

“Why Preserve? Public Memory and Heritage Preservation.”  
Building on the Past: Landmarks Policy and Urban Development  
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Preservationists have often been rather inarticulate on the central question of “Why Preserve?” When pressed to move beyond somewhat vague ideals related to the importance of heritage, preservationists’ have tended to argue on a parallel track with historians-- we try to learn from the past so that we can more clearly and critically understand how present actions give shape to the future. Preservationists have insisted through time that the material dimension of memory that characterizes preservation work serves as a particularly affective means of conveying historical narrative and understanding. I want scrutinize a few of the more common assumptions deployed in preserving buildings and places. They relate to citizenship, aesthetics, environmentalism, and the cultivation of a politics of locality.

In 1850, in one of the earliest acts of public preservation in the United States, the New York State Legislature purchased Washington’s revolutionary war headquarters at Newburgh, New York. The committee of the legislature argued that the physical properties of buildings and landscapes made their associated histories especially tangible, capable of “transmit[ing] to our children a knowledge of the virtues of the fathers of the republic.” The committee declared: “If our love of country is excited when we read the biography of our revolutionary heroes, or the history of revolutionary events, how much more will the flame of patriotism burn in our bosoms when we tread the ground where was shed the blood of our fathers, or when we move among the scenes where were conceived and consummated their noble achievements.” In the 1850s preservation of this headquarters seemed especially important. Here, in 1783, Washington stemmed a rising revolt among his own troops who were organizing to march on the Congress because they had not been paid for their military service. The preservationists had a very clear political purpose; they wanted to invoke portraits of nationalism and the memory of Washington’s leadership to counter the nation’s early lurch towards Civil War: they wrote, “It will be good for our citizens in these days of political collisions, in these days of political demagoguism: it will be good for them in these days when we hear the sound of disunion reiterated from every part of the Country; in all future time occasionally to chasten their minds by reviewing the history of our revolutionary struggle.” The preservation of the headquarters was more successful than the political agenda that prompted it. Nevertheless, this early campaign revealed that ideals of politics and citizenship often complemented the curatorial zeal that seemed to stand at the center of the preservation movement.

One hundred years later, in Chicago, the modern preservation movement also carried with it a purpose that went well beyond curatorial passion or antiquarian engagement. Interestingly, the 1950s emergence of preservation in the city worked in tandem with efforts to renew the city after a decade of Depression and a decade of war. Despite the full employment and seeming

prosperity of the war years, decentralization, suburbanization, and the growth of cities in the southern and western United States posed a grave threat to Chicago's economy. The downtown, the area that had earlier crystallized images of economic boom now seemed "asleep," "as dead as prohibition." Chicago's leaders appeared "especially defensive" that the city lagged far behind New York in its postwar office construction. In the face of such difficulties, history and an invented tradition of the Chicago School seemed especially reassuring; by looking back, many builders in Chicago discovered hope for a more promising future.

The effort to chart a future course for Chicago's economy and landscape involved looking back as well as forward. One of the defining moments for this effort came in 1957 during Chicago Dynamic Week, an event sponsored by U.S. Steel and other business groups. Mayor Daley proclaimed Chicago Dynamic week in August 1957 only a few weeks after clashes between blacks and whites in Calumet Park sparked one of the city's worst race riots in many years. Mayor Daley's proclamation rang with boosterism and local pride: "WHEREAS, Chicago is the birthplace of American architecture, the curtain wall building, which ushered in the age of the skyscraper; and WHEREAS, Chicago today is concerned with the continued use of the newest building forms, materials and techniques to make Chicago a better place in which to live and work; and WHEREAS, the Chicago Dynamic Committee comprising our community's business and civic leaders has been organized to honor the sound building and far-sighted planning of Chicago, the world's most dynamic city. . . . I Richard J. Daley, Mayor of the City of Chicago, do hereby proclaim the week of October 27 through November 2, as 'Chicago Dynamic Week.'"

When Chicago Dynamic Week arrived, reveling in history was more than merely rhetorical. The Committee commissioned 79-year-old Carl Sandburg to return to Chicago to report his view of the nascent Chicago renaissance. Obliging, Sandburg declared that Chicago "has elements of toil, combat, risk taking chances, departing from the known into the unknown. In this spirit during an earlier Chicago Dynamic the skyscraper was born. Today's Chicago Dynamic has cut loose from old traditions and begun to make new ones. Yesterday's skyscrapers are over-towered by steel clad structures rising far taller and with ease and grace."

