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**FLEETING LANDSCAPES AND THE CHALLENGE
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Cultural Landmarks and the Future of Preservation

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Historic preservation is facing a major challenge today, a particularly contemporary challenge that seems to be part of a new way of thinking about our personal culture and our group identity. The concepts of “culture” and “multiculturalism,” the subject of so much discussion in the past few years, have come knocking at our door—and, in fact, are knocking very loudly.

We see this phenomenon in New York City in the outcry over the demolition of such different sites as the house on East 17th Street where Antonin Dvorak composed the New World Symphony, and the Audubon Ballroom on Broadway where Malcolm X was killed. The outcry does not derive from the architectural merits of such buildings; it derives from their significance as cultural sites.

Cultural landmarks pose thorny questions for historic preservation. What should we do about buildings that may or may not “look like” landmarks (to quote a member of New York’s City Council), yet have historical or cultural value? How do we find them, how do we define them, how do we regulate them? The National Trust’s 1992 National Preservation Conference was devoted almost entirely to this subject, which is

becoming an issue all over the country. In one sense this is a new issue, but in another it represents a striking return to the very origins of historic preservation in this country—albeit in a contemporary guise.

As chronicled by the late Charles Hosmer¹, the phenomenon of historic preservation has its roots in pre-Civil War days, when monuments from Revolutionary times were being lost in the new nation's construction boom. Early American preservation efforts were devoted entirely to patriotic shrines. The first important nationwide preservation battle involving private citizens in this country was fought over Washington's Mount Vernon, threatened with demolition in the 1850s. Mount Vernon's architectural character was entirely irrelevant to the battle; the property was fought for because of its associations with Washington. We might call this the "Washington Slept Here" approach to historic preservation, a category in which all Colonial-era sites in general might be included, along with the Civil War battlefields.

In New York, a useful paradigm for this approach to preservation is offered by one of the city's most famous landmarks: Fraunces Tavern in lower Manhattan, where General Washington bade farewell to his officers at the end of the Revolutionary War. Even before Washington's day this house, dating to 1719, was considered "old." Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century it was threatened with demolition. The idea that a Revolutionary-era site like Fraunces Tavern might be demolished sparked outrage, especially on the part of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR). If there had been a Landmarks Commission in 1902, the SAR undoubtedly would have petitioned the Commission to hold a public hearing and designate the building a landmark. Left with few other options, the SAR found the necessary funds and bought the property outright.

Fraunces Tavern by this time had suffered many alterations and a fire, and the

SAR had to undertake major restoration work. Unfortunately, there was little documentation or historic fabric left with which to work. The SAR's choice of direction is very instructive: Instead of attempting to restore the building to its original 1719 appearance or simply repairing it and leaving the various phases of its structural history intact, they focused on its significance at the time of Washington's farewell to his troops in the 1790s. Since there was little concrete evidence of its appearance at that time, the architect in charge made educated guesses based on comparable surviving buildings.

The result is something of a pastiche, an idealization of what Fraunces Tavern might have looked like in Washington's day, yet it has always been presented as an authentic restoration. In other words, the fact that no one knew exactly what the original Fraunces Tavern looked like didn't really matter that much. The goal was to have a structure that looked like Fraunces Tavern *might have looked* in the 1790s, a structure suggestive of Washington's era.

The Fraunces Tavern story suggests that preservation was in large part the preserve of groups who could find the funds to buy threatened buildings. It also suggests that these sites tended to have national political or patriotic significance, and therefore that historic preservation focused on mainstream Anglo-American history. Finally, the Fraunces Tavern story suggests that preservation focused not so much on historical accuracy as on historical suggestion or idealization. In other words, it was not absolutely necessary that the building stand as an authentically restored monument (though lip-service certainly was paid to that ideal); it was enough that it merely remind viewers of past times. The culmination of this didactic approach to historic preservation would come in the 1930s with the creation of Williamsburg, Virginia, as a reconstructed "historic town."

The Fraunces Tavern model also illustrates the notion that history is made by

those people like Washington—in Hegel's phrase, "world historical individuals"—who have led us in heroic, world-shattering events that have shaped our national destiny. Finally, it also suggests that the only American history worthy of the name deals with the heroic days of the Revolution or, secondarily, of the Civil War.

