

After living in Paris during the student revolution that became a national general strike and nearly overturned the government, and after spending a summer in Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Yugoslavia, in the fall of 1968, I went to teach history in Detroit (commuting from my home in Berkeley, California to do so). My reasons for going there are explained both in Chapter 1 and in Part v. Still smoldering (in a metaphorical sense) from its 1967 “civil disturbance,” in 1968 Detroit seemed more war-torn than Berlin. At the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, Wayne State University was seething with its own version of the student rebellions that had torn apart the Berkeley campus, the Sorbonne, and other universities. On some days the state militia blocked off the streets near the campus. Among the courses I taught were courses on world cities, covering—among other things—the symbolic meaning of cities. I became Planning Director for the City of Detroit in 1979 and soon found that one of the many raging controversies was about the preservation of historic buildings. On one such occasion I wrote the following.



The Politics of Historic Preservation in Cities

At the national level, the disputants over policies pertaining to historical designation are easy to identify: developers, tax lawyers, building owners, bureaucrats, planners, mayors, archivists, advocates for the poor and minorities, conservationists, businessmen, architects, professional historians, archaeologists, and preservationists. The tactic of the preservationists, of course, has been to try to make allies among several of these groups. The purpose of the following remarks is not to address the politics of that process, but rather to outline some of the deeper values and interests at stake in community disputes over historic designation.

At the community level, the term “preservationists” embraces a number of different categories of people, with varying motivations and viewpoints. All the generalizations given below do not apply to all of them, even some of the time. It is a case of “if the shoe fits, put it on.”

One set of contenders, not all directly part of historic designation but related, are those concerned with environmental impact studies—mainly bureaucrats and consultants. Beneath legitimate concerns about possible effects of a proposed development of historic structures or landscapes, or on archaeological deposits, is another concern: to provide jobs for architectural historians and archaeologists at a time when there are not enough college and university jobs to employ many people trained in those professions. As a university professor of history on leave to be a director of a city’s planning department, I happened also to be a director of the National Council for Public History and chairperson of its Public Policy Committee. (I hasten to add that I am writing this purely as an individual, and am not in this case speaking for any of the above.) The National Council for Public History is concerned about jobs for historians, but jobs that serve a legitimate and needed function, not make-work jobs. I would contend that at least some of the jobs generated by federal environmental review requirements have a make-work quality. Or, at the very least, we ought to reconsider whether or not the money could be spent better elsewhere.

Over the past few years, the City of Detroit has had to spend approximately \$150,000 in direct costs for archaeological impact studies, and tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands more in related costs. Many of the most recent reports from archaeological consultants are inconclusive, simply saying that more detailed studies are needed, studies that would cost us thousands of dollars.

The artifacts that might be affected by most of Detroit's proposed development projects would probably be no more than a century old. Most of the artifacts turned up so far appear to have a relatively trivial bearing on major scholarly concerns. Given the kinds of records already available about the artifacts of the 19th century, the question might be asked whether the money for archaeological impact studies in Detroit might not be put to better use—for example, to send archaeologists to prehistoric digs of known major significance. It could even be questioned whether the money should be spent for this purpose at all, but spent instead on housing repair, or food for the elderly indigent, or some other immediately urgent need. The counter-argument presented thus far has been that the artifacts might be a tourist attraction.

Direct allocations for historic preservation studies in Detroit have totaled over half a million dollars; indirect costs have totaled many times that amount. Again, a good case could be made that the results obtained do not seem to warrant the expenditures involved.

Part of the issue pertains to differences in value perspective, but there is circumstantial evidence that national laws were written at least in part with the specific purpose in mind of increasing jobs for archaeological and historical professionals.

The more fundamental issues pertain to differences in basic values. In Detroit, underlying much of the militant pressure for historical preservation is the apparent presumption that whatever is should be conserved. As a conservationist movement, historical preservation sometimes takes on the quality of those environmentalists who fight to save spiders, or fish no one eats or looks at. In short, it sometimes becomes radical or—at times—mindless conservativeness. Developers and especially big developments are treated as if they were *a priori* bad.

