

Historical Preservation

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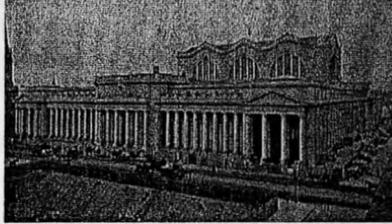
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III

Historical Preservation By William Lodge (Graduate Student)



When any building is torn down, something is lost. Sometimes the loss is the house where a family grew up, sometimes it is where your grandpa went to school, or your mom and dad married, and sometimes it is where a familiar product was invented. The history of a building tells the story of who built it and those who occupied it, stories that are lost when that building is no more.

The desire to get rid of old buildings for new ones encourages a “culture of destruction” that makes it easier to tear down even more buildings.¹ Such a culture is not a healthy culture. While it is not possible to save every building, a balance must be reached. Just as an ecosystem works the best when there is a balance of species, the built environment of a city works the best when there are enough older buildings to give the residents a link to their past, as well as newer buildings that provide for the needs of the people who live here. New buildings cannot meet every need.

Every structure built by humans has an expected life span, and choices made during construction have an effect on how long that life span is. The Pyramids in Egypt have survived for thousands of years, but they are an exception. Other ancient structures survive, but they are few in number, and many, like the Parthenon in Athens and the Coliseum in Rome, are no longer useable. Except for those lost by fire or natural forces, the end of a building’s life occurs because of a choice made by its owners. Some structures are demolished, while others are neglected until they collapse. Often this decision is based on economic grounds. Some buildings are unique enough to be saved from demolition. Others are saved because of the history connected to them. Others, with neither history nor uniqueness attached, are demolished in order that newer buildings might take their places.

In the past, demolishing old buildings equaled progress to Americans; old was not valuable, it was just old. If it is measured in that way, progress means a loss of continuity. Further, progress means the loss of some of the nation’s greatest public structures. At one time, New York City possessed one of the country’s great landmarks, Pennsylvania

¹ Anthony M. Tung, *Preserving the World’s Great Cities* (Potter: 2001) 1

Station. Here the Pennsylvania Railroad delivered passengers into the heart of Manhattan. Unfortunately, the early 1960s saw the last of Pennsylvania Station. The people of New York did not want to lose this public place, but in the end there was no way to save the station. It was not until 1965 that laws were enacted that could be used to preserve landmarks.²

The decisions that led to the loss of Pennsylvania Station were taken by the Pennsylvania Railroad with no thought to how New York residents would be affected. Pennsylvania Station's fate was decided as early as 1955, when air rights above the Station were sold by the Pennsylvania Railroad, meaning that the property was open for development. After the development rights were sold, it was inevitable that economic pressures would lead to the destruction of the station. Pennsylvania Station could have lasted a long time, but it was destroyed after 53 years.³ There is a new Pennsylvania Station, but it is below ground. Essentially, the new station is a basement. The Pennsylvania Station of 1910 to 1964 was a temple.

Pictures can give an idea of what it was like to enter the city of New York by way of this Pennsylvania Station. This was a building modeled after the Roman Tepidarium, or bathhouse, at Caracalla, except that the station was 20 percent bigger. The roof of the main waiting room was far overhead. Large iron beams made into arches held it up. The roof was made out of hundreds of glass panes. The effect was very much like that of a cathedral, with the arches forming a cross up above, and glass letting the light shine through. The main waiting room was 278 feet long, 102 feet wide and 147 feet high.⁴ "Through it one entered the city like a God," architectural critic Vincent Scully wrote. "One scuttles in now like a rat."⁵

This modern Roman Temple was built by the Pennsylvania Railroad to provide direct access to downtown New York for its passenger trains. Pennsylvania Station was a place where the coffee shop counters were made out of marble.⁶ Twenty granite eagles decorated the outside, above columns higher than some buildings. Many citizens of New York did not want to give up the station, but there was no legal way for citizens to fight the demolition of such a public landmark. In 1962, the idea for a New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission was new.⁷ In the 1960s the tearing down of an old building was progress. Old was worthless. "If you want to preserve Pennsylvania Station, you have to buy it," New York architect Norman Jaffe was told by fellow architect Phillip Johnson.⁸ There was public support to save the station, but not enough. In the end, it was demolished.

