

Lecture 3: Preservation in the 20th Century: History and Policy

Introduction and Announcements: This class session we will review the traditional tale of preservation history in the U.S., then we will try to complicate it, to understand where it fails. Bluestone and Wilson, as well as other readings, show how the traditional tale is incomplete. We will be talking about preservation up through the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). Then, we will discuss the process of having something listed as a landmark, what it involves. Finally, we will talk about the assignment from last week: to look up what, if any, historic places from your hometowns are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

On the Stellar site for next week's class- be sure to follow the links to the Presidents House web site, and learn about the controversy in Philadelphia. This is a timely issue, as tomorrow it will be revealed which design has won- showing what the historic interpretation of the site will be. The website shows all five designs that were considered in the final round.

March 5 is next week's class, by the week after students should have a prospectus prepared in three parts: (1) a statement of the topic in a few paragraphs, the argument summarized and state your biases, (2) the sources you plan to use (library, interviews, etc.), and (3) timeline. The prospectus should be a couple of pages in length, total. Later we will set a date for students to present in class.

Slide Lecture

Last week we talked about Ruskin and his ideas. His house and the landscape of the lake district, the site, and its neo-Gothic architecture show something about him. As important as Ruskin was, his claims about restoration and preservation, he actually inspired Revival movements in architecture. A key term is "picturesque," a complicated phrase in English. This movement invented new landscapes that would merge the human-made and the natural. For example, Central Park in New York.

The picturesque was supposed to promote restful feelings, but not eliminate human activity. It sought a delicate balance between human and natural. Ruskin was trying to build for the ages, something that would seem to be part of the landscape. The promoters of the picturesque created something to look like a picture, a new landscape. This movement shows the influence of Ruskin's views, which, in many ways, led to this movement. One could argue that they were a contradictory outflow of his ideas. Ruskin's "veneration of the object" and age were very important concepts, these ideas make him a crucial figure, especially in the U.S.

In 1816, Independence Hall in Philadelphia was threatened with destruction. At that time, preservation was a weak idea. Historic preservation is a modern invention. This idea of preservation as modern is paradoxical and one that is not easy to get our mind around. But, we can see that change and upheaval promote nostalgia. Some historians say nostalgia itself is a modern notion. In any case, it is a key concept. Protecting an historic building on a permanent basis, it is a modern concept. Obviously, at the time of the preservation campaign to save Independence Hall, this idea is just beginning to be articulated. Today, Independence Hall is considered a

sacred site. Note that this early preservation effort centers around a patriotic headquarters.

Indian mounds were another focus of early preservation campaigns. They were valued as uniquely North American landscapes and as archeological sites. They represented a time beyond the revolutionary sites. This site is in Ohio, one of major routes, one of the developments beyond the Cumberland Mountains. The Sansom reading relates to one of these sites. The impact of road building on the mounds presented one of the earliest preservation debates. The roads got built.

Mount Vernon. Note that these developments are going on at the same time: patriotic sites and Indian sites are being preserved. We have read about the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 1856, and Ann Pamela Cunningham. But we should keep in mind that these sites had meaning because of their patriotic associations, only much later were they valued for their architecture. Mount Vernon appears symmetrical, but it has oddities in its pediments and columns. Postmodern architects celebrated it, especially Venturi who described it as an example of "complexity and contradiction." But earlier, it was Mount Vernon's connection to the "Father" of our country that mattered.

Devil's Tower. The 1906 Antiquities Act was the first federal intervention, dealing with historic sites on federal land. It represented a pairing of conservation and preservation. Later the National Park Service (NPS) was established, and it became a common claim that "monuments" of nature must be saved. In the 20th Century these movements would go separate ways. However, they may be returning again to these older ideas in the current time.

House museums were a major part of early preservation efforts, often ones with a patriotic theme. Revere House in the North End is an example. The reconstruction at the turn of the 20th Century put a new front on it, reconstructed it, gave it a "Medieval" flavor. Central to the movement was the ideal of a moral, woman-centered home, especially as an example to the new immigrants. Many preservationists asked, how do we inculcate "American values" in "those people"?

Henry Ford's Greenfield Village. He collected homes and buildings from across the place, and brought them to one place. He created a Disney-type place using historic buildings.

Williamsburg. Rockefeller was a major force in its redevelopment in the late 1920s. The declining town of Williamsburg was reconstructed, one of the most massive urban renewal efforts in U.S. history. It sought to go back to a colonial era using reconstruction, and it was carried out in ways that make preservationists today cringe. The reconstruction was undertaken on very little evidence. Furthermore, slavery is written out of the story until the past 20 years. In the 1920s and 30s, recreating full historic environments was central to preservation practice.

Charleston. This city passed the first law, that any changes to heart of Charleston, which was once the wealthiest city in America, had to have approval from an architectural review board. The law was adopted in 1931. Note that it is not federal law, but rather state or town laws that are essential to preservation. It is remarkable how complete the effect of such regulation is, if you go to Charleston today.

