There's something to be said for preserving the good stuff

New is nice but old is comfy. I am prepared, therefore, to come out foursquare in favor of preservation, renovation and restoration—but only of the good stuff. Not the junk buildings or even the ugly ones. Just the basically sound, good-looking stuff. And since beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it may be necessary that I be appointed judge of what qualifies for retention and renewal. Surely no one could object to that.

In the fall 1996 Sooner Magazine, mention was made of several building renovation projects initiated in the past two years. Each of these projects will be featured as they are completed—Jacobson Hall in this issue, Boyd House upcoming and the Oklahoma Memorial Union soon thereafter. Having toured the first two and peeked around barricades at the third, I can report that the results are impressive.

Certainly the completion of the Union project will be greeted with hosannas throughout the University and Norman communities. For the past two years, the scramble for meeting and entertainment facilities has become a not-so-favorite pastime for event chairs (both social and academic), mothers-of-the bride, reuniting alumni, end-of-the-year banqueteers.

The Union management and the Alumni Office employed imaginative remedies for football Saturdays. Central Oklahoma rental companies must have done a land-office business in tents as Sooners braved weather uncertainties in the name of communal gatherings. The Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education absorbed the brunt of the pressure for space, as did hotels in Norman and Oklahoma City. But there is no real local substitute for the Union Ballroom.

The Union has had its critics in modern times. Once the massive structure stood strategically in the center of the main campus, within walking distance of the student population. Today the Union clings precariously to the far north edge, the victim of southward expansion and inadequate parking.

Tear it down or convert it to some other purpose and start over elsewhere, some suggested. But a student union is sort of like a hospital or a stadium—a huge investment in specialized facilities. You can build a new one, but what can you do with the original? So instead you usually build on or build up, demographics notwithstanding.

A great deal of thought and effort has gone into redesigning the Union as a congenial center for students to gather, as well as an accommodating venue for more formal assemblies and entertainment. Most of the administrative tenants have been evicted to make way for student organizations. The whole structure is being brought up to code—heating and air conditioning, accessibility, safety, asbestos removal.

While renovation cannot solve the location and parking problems, the new and improved Union should be worth the inconvenience. As for the student recreational needs that the Union cannot address, perhaps it is time to revisit the original intent for a phase two and three of Huston Huffman Physical Fitness Center.

What's next on the reclamation agenda? The conversion of Monnet Hall—the old "Law Barn"—into the Law Library for a new "Law Barn" next door is already on the wish list. And as long as we are wishing, wouldn’t it be wonderful to see Holmberg Hall restored to its former glory? Fortunately the Blender is still short of 30, so the question of that restoration is years away. I try not to think about it.

—CJB