Pennsylvania Station was lost, but not lost in vain. In the same way that Rachel Carson's publication of Silent Spring helped create the modern environmental movement, the fight over Pennsylvania Station helped create the modern preservation movement. A few short years later, Grand Central Station, just a few miles south, was

² Tung, 361

³ Kevin Walsh, *Forgotten New York* accessed at:

<http://www.forgotten-ny.com/STREET%20SCENES/Penn%20Station/penn.html>

⁴ Peter Moore, *The Destruction of Penn Station* (Distributed Art Publishers: 2000) 17

⁵ William Middleton, "Penn Station Lives!" *American Heritage of Invention and Technology* (Volume 13 Issue 3, 1998) 55

⁶ Moore, 15

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ Lorraine Diehl, *The Late, Great Pennsylvania Station* (Houghton Mifflin: 1985) 19

threatened. This time, the preservationists were ready. Allies such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis helped publicize their cause.⁹ Grand Central Station survived, and it is unlikely to be threatened by demolition anytime soon. Similar, smaller battles are fought all the time throughout the United States. When they are won a part of local history is saved. When they are lost, so is a part of local history.

In 1984, Leon Krier wrote, "Sixty percent of German buildings survived the Second World War. Only less than fifteen percent of these survived the industrial plans of the last thirty years".¹⁰ The big idea of urban planners was to replace old buildings with new ones. As Jackie Onassis said, "A young country, constantly re-forming its image of itself, the United States tore down too much. We saw great buildings and cherished small neighborhoods disappear. The voice of preservationists was a lonely voice, powerless against the mighty commercial interests."¹¹ However, the preservation of historic buildings was not new in the 1960s. In fact, the beginnings of the preservation movement date back more than a century.

If there was a birthplace for historical preservation in the United States, it was at Mount Vernon. George Washington's estate was in his family until 1850. At that time it was offered to either the United States government or the State of Virginia for \$200,000. In 1858 Mount Vernon was purchased by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. They were a private group, and they still run George Washington's home today. George Washington was such a revered figure that it seemed fitting that his home be preserved. The way it was saved set a precedent regarding the preservation of noteworthy structures. In general, governments were not going to be involved in efforts to save history. It was going to be up to private groups to save historic buildings.¹²

In the same area of Virginia as Mount Vernon is Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States. Like Mount Vernon, Monticello has also been lovingly preserved. However, the Monticello a visitor sees today never existed in Jefferson's lifetime.¹³ It wasn't finished in its current form until after his death. According to Stewart Brand, Jefferson, perhaps because he was a widower, was able to continually rebuild the house. "There was no wife to say 'you pull down one more wall and I'm out of here.'"¹⁴ A part of Jefferson's estate that was not often mentioned by tour guides are the slave quarters. Unlike the rest of Monticello, they were not preserved. Attempts are being made to reproduce some kind of representation of them, but it is difficult to re-create a landscape when so much has changed. Monticello and Mount Vernon were slave owning estates, but the groups that run them had decided not to focus attention on this fact. Jefferson (and Washington) as a slave owner does not fit into American mythology. However, it is likely that the slave quarters were not preserved not out of a desire to hide the presence of slaves but because there was no interest in doing so. At one time there were many examples of places that housed slaves. Why preserve something so common? Add to that the lack of interest in telling the stories of African

⁹ George H. Douglas, "What Was Grand About Grand Central" *Locomotive and Railway Preservation* (Issue 43 September/October 1993) 25

¹⁰ Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn* (Penguin Books: 1995) 82

¹¹ Douglas, 25

¹² Brand, 95

¹³ Brand, 44

¹⁴ Brand, 43

Americans in the century following the American Civil war, and the lack of preserved slave houses is hardly surprising.

Not every building's road to preservation is easily mapped. For example, the house on Arch Street in Philadelphia known as the Betsy Ross House may not have been lived in by Ms. Ross at all. There is evidence that the story of her sewing the flag was created for the American Centennial in 1876.¹⁵ It may not be the house Betsy Ross lived in, but it is an example of a small colonial house such as a seamstress might have lived in. Without the mythology there is a good chance the house would have been torn down. The Betsy Ross House has been preserved, but like Jefferson with Monticello, Ross never saw a home like this. Today the house is exposed on all sides. In the past it was more or less a row home. This does not negate the preservation of the house, even if the story of Betsy Ross is a myth. However, like Monticello, it is impossible to entirely re-create the past.