The Historic Sites Act of 1935 was rather limited; it identified some key landmarks and promoted research.

Also in the 1930s, "habbs hair" was created, acronyms that stand for the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) and the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER). Federal agencies began to document historic places. Some of these programs were created to give work to people, like the WPA Guides, for starving artists and writers, architects. These efforts didn't actually preserve buildings, but they gave a record. They were documentation efforts.

1949. The National Trust, modeled after the British, was established a quasi-governmental organizational.

1963. Penn Station became the center of a major preservation controversy. It was built in 1910 by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White. One of the most glorious buildings in New York. It was modeled after baths in Rome, and perhaps the ultimate in Neo-Classical building styles. Famous photos by Berenice Abbott depict this building before it was demolished. A proposal was put forth to tear it down to build office tower and Madison Square Garden. Its threatened (and eventual) demolition launched a growing preservation movement. Philip Johnson, Jane Jacobs, and many others protested. Soon after the NYC Landmarks Law passed, and the New York Landmarks Commission was created.

1966 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The "key law" shapes much of contemporary preservation practice, introducing such concepts and programs as the National Register, State Historic Preservation Offices, various rules, the notions of historic significance and integrity- all the key concepts were "crystallized" in this act.

One sculpture from Penn Station ended up in a fountain in Kansas City. The new Penn Station was a disaster, and its efforts to try to recall the old station were worse. Vincent Scully wrote, "Once we entered the city like gods, now we scuttle in like rats."

Today the Post Office is across the street, and there has been talk about moving the train station there. Former Senator Moynihan pushed for it for many years before his death.

Student question: What about Grand Central?

A 1978 effort to tear down Grand Central station failed. By that time laws were in place. A legal challenge ensued. The development company sued saying that the city's action was a "taking." The United States Supreme Court reaffirmed that historic preservation laws were within police power of municipal governments. It was a key legal decision in preservation law.

Penn Station was a "pivotal" event, but it came from a long history. Preservation law and preservationists did not just come out of the woodwork, but these events were connected a long tradition of thinking about preservation.

Now, to complicate this story a little. In the early twentieth century, rapid development posed all kinds of problems. It led to new building types, but also caused changes to the old city. Poverty terrified and worried city leaders, poverty could be seen right in the heart of the business and civic district. Educating

immigrants became a major focus of social reformers and historic sites were considered an important part of this education into American values. In New York, City Hall was a significant site. It was threatened with demolition as it was considered too small, and many thought the city should build a grander one. Several large buildings are built around City Hall during this period, including the Woolworth building nearby. During this period, there were a whole series of preservation battles going on in New York, likewise, in other places, as Holleran describes for Boston.

St. John's Church. This preservation battle was not about architecture, but about keeping a church on the site. Trinity Church is another example of a preservation conflict from this time. Some far-reaching ideas about preservation were floating around. In Boston, views of State House become a focus for preservationists. There are many ideas of what the purpose and possibilities of preservation are.

At New York City Hall, some preservationists proposed to tear down the Post Office building to create a better view of City Hall. Today, we would preserve a structure such as the Post Office. At that time, it was argued that it blocked the view of City Hall. In the end, the city cleared out the park so that there was only one historic building in the middle of it. This is largely what City Hall Park looks like today. This approach becomes a paradigm- the historic building in a little park.

Hamilton's Grave. It was moved to a park. It is another example, like a jewel in a jewel box, an exhibit in a museum.

As such, ideas about how far preservation can go get narrowed down in the late 1920s. St. John's gets demolished.

Wall Street. George Washington was inaugurated there at the Treasury Building. It was taken down, brick by brick, and reassembled. It became the entrance to the American Museum of Art at the Met. It is literally a museum piece.

Discussion

Question: How does that complicate our history of preservation? What does Wilson say? What happens in Santa Fe?

Discussion: Santa Fe becomes a tourist attraction. The preservation approach was based upon catering to tourism. It was decided to downplay the Spanish architectural styles and play up a Pueblo theme. These decisions defined the way Santa Fe looks today, The city still draws a lot of people, it captivates- its uniform, and it presents itself as authentic. It began with a proposed 1912 requirement of what the architectural style should be.

Question: What does Wilson think about it? Is he critical of it? He actually kind of defends it, which is interesting.

Discussion: An architectural language is created for an area, one that is distinctive. It's an amalgamation to create a sense of place, to build on traditions they merged them. The designers and city leaders were after the tourist trade, but also they sought to create their "thing"- when you are in Santa Fe, you know you are in Santa Fe. Isn't that what preservation is about, to create a sense of place? Not orthodox preservation, but creating a sense of place. It gets to how we think about

authenticity. Some would say there is a “dissonance that we bristle at,” that it displays a false recreation.