Today we might dismiss the Fraunces Tavern model of historic preservation as well-meaning but hopelessly flawed. Nevertheless, in its day this effort represented a major advance. By the time Fraunces Tavern was "restored," New York City had already lost many irreplaceable monuments, the most egregious example being the original Federal Hall on Wall Street. This building—the nation's first seat of government, where Congress sat while New York City was still the new nation's capital and where Washington was inaugurated as the country's first president—was demolished in the 1840s and replaced by a new customs house. (Ironically, that "new" building is now a historic landmark in its own right, operating as a museum renamed Federal Hall.) Measured against that kind of precedent, the preservation of Fraunces Tavern, whatever its flaws, represented major progress.

The goals of early preservation efforts, as recounted by Hosmer, were education and the promotion of patriotism, a sense of national identity and self-worth. This motivation was especially important in difficult times such as the years leading to the Civil War, when it was thought that patriotic impulses could prove an antidote to secessionism. Notions of architectural value rarely entered into the discussion. In 1913 Edward Hall, secretary of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, wrote about Mount Vernon:

One may stand before the modest wooden home of a gentleman farmer in Mount Vernon, Virginia, and feel no stirring of the emotion until he knows that here lived Washington.

Then the blood tingles, the nerves thrill. Then the building loses its insignificance, and the vision of the great patriot, general and statesman transforms it into a shrine of national patriotism.²

In more recent times, the Fraunces Tavern Museum published a pamphlet in which it stated with pride that "during the last year over fifteen thousand students came [to visit the museum], so that *as an educator and promoter of Americanism* [italics added], Fraunces Tavern is a real force."³

With this historic background in mind, consider the preservation movement in its more recent incarnations. By the 1970s, historic preservation had emerged as a national grassroots movement in reaction to various modern forces of destruction: construction of the interstate highway system, which swept everything before it; urban renewal, which decimated entire neighborhoods and city centers; and the general destruction of what began to be called our "built environment." Historic preservation gradually became redefined as part of the growing environmental movement: The fight to preserve the built environment was perceived as a component of the broader fight to conserve the natural environment.

By its very nature, such an approach is primarily visual, focusing on appearance and aesthetics, on architecture rather than history. Now people were quoted in preservation magazines as saying, "Don't preserve it because it's old, preserve it because it's good." In other words, never mind the history: Buildings were worth saving because they represented good design and made positive contributions to an attractive and healthy physical environment. Preservation thus became part of a new emphasis in the wider world on good design, good architecture and good urbanism.

This new movement coincided with a renewed interest in the study of historic architecture, which had been banished earlier

in the century by the Modern movement. Countless books now instructed readers on the difference between Gothic Revival, Greek Revival and dozens of lesser revivals. "Style" became the buzz-word of the day, followed closely by "design." Preservation advocates fought the razing of Victorian mansions that stood in the way of proposed gas stations—something that would have been inconceivable to the older generation for whom anything Victorian had been beyond the pale. (How, one wonders, would that generation understand today's battles to protect historic gas stations?)

Being environmentalists, the partisans of preservation looked beyond individual buildings to more comprehensive built environments: historic districts. Several models already existed, among them Beacon Hill in Boston and the Vieux Carre in New Orleans. The concept of a historic district made up of distinctive period architecture took hold, and district after district in city after city was identified and formally designated by local preservation agencies or listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

This emphasis on the designation of historic districts coincided with the "back to the city" movement. After the so-called urban flight of the 1950s and '60s, when large parts of the middle-class population moved from the inner cities to the suburbs, leaving historic neighborhoods and city centers behind them, a counter-trend emerged. Self-styled "urban pioneers," unhappy with what they had found to be colorless suburban environments lacking in history and community, discovered cheap houses in old city neighborhoods, found them to have the life and character they'd been missing in the suburbs, and moved in—often then lobbying for historic district protection.

At the same time, city-dwellers and suburbanites alike began to discover that if they looked up or around, the city proved to be a remarkable wonderland of heretofore unnoticed and undervalued treasures.

Urban walking tours became a growth industry, leading walkers into parts of the city they had previously ignored, to see old buildings they had previously thought little or nothing of.

This phase suggests something of an outsider's approach to preservation: "This neighborhood is gorgeous! Look what we've been missing; let's move in and restore it." Perhaps there's a not-so-hidden corollary: "They don't appreciate what they've got here; let's rip up the linoleum and expose the hardwood floors." Almost immediately, preservation advocates had to face accusations of "displacement" of existing, poorer residents who found themselves being pushed out of gentrified neighborhoods they could no longer afford.