The preservation of famous homes saves knowledge of how people lived in the past. Many former homes of presidents have been saved. The evolution of Monticello can teach much about who Thomas Jefferson was. Mount Vernon tells a similar story about George Washington. Both Presidential homes were added onto by their owners, and the revelations about their characters are fascinating. Washington added a two story porch to the side of the house that faces the Potomac River. It has been called the nicest place in America to sit.¹⁶ Washington made Mount Vernon "the best added-on-to American house of the 18th century" according to building historian William Seale. Washington the builder adds to the image of General Washington and President Washington. Without the evidence provided by his preserved home, Washington the builder would not be as accessible as he is to Americans today.

Sometimes there is an effort to recreate the setting of a historical building. Sometimes there is no effort to recreate the past. Instead, the goal seems more to be to add a touch of the past to a modern street setting. Sometimes, only a part of the older building is saved. Facadism is a term that means the only original part of a building is the exterior that faces the street. For example, Lit Brothers department store in Philadelphia was renovated in 1989. The inside was changed, but the Victorian era facade was preserved intact.¹⁷ Is this preservation? Many would argue it is not, but in this case the alternative was demolition. If all that can be saved are the outside walls it may be worth it. An extreme example of facadism is in Lake Havasu City, Arizona. In 1969 developer Robert P. McCullough bought London Bridge for 2.46 million dollars. He then shipped the bridge from London to Arizona. However, McCullough did not ship the whole bridge. He shipped the stone facing, the handrails, and all the other visible parts, later reattaching them to a poured concrete shape.¹⁸ It looks like the old London Bridge, but is this really London Bridge? Is this the London Bridge that Dickens wrote about? If it were not saved in this form the bridge would have been destroyed. But is it still the place where Dickens walked? This question might be better answered by a philosopher rather than a historian or an architect, but it is the kind of issue that preservationists struggle with constantly.

Sometimes only pieces of a building can be saved. There were twenty-two stone eagles that sat high above the entrances to Pennsylvania Station. Many were saved and

¹⁵ James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (Simon and Shuster: 1995) 31

¹⁶ Brand, 39

¹⁷ Francis Morrone, *An Architectural Guidebook to Philadelphia* (Gibbs Smith: 1999) 120

¹⁸ Reed Karaim, "A Bridge Too Far" *Preservation* (July/August 2001) 64

relocated. Four were removed as far away as Philadelphia. They now guard the corners of the Market Street Bridge across the Schuylkill River, near 30th street Station.¹⁹ Others remain in New York. Other pieces of Pennsylvania Station survive, if you know where to look.²⁰ Pennsylvania Station is not the only historic New York building to have a piece preserved in Philadelphia. A statue that the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens created to stand atop the original Madison Square Garden is preserved in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.²¹

Reusing buildings is not new. In fact, many buildings are being used for things other than what they were originally designed for. The Academy of Music in Philadelphia has been the home of the Orchestra for many years. However, it was not built for the orchestra.²² It was built as an opera house. The Atwater Kent museum is located in the former home of the Franklin Institute.²³

Sometimes the new use is close to the old one; sometimes it is not close at all. Still, old buildings can be adapted to serve new and exciting purposes. For example, factories are large, strong buildings with a great deal of open space inside. They have a lot of ventilation and light, as well as extra strength utilities inside them. They also have character and a story to tell. Re-using a factory gives the new occupant a nicer place to work than a suburban industrial park does, or a more interesting place to live.²⁴ A visit to Philadelphia reveals that this option is becoming popular, with many old factories now in use as condominiums.

The Lowell Mills of Massachusetts are famous in American history. The textile mills are where, in the 1840s, the Industrial Revolution became well established in the United States. By the 1970s the mill building had fallen into disrepair. Some of them were converted into housing. Others housed electronics firms. This helped revive Lowell. Instead of a decaying old factory town there was a place that people wanted to live.²⁵ Factories are well suited for conversion to other uses. They have large open spaces, and they are solidly constructed. The best thing about reuse is that it makes for interesting places to live and work. In 1932 the Quaker Oats Company built large concrete grain silos in Akron, Ohio. In 1980 conversion into a hotel began. The location helped make the hotel economically viable. It also allowed Akron to keep a landmark which otherwise might have been torn down.²⁶