Another wing of the movement likes to juxtapose old things, buildings included, rough textures, and natural materials with some element of the sleekly modern. In this way, nature and history are bracketed, domesticated, put in quotes—another version of Marie Antoinette playing shepherdess. History and “nature” become items of consumption, especially for tourists. I recall a friend who told me she went to Samarkand too soon, before they had finished building the ruins. Like a creature eating its own tail, we fatten ourselves on time—time past, time future—to give a feeling of substance to the present; probably also to give ourselves a sense of control over or detachment from time's flux. When we cognize something, label it, and bracket it in this fashion, we are recognizing it, but we are also putting ourselves rather than it in the position of power.

There is also, of course, the whole realm of status symbols. In an age of mass production, antiques make good status symbols, not accessible to the unini-

tiated. When historical houses are renovated and occupied by ethnic groups or social classes other than those who built or first occupied the houses, this is another aspect of “invasion and succession,” temporal as well as spatial. Why someone not-so-prestigious would want to occupy the former dwellings of the prestigious is obvious. Why the currently prestigious would want to occupy former servants’ dwellings, as in the Chelsea District in London or former workers’ cottages, is not so obvious, but it is not a repudiation of status striving.

Another case is when one ethnic group, socially dominant, insists upon preserving in its former domain the souvenirs and symbols of its dominance so that the new ethnic group now living in the area willy-nilly will be reminded that even though the first group is not physically present, its dominance lingers on. The first group may claim it is merely being sentimental, but sentiment has always been suspect! It is like the word “sorry” used when the post office window is slammed shut just before your turn has come.

If a building is preserved to permit the remembrance or recreation of history, we must ask what is history, and whose history?

Sometimes the administrators connected with historical designation are archivists. The perspective of an archivist is usually not the same as that of a person who writes and interprets history. The archivist is a collector, usually with a collector’s appetite for more. The archivist is not supposed to prejudge too much what might be of significance later; the bias is toward preserving as much as possible. But a building is not the same as a microfiche. It is not only much bigger, but other people are less in a position to take it or leave it. A building, especially whole rows of them, becomes part of the everyday environment of everyone who lives or works or passes through the vicinity.

The selection of buildings for preservation in a city should be informed more by the spirit of an historian or museum curator than by that of an archivist. Given enough funds, a museum director may also collect voraciously, but museums are highly selective when displaying art or artifacts. The writing of history, either as an art or social science, is not the replication of everything that ever happened. It is selective, and, by being selective, it is interpretive. Historians who collect and notate “facts” without an attempt to classify or arrange them interpretively are called antiquarians. When the motivation is only to possess, without love [or understanding], the result is simply clutter. How much more so when the “facts” are old buildings. The result then is anti-historical because the onlooker is given no clues about what to look for or why. Even if there is a latent message, it is scrambled.

We do enjoy flea markets and dusty antique shops, but we do not want all of our environment to have such random qualities. Rows of old buildings can tell their own story to those of us who are trained to find their meaning and who already know some of the history behind them. But what do they say to those

who are not trained, formally or informally, to see their meaning? Maybe they say something we would rather not have had said, if we really thought about it, when the original builders unconsciously expressed qualities of exploitation, vanity, greed, shoddiness, shallowness, or aimlessness. Indiscriminate preservation does not necessarily rule such kinds of buildings out.

On the other hand, if historical preservation is deliberately selective, we must ask about the assumptions underlying criteria for selection. In the western world, history has mostly been about power. Historical ballads commemorated the deeds and victories of a prince or warrior. The annals of an institution or group reminded them of the parameters and scaffolding of their existence; their history—written as an emotional tale of grievances, conflicts, and successes—helped to give them cohesion, make them present in the eyes of others, reinforce their forward thrust, or legitimate their attained position. National history—narration of how the nation-state was born, its external and internal power struggles—gave coherence and legitimization to the nation and its internal and external power orderings.