Frank Lloyd Wright also returned to complete the link to the past but failed to match Sandburg's enthusiasm for the skyscraper. In a televised session moderated by Alistair Cooke, Wright debated Sandburg on issues ranging from the political character of Lincoln and Jefferson, to Sputnik, to skyscrapers and urban form. Wright declared that skyscraper construction was "pushing the city to its end. They have no business in the city--they belong in the country where they can cast shadows on their own ground. Decentralize the entire affair and send people back to scenery." He also ventured the opinion that "in another 15 years this city will be on its way out." Developer Arthur Rubloff and the board chairman of Sears, Roebuck & Company quickly and nervously challenged Wright's assertions.

Chicago's nineteenth century skyscrapers had testified to the city's commercial vitality and growing economic prominence. Boosterism pervaded their initial development and promotion. In the 1950s Chicago's business and city leaders promoted a preservation movement that highlighted some of these

buildings even as the city charted sweeping changes in the urban fabric of both downtown and of various neighborhoods. In fact, the Chicago preservation movement got a considerable boost in what turned out to be the most destructive period in Chicago since the 1871 fire.

In January 1957 the Chicago City Council unanimously passed an ordinance sponsored by Alderman Leon Despres establishing a Commission on Chicago Architectural Landmarks. The ordinance called attention to Chicago's "internationally important monuments of architectural engineering and style" and cited six buildings as examples--Richardson's Glessner House, Sullivan's World's Fair residence, his Carson, Pirie, Scott store, and the Auditorium Theater, Wright's Robie House, and Burnham & Root's Monadnock Building. The ordinance also called attention to the need for landmark preservation by pointing to the earlier demolition of Richardson's Marshall Field Warehouse and Wright's Midway Gardens. The Council charged the Commission with designating Chicago's architectural landmarks, identifying and marking them, educating the public about their importance, and developing policies for their preservation.

The first official list of architectural landmarks included both historic and contemporary structures. The six major Chicago School monuments featured on a special architectural tour during the Chicago Dynamic week celebrations--the Rookery, Monadnock, Leiter, Auditorium, Carson-Pirie-Scott, and the Reliance--were among the 14 structures singled out for special recognition on the Commission's initial list of 39 landmark buildings. The list, drawn up by a committee of architectural historians, architects, and commission members, included numerous structures by Adler & Sullivan and Burnham & Root and other buildings considered to have a role in the local modernist genealogy. Then, to complete the links to the present, the commission designated such buildings as George and William Keck's University Avenue residence (1937), Mies's Illinois Institute of Technology campus (1947) and Lake Shore Drive apartments (1951) and S.O.M.'s Inland Steel Building (1957). The commission's designation offered no protection for landmarks but it established architectural "merit," "structure," and "planning" as the criteria for a new aesthetically-based landmarks program.

The adherence to the Chicago School's rather narrow canon of architectural significance, which located history within the bounds of a limited number of city lots, minimized conflict between heritage and modernism in the city's urban renewal program. Such an accommodation stood in sharp contrast to other major American cities where preservationists directly opposed demolition and clean sweep urban renewal practices. In Chicago leaders often saw preservation as an important route to inspiring the renewal of the city and the next generation of modern design. Even with their narrow, aesthetically-based, preservation ideals Chicago preservationists promoted specific citizen actions that certainly echoed the ideals of those who advocated the preservation of Washington's headquarters on the eve of the Civil War.

For architects, who at times founded preservation a vexing challenge to their professional identity, preservation still seemed to offer a clear utility. At times architects could view preservation as one way of providing formal models for their more revivalist work; however, they often shunned the use of the past as "a crutch" and looked to preservation as a means of simply inspiring innovative

work by creative modern architects. Holding onto the architectural glories of the past ennobled the overall profession while providing an inspiring frame for the future designs. In Chicago the coining of the First and the Second Chicago Schools of architecture certainly highlighted the link that designers envisioned between the past and future of architectural production. Professional architects' involvement in preservation has tended to constrict preservation and its possibilities. Whether seeking models or inspiration, architects often conveyed to the broad public that what really counted in preservation was style, aesthetic accomplishment, and excellence in design. Here preservation, as it related to a broad non-professional public, became not a means to some civic end but an end in itself—an end steeped in connoisseurship. This came complete with a host of style guides—like the Field Guide to American Architecture—that helped translate the subtleties of architecture into the art of appreciation for a lay audience; in this sense architectural preservation was comparable to bird watching complete with special interest groups like the Friends of Art Deco or the Friends of Cast Iron. Here I suppose the answer to “Why Preserve?” would be “because it is beautiful to look at.” Helping people see and appreciate the great beauty of past architecture in a more or less curatorial context has laid the foundation for a continuous attack on preservation by developers and anti-preservation parties who assume that any departure from high-style, canonically-based, architectural criterion for preservation sullies the entire enterprise. Architect Philip Johnson has argued that “Today, preservationists are trying to save everything, but there is no criterion for how important a building is. . . . Sentiment overlaps architecture and history. . . . Preservation is a double-edged sword. It gets too broad, and every lady in tennis shoes feels that everything should be preserved. There is no judgment.” For Johnson “artistic beauty” more than anything else needs to provide the foundation for preservation. “Why Preserve?” Because it is beautiful.

