

Vince Michael, Director, Historic Preservation Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

“I Was Trained as a Historian”

I was trained first as a historian and only gained an understanding of architecture and aesthetics after I became involved in historic preservation. I always wanted to preserve buildings because they were physical history texts, part of a landscape that could be read, and could be read with more senses and nuances than a book of written facts and dates. If these streets could talk.

Dolores Hayden wrote in *The Power of Place* that physical place is more powerful in creating and nurturing memory because it assaults all of the senses, more than books, more than television or films. Hayden talks about the “power of place to nurture citizen’s public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory” and I think that the fact that we share place in a different way than we share texts or even moving images is an important source for why people want to preserve buildings, streetscapes and landscapes. They hold our shared memory; our history.

At the same time, we have to recognize that all history “has an angle” and the 19th and early 20th century efforts to preserve patriotic landmarks in this country represented not so much shared memory as an attempt to write history. Buildings were preserved as lessons to help civilize the alien immigrants swarming into American cities. Writing history always implies selection and erasure, whether it is active or passive. Dan Bluestone has illustrated how the same process affected architectural history in Chicago, as preservationists in the 50s and 60s tried to save basically one “text” of architectural history. Chicago has been the site of some very amazing attempts to “erase” history, most notably with sites associated with Al Capone, arguably the most famous Chicagoan before Michael Jordan. The city wanted to eliminate the places so they could downplay the memory.

The most important point Dolores Hayden made in her 1995 book was that memory is tied to identity. We preserve landmarks because they mark our land; they are part of our collective identity. When Chicago demolished the garage of the St. Valentine’s Day massacre it was trying to purify not only its memory but its identity. We didn’t want that worldwide rat-a-tat-tat image and gangster identity. On the south side, over 4,000 Confederate prisoners of war are buried in Oak Woods Cemetery but the city under Harold Washington balked at landmarking the site because it was felt that somehow that honored slavery. Even the Haymarket site, 117 years behind us, had its landmark plaque installed secretly so the city would not have to deal with the two groups – labor activists and police – who still carry very different memories of this important historic event.

In a real sense, there is no shared memory any more than there can be shared perceptions, as Helene Lipstadt has noted in writing about the World War I monument at Thiepval, in the Somme. None of us saw the Chicago Fire, or the World’s Columbian Exposition or even the Armory Show but we agree that these are significant events and we might even agree as to how they shape our collective identity. We share interpretations, and a majority of people might share the same interpretation of an historic

event or an aesthetic monument. A majority often agrees that a site or building is significant, even if they don't interpret its significance in the same way. September 11, 2001 is already a diverse and contradictory flock of meanings.

It is fascinating to see which landmarks excite public interest. The Chess Records Studio, architecturally confused, aesthetically ordinary, garnered great public interest because it was a site associated with Chuck Berry and Howling Wolf and Muddy Waters and even the Rolling Stones. Architectural preservationists refused to put the eclectic and exuberant Chicago Theatre in their list of landmarks in 1974, but public outcry saved the building a decade later because people liked it. Of course it's an architectural landmark, they said, just look at it, it's just loaded with architecture. More architecture per linear foot than most buildings.

Frank Lloyd Wright is famous enough that a majority would support saving his buildings, but most architectural landmarks remain the province of an educated elite, an elite I am now part of. And certain buildings, like the Water Tower, become so completely entrenched in the identity of a place that they transcend both history and architecture and become essential components of character. The Eiffel Tower, Taj Mahal, Great Wall of China. These are not icons of history or architecture but icons of identity that are somehow more than physical places and material facts. Central Warsaw was rebuilt as an exact copy of itself after World War II because it had to be. It was an element of identity that went way beyond preservation.

I have been investigating what motivates people to preserve buildings. Sometimes it is a desire to connect to history or to save architecture or both, but there are also other motivations. People don't like to see change in their neighborhoods, or they want to stop a particular project because it's too high or too big or too ugly.

I looked at the passage of the first landmarks laws in New York City in 1965 and Chicago in 1968. In both cases, the effort to craft a landmarks law was led by non-profit groups that we could call "elites" who were motivated by a desire to preserve masterpieces of architecture. The New York list looked more Beaux-Arts and the Chicago list was more modernist, but nonetheless both were aesthetic lists of great buildings by great architects. Yet in order to get political support for a landmarks law these groups needed some grass roots. So they found neighborhood activists trying to preserve historic districts like Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village and Old Town and Astor Street. These provided the political numbers that the architectural preservationists didn't have on their own.

What happened next is interesting. In Brooklyn Heights, the neighborhood activists discovered that the landmarks ordinance didn't do everything they wanted it to do in terms of controlling new development. So they ended up downzoning in addition to landmarking. The exact same thing happened on Astor Street in Chicago, where landmarking was followed by downzoning. So in both cases, the desire to control and limit new development helped motivate preservation. They may have wanted to preserve identity and shared memory, but the reaction to new development – often seen as banal or cheap - was also in the mix. It is today. I still think Jane Jacobs tapped into something 42 years ago, and it wasn't architecture or even mixed uses and third places and eyes on the street. It was about control, community control of how a place was going to grow and change and ultimately how it was going to look. The democracy of the built environment.

We are always left with the problem of form, or materiality. You might be trying to preserve the memory – or the particular interpretation – of a particular event, but you are always doing that with material form – usually buildings, and you will naturally perceive them as buildings, as architectural, and thus slip into architectural preservation. A tragicomic example of that is the mid-1960s reconstruction of Hull House into an elaborate three-dimensional memorial to Jan Addams. Its form bore no relation to the home's original appearance and even less to its appearance during Jane Addams tenancy. The block-long architectural complex that Addams designed in concert with noted Chicago architects Irving and Allen Pond was demolished but for a single structure, and even it was restored to an appearance it never had. So now our shared memory – and the piece of our identity that Jane Addams embodies – is defined by the bad research and mixed motivations of a handful of Chicagoans circa 1963.

The public interest in preservation is defined by all of these motivations in various concentrations, from the aesthetic to the associational to the simple fact that we want to regulate what the neighbor builds next to our house or in our backyard.

As people, we are constantly reminded that our characters are not defined by our appearances. But in our cities and towns and countrysides, we are still caught between identity and memory on the one side and form and beauty on the other.