Modern social science history is the natural result of politics with party systems and extended or universal suffrage. It has not really abandoned a concern with power. If public opinion counts, rulers must count the opinions of the public.

What does all this have to do with historic designation? When we preserve an historic building because it was the site of an important past event, we are going far beyond those who simply write about the event. We are commemorating it; we are perpetuating a monument to it. So the question can legitimately be raised, just whose event was that? In the context of which power struggle is the event perceived to be important? If new power struggles are on the horizon promising to rearrange the significance of old power struggles, since history is usually written (or rewritten) by victors, will such a monument not constitute part of the ongoing power process and be, perhaps, one impediment to power change?

Social science history usually falls into the realm of the quantitative or of systems analysis, or both. Any single artifact relevant to it would normally have to be representative of a whole genre of similar artifacts, or else occupy a uniquely pivotal place in a complex system such that the meaning of the place could be fully understood only by reference to the whole system. It is possible to make meaningful designations of historic buildings with such referential significance, but not without a great deal of prior research and analysis and after-the-fact explication. Currently funded studies do not evaluate the historic value of buildings with these kinds of historians' criteria in mind. The current process has a quality of mindlessness. The conclusion might well be, do it more or do it less—which is to say, do it better or do not do it.

Much of the debate over historical preservation, when its motivation is not simple conservatism, refers to the sentimental value of buildings. Architects are also, of course, interested in having samples of their work preserved. They do not insist that every building ever designed by an architect be preserved, but they do want the preservation of outstanding examples. Implicit is aesthetic judgment, not only about individual buildings but also about the general appearance of neighborhoods or whole cities. Historical preservation is supposed to contribute to a city's beauty.

What ought to be taken into account is the cultural relativism of definitions of beauty. Consider the following tabulation of different definitions of beauty in Western culture:¹

1. *Beauty is the quality of a thing, intrinsic, integral, unique—and also inef-fable and incommensurable.* This standard could be highly selective. However, in Detroit almost every church seems to be unique so that every substantial church along Woodward Avenue between downtown and the city limits has been designated.
2. *Beauty is human emotion (e.g., pleasure), or psychological reaction.* (Tastes differ!)
3. *Beauty is an attribute of perception; it is in part a creation of the gestalt, of the way we codify and react systematically to, the way we organize, sensual stimuli.* It follows again, that perceptions differ. Also, to achieve or retain a desired gestalt, only a few key buildings may be necessary.
4. *Beauty is a social norm, or the quality in a social symbol that binds the individual to the group or polity.* Beauty as social ritual or reinforcement of social values may be an instrument of conservation, control, or suppression, and may not be hospitable to new creativity.
5. *Beauty is a channel of escape from social pressures (i.e., as in carnivals) or from some component of one's inner self that does not speak for all the self.* Sometimes this escape is from the social order to the uncodifiable and ephemeral, and from abstract rule to emotion.

Art forms may clear away the old to make way for the new, or they may provide a temporary holding action for people on the make. Usually the latter forms are borrowed and eclectic. Late 19th-century nouveaux riches saw beauty in borrowed power and grandeur, something out of the past to indicate stability in time, and so they built imitation palaces on Fifth Avenue, in Buffalo, Newport, Detroit, or Chicago's White City. Suburbs of the 1920s, with their Swiss chalets and miniature Tudor houses, carried out this theme on a more modest scale. Beauty was borrowed form, grafted prestige.

In 18th-century rococo architectural forms, movement was held lightly in tension by orderly boundaries, expressing an ideal of moderation and balance

but also permitting freedom. Classicism in architecture occurs when society has found a form of balance, a discipline which is meant to last.

