

Historic Preservation and Planning

The Limits of Prediction

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Professor Baer's call for a systematic approach among planners to take into account and plan around emerging trends in historic preservation is long overdue and very welcome. His premise that historic preservation is a major regulatory activity, whose accommodation requires careful analysis and planning, shows just how far the preservation movement has come in recent decades. Preservation advocacy of one kind or another has been with us since pre-Civil War times; the great change in our day has been the evolution of the preservation advocate from gadfly embroiled in one crisis or another to active participant in planning the physical future of both rural and urban America. In part, that is because preservation has grown from the occasional house museum to, in Baer's words, a role as "catalyst in central city renewal and economic stimulus." In cities and towns across the country, historic districts have risen phoenix-like from the ashes to become unexpected new economic powerhouses and urban success stories. Preservation has now won the much vaunted "place at the table" that its advocates have long fought for. Those advocates, now professionally trained, staff local landmarks commissions; take part in environmental reviews; and are consulted up front, at the local, state, and federal levels, when major development plans are hatched.

So Professor Baer's proposals to focus on historic districts, to "devise new techniques . . . in thinking about preservation over the long term," and to anticipate "future trends for consideration by policymakers" are all most welcome. That "historic preservation should no longer be thought of as a piecemeal endeavor," that "it requires systematic forethought," and that "its integration into our evolving cities requires long-range planning" are all proposals that can only be seconded in the world of historic preservation.

Honesty, however, requires the acknowledgment that such a call for cooperation is born not simply out of the unalloyed admiration of plan-

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ners for preservation, but also from the recognition that planning and preservation sometimes collide.

As Professor Baer reminds us, the relationship between planning and preservation remains an “uneasy alliance.” What else could be expected of two professional disciplines with overlapping mandates? Planners sometimes see preservation advocates as single-minded special-interest pleaders, unable to grasp the big picture; preservation advocates sometimes see planners as promoters of broad-brush development, hopelessly insensitive to their concerns.

Many of the conflicts that arise between planning and preservation may be traced to an inherent condition of historic preservation, namely, that it is an evolving process. Planners sometimes start planning around currently identified landmarks and historic districts, only to discover that, unbeknownst to them, new landmarks and historic districts have been identified that happen to stand in the center of their plans. That dynamic must be understood as the context for Baer’s listing with alarm the growing numbers of newly identified historic sites. In response to such conflicts, he proposes methods by which planners might project long-term, specifically over the coming half-century, where the multiplying newly minted historic sites are likely to turn up, so that planners can then plan around them.

Such long-range planning is in itself not necessarily a bad idea. That said, however, it must also be said that Professor Baer’s projection of the future of historic preservation efforts through the year 2040 has little to do with the current scene, and does not seem particularly probable.

Baer’s argument, briefly stated, is this:

1. On average, in a dozen major cities, preservation advocates have identified roughly 5.5 percent of the surviving pre-1940 building stock, the building stock old enough to be considered for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, as worthy of preservation.
2. Therefore, we can assume that as the years pass, roughly 5.5 percent of the country’s post-1940 building stock, as it reaches the fifty-year mark, will also be so identified.
3. Even today, the country’s post-1940 building stock is much larger than its pre-1940 building stock, perhaps three times as large.
4. Most of that post-1940 building stock is located in the suburbs, in the form of housing tracts and “malls, office clusters and industrial parks.”
5. Planners therefore have to consider the implications of landmark designation approaching the neighborhood of 5.5 percent of all post-1940 hous-

ing tracts, malls, office clusters and industrial parks. Because there are so many of these buildings, in the next five decades we will see a much greater amount of preservation than anything known to date, tripling or quadrupling today’s numbers from this source alone.

Baer is projecting, in other words, that by the year 2040, whatever percentage of the first four centuries of American building stock may be designated as historic sites—the Colonial towns, the Greek Revival banks and churches, the Civil War era, cast-iron commercial districts, the Victorian brownstones and planned landscaped suburbs, the grand Beaux Arts civic monuments, the Art Deco skyscrapers—all this will be dwarfed by designations drawn from the pool of shopping malls, office parks and housing tracts built between the end of World War II and today, simply because there are so many of them, and they will have reached their fiftieth birthdays.

Stated this baldly, the projection seems remarkably unlikely. The question becomes: Why do Baer’s calculations produce such an implausible scenario? The answer lies in several flawed underlying assumptions.