The same thing can be said for Philadelphia's Reading Terminal. The last train left the station in 1984. Since then it has been rebuilt into part of the city's new convention center. Homage is paid to the history of the building. On the floor of the old train shed there are metal lines where the tracks were once located.²⁷ The headhouse, which formerly contained the railroad offices, was also restored, and now hosts the local

¹⁹ Diehl, 29

²⁰ Walsh

²¹ Morrone, 209

²² Morrone, 15

²³ Morrone, 125

²⁴ Brand, 108-109

²⁵ Marilyn Palmer and Peter Neaverson *Industrial Archaeology* (Routledge: 1998) 153

²⁶ Brand, 105

²⁷ National Railway Historical Preservation Society

Hard Rock Cafe. The restored headhouse won an award from the local preservation alliance.²⁸

Sometimes it is easy to come up with a new use for a local landmark. For example, the Bethlehem Steel complex in Pennsylvania produced steel that built some of the most famous structures in the world. The H beams in the Chrysler Building and the main gun turrets of the battleship USS Pennsylvania were made in Bethlehem.²⁹ In 1998 the last part of the steel plant closed. The Smithsonian Institute is supposed to use a part of the complex as a national museum of industry. Another part is to become a museum of steelmaking. This would allow the story of steelmaking in Bethlehem to be shown to visitors of the museum. However, the largest part of the complex will be torn down.³⁰ As of 2006, Bethlehem is still waiting for the museum to be built. If it does come about, it will be a part of a larger development that will include a casino.³¹

Lima, Ohio, used to contain the Lima Locomotive works. They were famous for the quality of their locomotives. From 1882 to 1950 over 7,750 were built, including the unique Shay logging engine. The locomotive factory eventually grew to contain twenty-six acres of buildings.³² There was an effort to save the factories, restoring them to tell the story of steam engine building at Lima. The effort eventually failed. Although there had been local interest, a great deal of money is needed when preserving a large industrial site. Because of this, few industrial sites survive the end of their working days.

Adaptive reuse of buildings can be found everywhere. On Fairmount Avenue in Philadelphia, there is an old firehouse that has become a restaurant. Even churches can become something different. On Temple's campus a small church built in 1890 is now being used by the law school.³³ Other campus buildings are also being used for purposes other than for which they were built. The Bell Building, which houses the Campus security office, was formerly owned by Bell Atlantic as their computer building. College Hall, on Broad Street, was the original home of Temple University. After recent renovations, College Hall has become part of Temple Law School. In February 1936, Sullivan Hall was dedicated by President Franklin Roosevelt as the University Library. Now, Sullivan Hall contains the Office of the University President, amongst other things.³⁴

Preserving old buildings is a form of recycling. If a building can be reused it saves the disruption caused by the demolition. For example, there is no need to find a place to dump the chunks of concrete, wood, and stone inevitably left after demolition. In fact, reconstructing an old building can save money since the demolition costs are saved with a rebuild. The difference can be between three to sixteen percent from the cost of new construction.³⁵ Sadly, the prevailing trend is to tear down rather than rebuild.

²⁸ R. M. Shoemaker Co. *Reading Terminal Headhouse Wins Award*. Accessed at: <http://www.rmsco.com/RTH.htm>

²⁹ Andrew Garn, *Bethlehem Steel* (Princeton Architectural Press: 199) 15,34

³⁰ Garn, 44

³¹ Save Our Steel, accessed at: <http://www.saveoursteel.org/MuseumdealSteel.htm>

³² Hans Houshower, "Bringing 'The Loco' to Life in Lima" *Locomotive and Railway Preservation* (Issue 31: March/April 1991) 11

³³ Temple University, accessed at: <http://www.temple.edu/maps/buildings/ParkHall.html>

³⁴ Temple University, accessed at: <http://www.temple.edu/maps/buildings/CollegeHall.html>

³⁵ Brand, 93

Usually the demolition of a building is preceded by poor maintenance. There is no fame or fortune to be had in maintaining a building, but it is necessary for its health and longevity. Owners, faced with a desire to cut expenses, will usually aim the budget ax at preventive maintenance first. As the cost of the repairs needed to make up for poor maintenance grows, new construction begins to look like a better idea than keeping the older building active. Too, the tenants sometimes move out of the poorly maintained structure and abandon the building. In general, if the cost of fixing what is needed is more than half the cost of replacement then the building will be abandoned.³⁶