So we see the swing of the pendulum in the motivation of the preservation movement: from the goal of patriotic education chronicled by Hosmer to the goal of environmental protection and historical aesthetics that the movement has embraced for the past several decades. Seen in the context of the current architectural perspective, Fraunces Tavern, though certainly an important site, is hardly authentic; it could even be called fictitious, a product of 1902 rather than of 1719 or 1790.

Already, however, the pendulum has started to swing back from architecture to history. Among current preservation issues, many of the most pressing are once again the so-called cultural ones of the "Washington Slept Here" type. But now that we're re-emphasizing the importance of history and culture, we find that the meaning of those terms has expanded. "Culture" no longer means simply national culture—it means also local culture, community culture, ethnic culture. The "Washington Slept Here" approach is no longer limited to Washington.

If the impetus for the shift in preservation emphasis from historical to architectural was provided by the environmental movement, the impetus for the current shift back

is provided by the multicultural movement. If the loss being fought then was the physical razing of historic communities, the loss being fought now is the spiritual razing of historic communities: the loss of community identity. This issue takes us out of the realm of the visual environment and back into the realm of history as a state of mind—but with a contemporary orientation: Now we're talking not merely about Revolutionary-era history, national history, or Anglo-American history, but also about other individual groups, about ethnic and community history.

New and compelling questions are being asked by members of a variety of groups: "Where are the monuments and sites, the historic buildings that tell my history? If my ancestors weren't Revolutionary War veterans, if they were immigrants, if they were slaves, if they were Native Americans, if I'm not a Son or Daughter of the American Revolution, where is my history?"

In New York, examples of this kind of interest go back at least to the turn of the century, when Italian-American groups became interested in preserving a house in Staten Island that had been lived in by both Garibaldi, exiled leader of the Italian Risorgimento, and Meucci, credited as the inventor of the telephone. This kind of cultural landmark is specifically about associations, about different histories, different communities, different historical individuals. Ultimately, however, the drive to preserve this kind of cultural landmark springs from familiar impulses: education and, in a narrower sense, patriotism. These are the sites that help us understand who we are as a local community, who we are as ethnic or racial or religious groups, what our particularistic history here has been. They answer the question, "Where's my part of the city, the part that shows that I've been here?"

The comparison with preservation as an adjunct to the "back to the city" movement is interesting: In that context, preservation was something of an "outsider" phe-

nomenon, of people rediscovering a historic area, moving in and restoring, and lobbying for historic designation. Now, the people who already live in such neighborhoods are saying, "Beautiful architecture is well and good, but we live here now. Where are the buildings here that relate to our experience and history?"

In New York the Landmarks Commission has successfully designated a number of such cultural sites, probably the best-known of which is the Colonial-era African Burial Ground in lower Manhattan. This site is tied not to a specific individual, but to an entire community. The outpouring of interest that followed its rediscovery is a profound example of a community reclaiming its history and saying not merely, "We are here now," but also, "We were here then, too, even though we were ignored."

Another example is provided by the recent designation of Ellis Island. While this collection of buildings certainly possesses architectural interest, it is much more significant as a historical site for all those whose forebears passed through its portals as immigrants. Ellis Island figures in the family history of over one hundred million Americans.

Now that interest in these kinds of landmarks is growing, it has become the task of local agencies to define, identify and regulate them. But that task raises several difficult questions.

First, the question of priorities: How do we determine what to look for first? Though priorities are always an issue for preservation, now there is an added dimension: Which group will have its history attended to first by government?

Second, the question of methodology: How do we find these sites? Buildings of architectural interest are readily identifiable on the street or on maps, but surveying for associative significance is a less clear-cut task. Cultural landmarks may provide few or no physical clues to their importance. We have to discover the significance elsewhere

and then look for the buildings—see if they survive, and in what condition. In some cases, ethnic or community history has been well-documented; in other cases, however, written sources are rare or nonexistent.

Third, there are questions of threshold. The threshold of significance, for instance: How important does a site have to be to warrant official recognition and protection by a municipal preservation agency? In New York all buildings over thirty years old (the minimum age for landmark eligibility) have a history. Who or what determines which ones are sufficiently important? A city like New York is full of history, full of famous people and events, full of intensely felt local histories; in a sense, Washington slept everywhere.

And the threshold of alterations: Is there a different threshold for historical or cultural landmarks, as opposed to architectural landmarks? Should these buildings look like they did when the events in question happened or the persons in question lived there? Does it really matter? Lincoln was killed at Ford's Theater in Washington, which still stands; if the theater had been completely refaced, would that make it any less important as a historic site?

