

Landmarks and preservation: worksheet n°7

Can historic preservation turn New York City into a “brownstone theme park”?

Source 1: The danger of deifying the past

I am not sure that we haven't come, in this age of preservation (...), to rely too heavily on precedent, to mistrust architecture that does not look like what we have seen before. To hate the modern boxes of Third Avenue is one thing; but it is quite another to turn New York into a brownstone theme park. When we have come to fear modernism so much that we do not allow an architect to replace a wooden window with a sympathetically designed metal one, simply because the metal one wasn't part of the building's original design, we do neither new nor old architecture any service. We deify the past, taking it out of the realm of reality and raising it to sacred status, and we scorn the present as lacking any capacity to enter into a meaningful dialogue with what has come before.

For dialogue, in the end, is what urban architecture must be about, lest whole cities turn into vast pieces of make-believe. A city evolves over time, and the city that contains not enough new buildings is as robbed of the reality of time as the one that contains not enough old ones. Not that New York has ever been in much danger of lacking enough new buildings, obviously. But it is in danger of thinking that all architectural quality, all signs of urban civility; come from what is old, from what has been preserved rather than from what has been created.

PAUL GOLDBERGER, “A commission that has itself become a landmark”, April 15, 1990, The New York Times

Brownstone: a building or house with its front built of a reddish brown sandstone, especially common in New York City, where many brownstones were built in the 19th c.



Landmarks and preservation: worksheet n°7

Source 2: Preserving historic preservation

New York City became a world leader in historic preservation following the demolition of the original Penn Station in 1963 and the threatened destruction of Grand Central Terminal shortly thereafter. Now nearly 50 years later, a public debate has emerged around whether the city is taking landmarks preservation too far. Historic preservation has become a core value of the city, and many of the city's greatest architectural treasures have been protected.

Yet even as eminent an architectural authority as Paul Goldberger recently warned that increasing numbers of landmarked buildings risk turning the city into "some grotesque version of Colonial Williamsburg on the Hudson." And New York City-bred Harvard urban economist Edward Glaeser recently published a blog posting titled "Reservations About Landmark Preservation." The criticisms focus on stifling the development of new buildings - with the hope that those new buildings will add contemporary architectural vitality (and perhaps future landmarks) and greater housing stock (and lower housing costs) - all admirable goals.

But the criticisms ignore a number of facts about historic preservation that should be kept in mind:

Historic Districts Make up Only a Tiny Percentage of the City: In New York City, there are 115 historic districts and 1,265 individual landmarks, totaling approximately 27,000 buildings - out of a total of about 975,000 buildings. The protected buildings thus make up less than three percent of the city's building stock.

Development Can and Does Take Place in Historic Districts: New residential buildings that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has recently approved include the 11-story 1 Jackson Square in the Greenwich Village Historic District, a 23-story building at 39-41 West 23rd Street, and a 17-story building at 4 West 21st Street.(...)

The City is Dynamic and Growing: New York City has continued to grow while the Landmarks Preservation Commission has designated more buildings and historic districts.

"New Ideas Require Old Buildings": This quote from the renowned urban activist and author Jane Jacobs says it best. New York's older and existing buildings provide the most affordable places to start a business or live. Galleries in old warehouses in Long Island City, small manufacturers in the Brooklyn Navy Yard's longstanding buildings, and restaurants opened by up-and-coming chefs in Fort Greene, are just some of the present-day examples of the creative ideas that are the backbone of New York's identity being born and realized in old buildings. (...)

Vin Cippola, President of the Municipal Art Society of New York, *Huffington Post*, 22/10/2010

*Landmarks and preservation: worksheet n°7***Source 3: 9/11 and the preservation of modern landmarks**

I think the battles, increasingly, are going to be fought on the grounds of modern landmarks - those buildings that were constructed in the years after the preservation movement rose to become a major force, those buildings that many of us, myself included, grew up disliking - even believing were the enemy, since some of them were the things that got built when the things we were trying to save didn't get saved. Could it possibly be that a skyscraper put up in the nineteen-sixties on the site of a block of brownstones be itself worth saving? Not necessarily, and I don't mean to say the answer to my question is a simple "yes." But it isn't a simple "no" either. There is a fair amount to say on this subject. And it is also true that our views of what matters here have changed significantly in the twenty months since September 11, 2001.