One assumption is that the chief source of new designations is the process of “ripening.” In fact, the identification of new landmarks and historic districts continues on three separate fronts. First and foremost, there is a lot of unfinished business. The still young preservation movement continues to confront historic and architectural resources from four centuries of post-Columbian American history, and many more centuries’ worth of remains from pre-Columbian times. Second, new areas of historic significance are being identified. Archeological sites, industrial structures, and sites with historical or cultural associations, especially in the multicultural sphere, constitute a growing segment of interest in the preservation world. Only then comes the ripening of resources, one year at a time. This year we can look at 1945; next year we can add 1946.¹

In other words, even though the National Register program is now able to consider structures from the mid-1940s, that hardly means that every eligible structure built before 1945 has already been listed. Perhaps most major Colonial sites in most places have been identified for protection; large tracts of Victorian neighborhoods may now be established historic districts; Art Deco has become fashionable—but much remains to be done. There is still no agreement about how to handle the vast urban production of the 1920s—in New York City, for example, the miles and miles of modest, eclectically designed elevator apart-

ments and commercial storefronts in the Bronx come to mind—or, for that matter, the numberless blocks of late-nineteenth-century tenement buildings. Brooklyn has several square miles' worth of intact Victorian streetscapes, typical of existing historic districts, that have yet to be dealt with. It is likely that preservation will have to grapple with these issues long before turning to 1970s office parks.

The second assumption underlying Baer's projections is the idea of "sampling," in other words, the assumption that preservation will give equal attention to the products of each period. By this logic, if 5.5 percent of all pre-1940 sites are identified as historic, then something like the same percentage of post-1940 sites will probably also be identified as historic. But such logic runs counter to the way that preservation in fact operates.

The pre-1940 universe, for instance, ranges from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Colonial buildings to 1920s elevator apartment buildings. Preservation advocates might very well fight to extend landmarks protection to all Colonial sites (not all of them are currently protected)—a rate of 100 percent—because of their great rarity, their great comparative age, and their historic significance as relics of the nation's Colonial origins. Who would propose such an approach to protecting all surviving 1920s elevator apartment buildings? Who would propose even 5.5 percent? These are, admittedly, two groups chosen from the extremes of the pre-1940 spectrum. But even restricting the comparison to the fifty-year period of 1890 to 1940, rates across that spectrum would not be uniform. The questions of rarity, historical significance, influence, and quality of design asked by preservation advocates get different answers for different sites. The figure of 5.5 percent calculated for pre-1940 structures is of some interest. But why should it be assumed applicable to post-1940 production? Sloppy as it may seem, preservation proceeds case by case.

If any assumptions are going to be made about the likelihood of preservation for the post-1940 stock—not the unbuilt landmarks of the future, but five decades' worth of structures that exist today, built 1940–1990—they should rest on an analysis not of what has been deemed appropriate for pre-1940 sites, but of the qualities of the stock in question. The very existence of the fifty-year benchmark reflects a generally accepted principle that such judgments require the clarity of distance. Nevertheless, we do know something about this group of sites.

We can note, for instance, that there is indeed budding interest in post-1940 buildings. Such modern monuments as Lever House, the Seagram Building, the Guggenheim Museum, and the TWA terminal at

Kennedy Airport are now local New York City landmarks. Morris Lapidus's Miami Beach extravaganzas, once mocked in certain circles, are now much loved. Will such reevaluation continue? Probably. If the Seagram Building is now an historic landmark, can the Pan Am Building be far behind? Maybe; who knows?

We can also note, however, that the year 1940 serves as more than the fifty-year dividing line for the National Register. As Baer observes in categorizing the bulk of post-World War II development, 1940 separates a largely mass-transit-oriented half-century of dense urban and suburban development from an automobile-driven suburban culture with its attendant sprawl. In projecting large numbers of new landmarks, Baer is anticipating the impact of designating not individual sites, like skyscrapers, but historic districts encompassing shopping malls, housing tracts, and industrial parks. But that projection fails to consider a critical question—how much value will future preservation advocates place on such artifacts? The rationale uses a percentage gleaned from a different set of buildings from a different time. Its underlying assumption is that the same attention given to four centuries of built history, expressed as a percentage of surviving stock, will be lavished on today's suburban shopping centers to the extent that such sites will become the most common kind of historic district. Yet apart from a belief in the immutability of statistics, why should anyone believe that in future preservation activity a reevaluation of postwar suburban sprawl will play anything more than a small role? Preservation of 5.5 percent of pre-1940 stock may turn out to be a good guess about the present, but Baer offers no convincing evidence that the same rate will apply in the future. If 5.5 percent indeed turns out to be accurate, it will simply be a snapshot of today's numbers. Anything, of course, is possible; but it could just as plausibly be projected that, given the low esteem in which suburban sprawl is currently held, future preservation will largely skip over the whole period and look to post-1990 development for new landmarks. It is certainly more likely that the next ten or twenty years will see an increase beyond 5.5 percent of the pre-1940 stock still being grappled with, than that attention will shift to large numbers of post-1940 suburban sites. The undifferentiated chronological focus of Baer's projections is not realistic. We simply don't know how the world will look to our children in 2040.