However, art and architecture may express the heat and dust of effort, movement, and aspiration. Alfred Kazin once said that art was synonymous with energy, change, disturbance.²

6. *Beauty might be play, to express spontaneity, purposeless creativity, or purely for personal and social display.* Again, tastes differ.

7. *Beauty may be metaphysical truth, or a token of the fundamental ground of Being, or an isomorph of Nature.*

In the 19th century, people often made a fetish of tangible disparate material things because things, like cash, were of the moment, of the moments that were serial and therefore precarious. Paintings were sometimes icons to Nature because the 19th-century western world was really at war with Nature—that is, it was at war with time and death. Buildings often reflected the poignant hubris of this battle.

For some American poets and critics between about 1910 and World War II, definitions of beauty changed because the nature of perceived reality changed. Perhaps eternity was not beyond but hidden somewhere deep in the fact and in the moment, whether that moment be felt and known with sharp clear precision, as in some modernist forms, or deeply imploded, or amplified through time-binding, through the weaving of riches from past and future into the present. Death, said Wallace Stevens, is the mother of beauty because it turns us back to life, to the grain of experience, to the intensity of the now.

Emphasis on beauty as “now” and “now” as beauty would—were it heeded—impede the planar thrust, the bulldozing momentum of developers hell-bent for the future. But it would also imply a less-than-passive role toward architectural forms inherited from the past. On the other hand, beauty has been defined as truth assented to by man. The assent might not be of will but rather of sensibility—a finer discipline.

8. *Beauty might be at the peak or most intense or central point of relationship—between person and object, between various elements of a social and symbolic situation, or between all the elements that make up existence in any given nation, culture, and era.* There are times when those relationships have so changed, or must change, so that the symbols at the peak must change.

Obviously, no group battling for historic preservation on aesthetic grounds has considered in such a systematic way the philosophical premises and social psychology of its aesthetics. But the preservation of particular buildings on aesthetic grounds assumes one or another of these definitions of beauty. Any kind of beauty is not as good as any other kind of beauty; that is, it is not enough to say that any definition may be used. Aesthetics and their exemplification are profoundly intertwined with other aspects of culture, which are

profoundly correlated with structures of, or struggles over, power. Whose definition of beauty is being employed, however unconsciously, signals who has the power.

When historic preservationists come into a community from the outside to impose a standard of aesthetics (or simply to impose conservation or conservativeness about the built environment), this is tantamount to cultural imperialism. I am struck by the way the speeches and literature of the national preservation movement deliberately ignore the qualifications of local professional planners. In a community where a white minority imposes its aesthetic standards on a black majority, even though political power rests in the latter group, can there be any question about who really has the power? This is apart from, or in addition to, the usual issues of gentrification and displacement.

Our buildings, like our clothing and furniture, speak volumes about us. Buildings, especially, are part of public discourse. Not only the parts of a city, its individual buildings, but also their juxtaposition and collective arrangement constitute a symbol system voicing the culture, anthropologically speaking, that permeates that city. The words “city” and “civilization” have similar derivations. Great cities are symbol systems for whole civilizations. When civilizations change, as ours is on the brink of doing, their symbols must also be changed.

The instruments for altering cultural symbolism may work in unexpected ways, as when a window tax significantly altered fenestration or the invention of the elevator altered building heights. The new U.S. tax laws affecting preservation may have unexpected consequences. On the other hand, they may lead to indiscriminate preservation, and the whole preservation process could degenerate into a scramble for tax shelters. Given a 15 percent investment tax credit for 30-year old buildings, and a 20 percent credit for 40-year old buildings, the result might be wholesale conservation of extant structures and forms.³ The monetary incentives for preservation could result in buildings standing shoulder to shoulder in resistance to any major alteration of the urban landscape. On the other hand, repeal of tax penalties for demolishing historic buildings might encourage new development in older cities. Either way, there is plenty of room for abuse. The crucial question is who dominates the process, with what values? Politics are everywhere.