Hole in the Wall

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES HIPPISLEY-COX

Repairing old buildings is fraught with ethical dilemmas, from preservation to attempts at modernization. Often in the repair process we overlook the fact that buildings are borrowed vessels, used for a few years before we move on, and that our journeys through them overlap with those of many other species.

Not long ago, as part of my ongoing work with historic buildings, I stumbled across a curious niche in the stone wall of a house. While standing and staring at this rather tatty piece of wall, I pondered what might have caused this hole to form and decided that it might have originated as a "lug hole" for the support of scaffolding when the building had been reroofed about sixty years ago. The generous overhang of the eaves had meant that the wall had remained protected from the elements, and although the hole had been left unrepaired for two generations, it didn't really require re-pointing.

Some of the adjacent walls on the same property included deep voids occupied each year by blue tits. The niche seemed like the perfect place to provide the birds with some alternative accommodation in the form of a nest box, while I busied myself with other necessary repairs.

The hole was not exactly the right shape, so I applied a weak mortar (six parts sand to one of white cement) to create a smooth interior for the new homestead. Cement was chosen as the binding agent because a lime mortar might prove to be a hazard to young and curious chicks. I chose a piece of old oak floorboard for the front of the "box" and used a thirty-two-millimeter drill bit to create the entrance hole. In retrospect that was a little on the large side for blue tits: a smaller hole might have suited them better and excluded the slightly larger and competitive great tits.

I used screws to fasten the board to the stone wall, covering the niche, and added spare mortar to make a weather-tight seal around the top and two sides. The bottom was left with some ventilation to allow for fresh air to rise through the nest and stale air to flow out of the entrance. I put a coat of water-based fence paint on the front of the board, but left the inside "natural" in case the paint was toxic in any way.

All of the mortar will remain in place when, in the future, the cover is removed for the old nests to be cleaned out. Old nests can house parasites harmful to the next generation of occupants; for the same reason, the wood around the entrance hole should also be scrubbed each year. One might also consider fitting a remote battery-powered camera inside the nest box, to be used in conjunction with Wi-Fi.

All in all, my little project took only half an hour. I hope it may encourage other enthusiasts to consider doing something similar and avoid the temptation just to "tidy up" our old buildings.

Charles Hippisley-Cox was part of the award-winning Department of Conservation Science at Bournemouth University before he was appointed Senior Lecturer in Building Conservation at Huddersfield University, where he is also course director for Architectural Technology. His current research involves exploring historic buildings as interactive ecosystems.