Fourth, and particularly tricky, the question of authority: Who determines whether a site is important to a community's history? For architecture, there is a generally accepted—albeit continually growing and changing—canon of architectural types and styles and significance. But no such canon exists for evaluating the significance of associative or cultural landmarks, especially given the wide variety of local and ethnic histories under consideration. Further complicating the issue is the fact that while government agencies see themselves as representing all the people of the city, many of those same people sometimes see government agencies as untrustworthy outsiders who have no business deciding what is important in their history.

The issues of methodology and priority are very straightforward. The issues of authority and threshold, on the other hand, can be problematic. Sometimes the merit of a proposed cultural landmark is beyond question, as was the case, for example, with the African Burial Ground and Ellis Island. In other instances there is room for discussion.

Consider the following examples, all of which have been proposed for New York landmark designation at one time or another:

- Minton's Playhouse and Small's Paradise are famous musical sites in Harlem. Both have been greatly altered. On the outside of the apartment house that once housed Minton's, there is no sign that the club was ever there; the building housing Small's Paradise has been gutted by fire, though the club's sign survives. Many people consider both sites to be of seminal importance in the history of music and in the identity of the community. Should they be designated landmarks despite their present condition?

- The Scala Sancta, a grotto with statues behind St. Lucy's Church in the Bronx, is a pilgrimage site for many Roman Catholics. It is undoubtedly a landmark to the many people who visit from all over the tri-state area. Should it be designated a city landmark as well?

- The architecturally undistinguished American Legion building in Whitestone, Queens, is a major community center: Local parades leave from the building, the Boy Scouts meet there, it is important to the identity of the community. If neighborhood focal points should be considered, is this one eligible for landmark designation?

- A resurfaced frame house in Astoria, Queens, is said to be the site where the Xerox photocopier was invented. In the words of the person who wrote us, "Today this is a 150 billion dollar industry that affects everyone." Should that make it eligible for landmark designation? What about the houses of computer pioneers Steve Jobs,

founder of Apple Computers, or Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft?

- A refaced brownstone in midtown Manhattan is the home and studio of a photographer who made photos of actor James Dean. Is the building significant? The Commission has received letters from James Dean fans in almost every state who think it is.

- “The rock” in St. Alban’s, Queens, is a local memorial painted in the colors of the black liberation flag. To residents of the neighborhood it’s an important monument. Should it be a city landmark?

- A four-foot wooden post next to a parking meter in Queens is said to be a hitching post, perhaps the only one of its kind left in the city. It tells us something about the rural history of Queens. Is that enough to make it eligible for designation?

In weighing proposals for landmark designation of properties such as these, government agencies are being asked to place an official validation on the significance of people’s history and culture—in a sense, on the significance of their very lives. If these agencies ask, “Is this site really significant?” they risk having questions thrown back at them: “Significant to whom? If I think, or if my community thinks, that this site is of significance to our culture and history, who are you to question it?”

One means of dealing with this issue is simply to sit back and wait to hear from the community, however “community” is defined. Because of the nature of the enterprise, the community itself is likely to be both better informed and more inclined to support and accept designations of sites which it helps identify. On the other hand, this approach may let preservation agencies off the hook a bit too easily. We do, after all, have official responsibility for identification and protection of landmarks.

As the preservation pendulum swings back towards an emphasis on history, we must understand that we are not exchanging

one kind of landmark for another, but rather broadening the scope of what we do. As the nature of our preservation work changes, it’s very interesting to watch the trajectory of preservation issues: from history to architecture and back to history; from patriotic general history to local culture; and from interest in individual sites for their educational and patriotic value to interest in communities from without (“let’s move in and restore”) to interest in communities from within (“how are we and our history reflected in our environment?”).

In light of this overview of the new way of considering history, Fraunces Tavern now appears once again to be an important site, and its suggestion of Washington’s era outweighs its highly conjectural attempt at historical recreation. If that’s so, does the confusion at this site between idealization and historical accuracy become more comprehensible? Is this where historic preservation is headed?

Not many of us will readily sacrifice historical accuracy. But we must recognize that some of our most important current efforts deal with landmarks of the historical/cultural type, as evidenced by the overwhelming public response to both Ellis Island and the African Burial Ground. More people care about these kinds of cultural landmarks than about the finest, most intact example of “pure” historic architecture. This may very well be the future of historic preservation.

1 Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965).

2 Cited by Hosmer, p. 262.

3 Henry Russell Drowne, *The Story of Fraunces Tavern* (New York: Fraunces Tavern, 1966), p. 39.

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