The misogyny of Johnson's view and the impatience with sentiment or other meaning that people may value in a place and its memory is all framed around an effort to privilege architectural beauty over every other values. One weakness with this position is that architectural beauty is not a universal value—a simple relationship between the building and the back of the retina, unmediated by culture. Aesthetic interest shifts. It is hard to imagine or comprehend today that Walter Gropius, the modern architect who moved from the Bauhaus to Harvard, in 1936 could have written in his 1964 essay “Tradition and Continuity in Architecture” “I confess to be impatient with our inertia and the recent tendency to stand wailing at the grave of the 19th century. . . . Why, for instance, do we dissipate our strength by fighting battles for the resurrection or preservation of structures which were monuments to a particularly insignificant period in American architectural history, a period which, still unsure of its own mission, threw the Roman toga around its limbs to appease its nagging doubts. Pennsylvania Station in New York is such a case of pseudo-tradition. . . . only a throw back to the empty mannerism inspired by the dependence of the American businessman on European prototypes of the so-called ‘ageless masterpieces.’” There is no doubt that the building would have merited National Register listing today. We stand on a slippery subjective slope in trying to see preservation as a movement to define and hold onto “artistic beauty” in the built world.

In the 1940s and 1950s as they worked to preserve their neighborhood the residents of Chicago's Old Town community necessarily struggled against the narrowness of the prevailing canonical conceptions of Chicago architectural history. They lived in a neighborhood developed in the late nineteenth century. Middle-class and working-class Germans initially built and settled the community. In the years after World War II the area seemed to offer a vital alternative to middle-class suburban communities. It had easy access to Chicago's downtown business and cultural institutions, it stood adjacent to Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan, and it possessed what residents and visitors considered architectural and urban "charm." In the late 1940s the neighborhood assumed the new name--Old Town. The people who formed the Old Town Triangle Association in 1948 coined the name. In 1950 the Association sponsored the first of its annual Old Town Holidays. The fair offered for sale the arts and crafts of local artist and boosted the community in the eyes of tens of thousands of visitors.

In preserving their neighborhood residents of Old Town appreciated the day-to-day value of the location and the utility of the housing stock. Here they advocated preservation quite apart from canonical aesthetics or nationalist narratives. Their interest was clearly spurred by the sense of the quality and age of the buildings and streets--of what they viewed as their picturesqueness and charm. These qualities led Old Town residents to compare their neighborhood with other gentrified urban neighborhoods like Beacon Hill, Georgetown, and the French Quarter. However, in the context contemporary taste and the growing popularization of Chicago School modernism, the preservationists in Chicago's Old Town found it difficult to place their eclectic buildings in some broader narrative of architectural value or importance. Even architect Earl Reed, an Old Town resident with all his preservation experience on the American Institute of Architects' Committee on the Preservation of Historic Buildings, could not easily argue the historic value of Old Town's architecture. In 1953 Reed wrote in his neighborhood "architectural portrait" that: "The Triangle's close-packed architecture is jumbled, completely Chicagoesque, and endures as an unsurpassed relic of Old Town. Built mostly by modest citizens, often of foreign origin, it is compounded of the accidental and the expedient, reflecting various successive designs." Given current taste, Reed noted with some sense of regret that there was "no hint of the International style of architecture." He then concluded his portrait by declaring: "The 'Triangle Look' is diverse, actually unarchitectural, and sometimes crude. Yet its charm is undeniable and merits jealous preservation. It is undefined--unmentioned even--in the book on architecture, but go out and discover it for yourself. We guarantee that you'll feel well rewarded." Academic and critical discussions of architecture provided little guidance to residents interested in establishing the importance of their community's architectural history.