Applying it to a living city seems different, to try to accommodate new buildings and to foster it the style of old buildings, to make them look like they belong. But, its not like Williamsburg, there isn't the same claim to be historic. No one is saying that in Santa Fe. The original Pueblo-type style was an outgrowth of climate and culture, but this Revival style is decoration. They put frills on a building. It doesn't build a sense of place. Also, as Wilson notes Hispanics are pushed out of neighborhoods. Greenfield tells a similar story about Providence.

Professor's comment: Wilson makes a very important point here. Look at page 197, at the bottom: preservation theory embraced a modernist concept, the spirit of the time. It turned into a moral imperative that additions embody contemporary styles. The spirit of the time became more important than sense of place. The author says that there are other ideas out there that are much more popular than the preservationists' approach. This view, the Santa Fe perspective, is influential, it is in Southwest, and it is in Disney. The major historian of historic preservation doesn't even mention it.

Question: What about the Bluestone article? Mecca Flats? It is a story of African American preservation, in 1940s in a very segregated city. Why did they want to save it?

Discussion: They fought for good housing, affordable housing, to preserve a social center, a place that had stature in the community. It was not patriotic, not great architecture. They were active, organized, go to State Senate and fight for it.

Question: Why does it fail? What is being built next door?

Discussion: The Illinois Institute of Technology campus by Mies van der Rohe is constructed there. It would be considered Mies's masterwork. The problem was there was a building standing in the way.

Professor's comment: Chicago was considered the center of modern architecture, that is a tale that was frequently told. Certain buildings by modern architects were considered part of a cannon with no room for another kind of innovation. A such, we see that the modernist bias in Santa Fe also is a bias here. In the 20th Century preservationists blind themselves, and start to exclude things that might be meaningful to people. History shows that there were a lot more choices than people thought. Preservation gets progressively narrowed down, the idea of what is possible. But, like Santa Fe, we should ask how wrong is it? You can understand the attraction to it.

Discussion of Preservation Practice

Summary: The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was the “first comprehensive historic preservation act.” Private preservation activity remains a focus. Writers of the federal regulation take care not to interfere with property rights, while they assert the public interest. The act creates a vocabulary, a language, the key words of preservation practice. “Aspects of integrity” are created later. Four criteria are established for National Register eligibility. Section 106

becomes one of the more powerful aspects of the law. The act also creates State Historic Preservation Officer.

Question: What is the process if you wanted to put a building (like one at MIT, such as Building 7) on the National Register?

Discussion: Preservation work almost always starts with local or state, then works its way up to federal. It's a federal system. The one exception is National Historic Landmarks. To prove that a building like Building 7 is historic, that is, eligible for the National Register would require historic photos and an argument, a story about why it is significant. One might argue, for example that is the architecture of 1920s, or the inventions of MIT researchers. You could have multiple reasons, and write a history of the building.

Question: But, what about if it were a total ruin?

Professor's Comment: Remember the term "integrity." Historic buildings are supposed to represent that moment of significance. There must be enough "stuff" of the building that goes back to 1920s.

Discussion: There was a similar debate about Building 20. Since demolished and now the location of the Stata Center.

Professor's Comment: Another key concept in preservation practice is the "era of significance." In general, it is not acceptable to say we are interested in the whole life of the building. In the documentation, it is necessary to choose a point in time to celebrate. The period of significance usually starts at date of construction, especially with Criterion C argument.

Question: OK, so you've done the research. You have convinced the local historic commission, you've filled out the form yourself- assembled the photographs and the technical parts of the application. Then it goes to the state: in this case, the Mass. Historical Commission What do they do?

Discussion: They check to see if the application is complete, if more information is needed.

Professor's Comment: Here is another point of potential bias. The state commission or state office is unlikely to forward nominations that they think will not be accepted into the National Register.

Question: Say the property is listed. Then what happens? What do you get?

Discussion/Professor's Comment: The building gets a brass plaque which says: "This property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places" on such-and-such date. That's it. Nothing else. The sign does not include an explanation of why the building is considered historic. The building is not protected by virtue of being listed and someone could knock it down. A combination of property rights and federalism form the basis of the current system. The National Register gives nothing in terms of protection. However, historic buildings do get protected. But, how? Usually, it is city ordinances that provide the most protection. Under the federal system, states have the right to allow cities to pass the more effective landmark legislation. That's where the power comes in. In some places, the city law allows for a demolition delay.

Discussion: The historic tax credit only applies to commercial properties.

Question: What struck you about the properties in your town listed on the National Register?

Discussion: Some properties are not listed on the Register. Other properties are unknown or it is mysterious as to why they are listed. To be listed requires someone to put it on the Register. Often, for an historic district, a majority of people in the proposed district have to approve. Some properties may be listed locally, but not on the National Register. Overall, we should keep in mind that the Register is a list of places that have made it on to the National Register. That's it. Not a comprehensive list of anything. The Matthews article asks, is the list too big? Is it a problem? Maybe it is too small? Does it matter? One value is that it can be used to convince people. We should not forget the uniqueness of the American approach to preservation. We have our own system, very different than other places. It is a system born of property rights and federalism.

Next week we will discuss the Presidents House in Philadelphia.