Baer's attempts to predict the results of the next fifty years of preservation activity are not persuasive. Yet his compilation of statistics is very impressive, and might leave other planners with misconceptions about historic preservation. (We would all be wise to remember Mark Twain's remark about "lies, damned lies, and

statistics.”) For the numbers amount to something of a red herring. In particular, the urgency of the question which the proposal attempts to answer is overstated. It is possible to claim that “considerable land both in the city and the hinterlands is being removed from the prospect of new development” and to lay this at the door of historic preservation only by conflating historic preservation, as Baer in fact does, with wetlands, hillsides, earthquake fault zones, farm-land conservation and so forth. While planners have to consider all these things, it is misleading to suggest that historic preservation, all by itself, is “filling up” the national “family closet” and leaving no room for the treasures of future generations. The historical numbers just don’t bear out such dire prognostications. After 30 years of preservation in New York City, a leader in such efforts, only 2 percent of the city’s buildings are affected by historic designations. Baer’s own predictions for the year 2040 rise only to 5.5 percent—leaving 94.5 percent of the city, and for that matter the country, untouched. “Filling up the closet” is, to say the least, an exaggeration.

So is the sense conveyed here of the numbers of sites currently being identified for preservation. Most of the big numbers cited by Baer reflect listings in the National Register of Historic Places, and in State Registers of the same kind; yet such listings carry no regulatory review, unless government spending is involved. And even then, they serve chiefly as a planning tool, to measure the impact of government-funded projects on historic resources. The interests of planners and preservationists are more likely to intersect at the local level of land-use planning. There, the numbers of designated sites are smaller.

Preservation activity may be open to analysis, but it should be grounded in real-world understanding of preservation’s workings and current directions. Because of the very distance built into preservation laws via age limits, the farther ahead we try to project, the shakier our projections are likely to become. In this instance we are trying to anticipate not what we would make of the post-1940 stock of buildings, but what our children will. Yet, despite these obstacles, some kind of planning for the future is surely worthwhile,

and planners and preservation advocates should surely be working together.

In making such attempts, it might prove useful to keep a simple analogy in mind: Projecting preservation is a lot like projecting the weather. First, it’s necessary to look out the window to see what’s happening. Then, it’s helpful to find out what’s happening nearby. With a general knowledge of trends and patterns, and a thorough grounding in meteorology, it’s possible to make a useful weather prediction. There are, however, no guarantees. And a weather forecast for the next four hours is much more likely of success than is a five-day forecast—anything longer being left to the Farmer’s Almanac. Why? Too many variables are involved, and the only certain information available is the state of local conditions right now.

So with preservation. Planners wishing to predict its future trends need to work closely with professionals in the preservation field to understand current conditions, and to understand what issues are looming on the horizon. But they also would do well to limit their projections to relatively short periods—say five to ten years. A study of preservation trends over the past ten or twenty years could also be useful, but only insofar as it went beyond numerical calculations to consider how preservation choices have been made. None of this is meant to suggest that preservation is unpredictable, but rather that guessing how Americans will feel about it in fifty years, and how that public perception will be translated into governmental policy in the year 2040, is likely to lead us down the garden path to plans drawn carefully around nonexistent landmarks.

NOTE

1. It should be noted that, while a convenient bench-mark, fifty years is not as magic a number as might be supposed. Local preservation agencies are not necessarily bound by it—New York City’s limit, for instance, is 30 years—and neither, for that matter, is the National Register program, which, while using 50 years as a cut-off, nevertheless considers younger sites if they are deemed of “extraordinary” significance, e.g. Cape Canaveral Air Force Station.