As Vince Michael will discuss increasingly in the 1960s local historians and critics actually came to celebrate the work of Old Town's anonymous architects and builders as an antidote to modernism. One commentator on local architecture, for example, concluded an essay by insisting that "In Old Town you can see buildings executed by humble and honest men who have achieved something sincere. In many instances overly sentimental, perhaps. But, nonetheless, their genuine naiveté gave a scale that seems human, not the lifeless

expression of a machined art. Certainly in this human scale we can find a *raison d'être* for Old Town's current popularity and a heartening message for our own day." Surveying the same history, architect John A. Holabird, Jr. wrote in 1964, "Victorian, which was a dirty word in architecture for fifty years, synonymous with stiffness and eclecticism has come back into its own and Old Town is its Leader. . . . Hopefully, the lessons to be learned from its unknown Masters of the Past will not be tossed away." The reactions of local residents to the checkered history of urban renewal nurtured these attitudes and in time profoundly shaped the urban renewal plans for Old Town.

Just as aesthetic preservation and narratives of the Chicago School bypassed Old Town so too did older notions of associational landmarks. National history and even Chicago history as celebrated in textbooks and in earlier programs of historic markers seemed to bear little relation to Old Town. In a 1959 essay "A Sense of History, More or Less," Chicago critic Herman Kogan reflected on the neighborhood's supposed obscurity: "if any of the professional historical-site outfits has designated Old Town a likely area for plaques and markers, then I have not heard of it. . . . In purely objective moments, we may be compelled to admit that the official affixers of historical monuments have a point, technically speaking, but we have our own treasuries of historical fact, lore and memorabilia (and some trivia), and we cherish them all, however unimportant they may seem to the site-pickers." With history valued from the top down, as a chronicle of famous people and events, local traditions and the invention of Old Town itself did not provide residents with a historical link between themselves and their neighborhood or a broader public. In 1960 neighborhood boosters wrote, "Old Town is essentially a state of mind, preferably of an artistic bent. It is also a significant demonstration in neighborhood renovation, a reversal of threatening blight to embody convenience, charm, and conviviality. What it is not is a historical entity. Its foothold in Chicago history is . . . precarious." In this context the recourse to promoting the community as a living community of artists, as a diverse community of families provided a more obvious route to establishing the importance and value of the community in the face of the dual threats posed by deterioration and by urban renewal.

The defensiveness that characterized early preservation of places like Old Town has now largely disappeared. The scholarly turbulence in the academy from the 1960s onward has changed the face of history, and has in turn transformed historic preservation. Social and cultural history paid growing attention to the everyday lives of ordinary people. History teaching and writing scrutinized the ways in which race, class, gender, and ethnicity affected history and human experience. Architectural history, in turn, attended more closely to the social and cultural meaning of architecture and developed a greater sophistication in looking at vernacular buildings and landscapes. Conceptions of heritage and objects of preservation interest have expanded enormously in the last quarter of a century. Preservation as well as history has assumed the responsibility to narrate and explore a broader swath of historical experience. "Why Preserve?" because a central part of preservation's role can increasingly come from defining and supporting an architecture and landscape that helps people understand place and history in a way that promotes a critical engagement with historical agency and the politics of living in and using and

constructing place. I would argue that burrowing into locality, into the everyday, also has boundless potential for buttressing our public realm in the face of an increasingly homogenous and globalized world. Imagine the possibilities if we had had the imagination and resourcefulness to cultivate the local with the tenacity that we have cultivated the national—at Washington's headquarters and on Civil War battlefields. Places like Old Town offer these sorts of possibilities. I would argue in relation to the question posed by this panel that there is and should be little fundamental difference between sites preserved for cultural or political significance and sites designated for historical and architectural value. They all offer the possibility of forging crucial links between people and the places in which they live, work and visit.

Finally, we should recognize and applaud the fact that preservation has also allied itself with environmental stewardship, adding in recent years new rationales for "Why Preserve?" Buildings can be seen not only as reservoirs of memory but as reservoirs of embodied energy; the most sustainable thing to do with our stock of existing buildings and landscapes is to buttress plans for continuing their use. In an age that now religiously re-cycles aluminum cans and is beginning to confront the limits of our natural resources it is incumbent upon us to strive to conserve the resources and energies that are embodied in the built environment. Finding creative approaches to using and re-using existing places is one means of doing just that. Another way is to cultivate narratives of place in a way that strengthens human connections to place and promote a greater understanding of what it means to take hold of a politics of living in place.

#### Note for Consideration of Other Panels and Participants: Stewardship Responsibilities

John Ruskin wrote in Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849): "It is no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong, partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their rights to them: that which they laboured for. . . we have no right to throw down; but what other men gave their strength, and wealth and life to accomplish, their right over does not pass away with their death; still less is the right to the use of what they have left vested in us only. It belongs to all their successors."