuation of humidity, low temperatures, total darkness, and zero level of pollution. For a collection housed in any museum that has access as their mission, this is not possible.

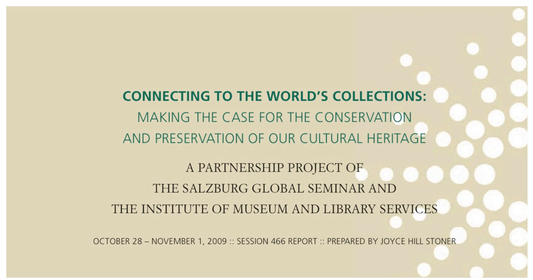
General accepted standards were: 70 degrees Farenheight 50% Relative humidity, with as little fluctuation as possible, at first +/- 10 degrees or 10% RH was suggested, then it was thought if that was good then +/-5 degrees or 5% RH would be better, +/- 3 degrees or 3% RH would be another improvement on the life of the collection.

To obtain these standards it was suggested that museums use large, expensive HVAC systems to control the environment in their spaces, a discussion of the sustainability of this approach is not discussed.

Current Influences

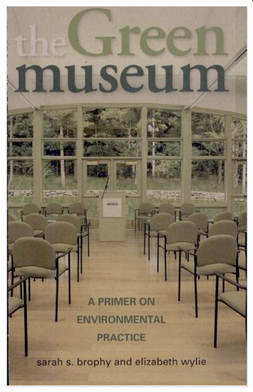
The CCAHA Seminar focused on environmental management and sustainable practices.

IIC Roundtable
The Plus/Minus Dilemma:
The Way Forward in Environmental Guidelines



The Salzburg Global Seminar Recommendations include:

Design and carry out research to address the threat induced by environmental changes



The Green Museum outlines how museums can incorporate "Green", sustainable practices

Noah's Ark evaluates Global Climate Change and it's impact on built heritage and cultural landscapes

http://noahsark.isac.cnr.it/

The Grup Tècnic of Catalan Conservators and Restorers annual meeting on the topic of sustainability

Preservation Vision: Planning for the Future of Preservation in New York City was an initiative about preservationists aspirations for New York City in 2030

http://www.preservationvision-nyc.org/

New Paradigm

As a research component interviews with art conservators and heritage building managers around the world asked them about their sustainable projects. It was widely noted during interviews that heritage professionals felt a sense of responsibility, as stewards of collections, to also be stewards of the environment. It has also been noted that museums are often publicly funded or receive funding from donations and grants. It is important to demonstrate to the public, the board of trustees, or the granting institution that their money is being spent in a responsible way.

More sustainable practices that have been developed include:

- Passive Systems: using microclimates or the building itself to buffer fluctuations in temperature or relative humidity.
- Consideration of the environment from the point of view of the object
- A closer examination of how damage occurs and what damage is being prevented with certain environmental parameters.
- A closer look at the capabilities of historic structure in which objects are stored.
- Fewer collection-wide standards, more subjective depending on materials and storage design.
- Monitoring in a holistic way, examination for overall trends and not occasional fluctuations.
- Shutting down systems when buildings are not in use: overnight, over a holiday, over a season.
- Building more efficient buildings and HVAC systems, retrofitting exisiting buildings to be more efficient.

Bibliography

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