Preservation sometimes can be difficult. In late 2001 the city government of Detroit was planning to demolish Tiger Stadium, former home of the Detroit Tigers. Opened in 1912, the same week the Titanic sank, generations of Tiger fans watched games there. "We like sitting in the same seats our grandfathers used," says Bob Buchta, cofounder of the Tiger Stadium Fan Club.³⁷ The last season for Tiger Stadium was 1999. As of the 2006 World Series, Tiger stadium was still standing. Current plans call for the playing field to remain as it is. However, the rest of Tiger Stadium will be demolished. Shopping and condominiums will surround the playing field. People will still be able to see where Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb played, but in a vastly different context. The space used by the fans of the Tigers will be gone.³⁸

The preservation movement saved the cities from even more destruction. The centers of cities are now likened to antiques, with people wanting to come and see them.³⁹ In the early 1960s old was worthless. Urban renewal was the way to save the cities, even as it was actually destroying them. The preservation movement changed this. Preservationists say that landmark buildings belong to the people, even if they are privately owned. As a result it is no longer so easy for the owners or operators of a building to tear down a well-loved old structure.⁴⁰

If people start thinking about preservation, they will be returning to a way of thinking that has a long history. New College, Oxford, was founded in the 14th century. The oldest building on campus dates from 1386. In 1865, the oaken roof beams were found to be rotted. This caused some concern, because even in 1865 it was not easy to find solid oak beams two feet square and forty-five feet long. However, the original builders of the hall planned for this. They had planted a grove of oaks to provide wood to replace the beams.⁴¹ Contrast this attitude about building maintenance with that shown in the Sydney Opera House. A symbol of Australia, its unique roof shells can potentially last for centuries. However, the joints between the roof shells were sealed with a material with an expected life of twelve years. No means of inspection or replacement was provided.⁴² Which way of thinking about a building makes more sense? As far as anyone knows, no new oaks have been planted by New College to replace the roof beams around the year 2345, the next time replacement beams may be needed.⁴³

³⁶ Brand, 112

³⁷ Michael Gerschman, *Diamonds* (Houghton Mifflin: 1993) 232

³⁸ Mel Antonen, "Once a Baseball Cathedral, tiger Stadium Now Sits in Disrepair" *USA Today* (10/18/2006)

³⁹ Brand, 102

⁴⁰ Diehl, 19-20

⁴¹ Brand, 130

⁴² Brand, 120

⁴³ Brand, 130

It's easy to be unrealistically nostalgic about preservation. Many places in Philadelphia date back to the beginning of the 20th century. Are they worth preserving? Some of these areas have been described as looking "more like Dresden than a preservation paradise."⁴⁴ Yet there are some places worth saving and reusing. A New York Times editorial of October 30, 1963 said "We will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we destroy."⁴⁵ Pennsylvania Station was torn down to make way for the new Madison Square Garden. In 1984, Madison Square Garden itself was threatened with demolition. Such instability cannot be good for a city. New construction is not always the answer. In fact, in the end it can cause more problems than it is supposed to solve.

Much of what feels wrong with modern life could be addressed by a sense of community and a sense of roots. The old neighborhood was a place where neighbors sat on the front porch and talked to each other. Jobs were close by, and kids walked to school. Modern society offers many advantages, but also some serious problems can occur. Many Americans want the simple life of a neighborhood, even as inner city areas that could meet the need are being demolished. Outside the cities open spaces are being turned into houses that separate rather than unite the people that live in them. People who have roots know where they belong. It stands to reason that when many different generations attend the same school the school is then better taken care of. When the local residents can tell who used to live in the house across the street, they believe their neighborhood belongs to them. Preserving old buildings can help make all this happen.

Is the preservation of neighborhoods a guarantee against social ills? Of course it is not. However, it is a direct contradiction to some of the social problems that have come with the growth of suburbanization and sprawl. The preservation of older bits of the built environment is also a way for historians to contribute some solutions to the modern world. Historians can, by studying what was, give meaning to what is and what will be.

⁴⁴ Kin Keister, Ed. "Preservation News" *Preservation* (September/October 2001) 12

⁴⁵ Diehl, 154

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