When the World Trade Center was destroyed, we saw a modern building become more deeply connected to the psyche of our city, and our nation, than any building ever has in our lifetimes. A modern building is now, in a sense, the ultimate landmark. I do not know that we have ever in this country had what we could call an architectural martyr, a skyscraper martyr, but of course that is exactly what we have now. When you see sidewalk vendors in midtown selling pictures of the World Trade Center the way they used to sell pictures of JFK or Malcolm X, when you see pictures of this building in shop windows alongside the American flag - and we still do see these things, more than a year and a half after September 11th - that tells us something about what this building has come to mean in our culture. But by extension, it affects what modern buildings mean in general, or can mean. And while of course the trade center's enormous symbolic role -is due to mainly to the way it stands, as it must, for the thousands of lives lost on September 11th, it means some other things.

It is not an accident that the World Trade Center, both for the terrorists who attacked it and for the people who mourn it, symbolized modernity. The reason that the terrorists did not go after the Empire State Building, I am convinced, is not only because they did not see the Empire State Building as representing the same kind of financial might, but also because it did not seem modern. The trade center, whatever we as architectural historians and critics might have thought of it, advertised the promise of modernity to the world. To most of the world, these towers represented the modernist idea, in its most perfect, most fully realized form. And since to the attackers, modernity was an evil that has to be abolished, the towers, as the ultimate symbol of modernity, were the ultimate target.

Now, they are mourned, and they are beloved (...) The new associations people have with these buildings have to change the way in which we think of modernity. It is now, more than ever before, American. It has now come to stand for the life that we want to protect, as much as the Capitol and the Pentagon and the Lincoln Memorial. Modern architecture has never been intimately tied into the identity of this country, but it is now. The terrorists have managed to do what no architect, no architecture critic, no preservationists have yet been able to do, which is to make this country, this culture, cherish a piece of modern architecture and think of it as representing the national ideals.

Paul Golderberg, "On Historic Preservation", *Lecture to the National Trust for Historic Preservation*, May 29, 2003

<http://www.paulgoldberger.com/lectures/13>

Landmarks and preservation: worksheet n°7

Source 4: New Buildings that embrace the old

Samuel Tredwell Skidmore House at 37 East Fourth Street in the East Village



Before renovation and the construction of the 15-story rental apartment building next door *After the construction of the building next door*

New York City has some curious-looking streets, where elegant old brownstones sit cheek by jowl with shiny glass towers. And with a number of unusual developments under way in Manhattan, the city might come to resemble an even more exotic jigsaw puzzle.

Some striking newer buildings are ones that — for one reason or another — wrap around older buildings. Sometimes this is done because renters in the existing building refuse to accept a developer’s offer to buy out their leases, or else the owner thinks that he has a better plan for it. In other cases, a building has landmark status and cannot be torn down. This clearly presents the biggest challenge for developers and architects, at least in terms of the permitting process.

Take, for example, the Samuel Tredwell Skidmore House at 37 East Fourth Street in the East Village. This Greek Revival row house, which has three floors and a big attic, is named for the businessman who built it in 1845. It was granted landmark status by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1970.

In 2006, the commission approved a plan to build a 15-story luxury rental apartment building next door, where the lower stories would wrap around the back of this landmark.

Elisabeth de Bourbon, a spokeswoman for the Landmarks Preservation Commission, wrote in an e-mail message that the commission had received very few requests over the years from developers who wanted to wrap a new building around a landmark. “The challenge is to determine whether the new structure is compatible with the landmarked building,” Ms. De Bourbon wrote. She said such a decision was based on an evaluation of the new structure’s size, materials and architectural details. “It also would have to relate well to the historic building and in some way speak to it,” she added.

Peter Fine -the New York developer that plans to build the apartment building on a parking lot that it owns next door to Skidmore House -said he wanted to build something that would preserve the flavor of the old row houses that have defined this neighborhood since the 19th century. Mr. Fine has already spent \$600,000 in stabilizing Skidmore house, which is vacant, and renovating the exterior. He does not know how much he will ultimately spend. “Too much,” he said.

From J Alex Tarquino, “New Buildings that Embrace the Old”, *The New York Times*, October 3, 2007

1) Explain why historic preservation is controversial. Explain the expression “brownstone theme park” (Sources 1 and 2)

2) Using source 4, show that historic preservation can limit urban development but do not stop it.

3) Explain the following sentence about the consequences of 9/11 on historic preservation in New York City extracted from source 3 “The terrorists have managed to do what no architect, no architecture critic, no preservationists have yet been able to do, which is to make this country, this culture, cherish a piece of modern architecture”

4) Explain why historic preservation should be preserved in New York City according to Vin Cippola.

5) Can historic preservation turn New York City into a brownstone theme park? Support your answer.