When the Present Becomes Past
By Richard Longstreth

The Federal Legislation of 1966, which transformed Historic Preservation into a national movement, also bore rather ominous implications for the traditional concept of progress. Although not directly stated, an underlying rationale for the National Historic Preservation Act was that contemporary achievements in architecture, planning, and other fields that shaped the built environment were inferior to those of the past.

Regret over the loss of old buildings had been voiced in the United States since at least the mid-19th century, but that sentiment was generally subsumed by the belief that what replaced them would be “better” and indeed necessary if the nation was to advance. The properties that were preserved, through organized activity or otherwise, tended to lie outside the mainstream of development: in bypassed quarters of the city, in towns themselves bypassed, or in depressed rural areas. Historic resources in places considered prime targets for more intense, “improved” development stood little chance of survival.

The 1966 law was a benchmark not only because it reinforced the belief that more of the built environment should be preserved than traditionally had been the case, but also because it laid the groundwork for protecting many places that stood directly in the path of “progress.” For the first time, a nationwide system of checks and balances was created to mitigate what were then major thrusts in development: highway programs, urban renewal, and subsidized housing. Thus preservation no longer had to be confined to peripheral areas; it could become a significant factor in planning for the future.

The rise of preservation as a proactive movement was fueled in part by the understanding that old things can continue to function in practical as well as culturally enriching ways. However, the impetus for protecting large segments of the past also was bolstered by a dislike for work of the present: shopping malls and commercial strips, new residential tracts and high-rise apartment complexes, office and industrial parks, and the ever more ambitious roadways that served all of them. Reacting both to modernist design and the very nature of decentralized development, preservationists often found widespread support for their assertions that contemporary building lacked the character, scale, variety, and even the sense of purpose possessed by the standard products of earlier generations. New things were not rejected altogether, yet it was believed that stringent constraints were necessary if such work was to assume a respectable form in historic areas. Confidence in the new was tentative at best.

Twenty-five years later, of course, much of what was then seen in the present tense has begun to assume the aura of the past. From the perspective of commercial real estate investment, properties then new are now beyond their prime, if not completely outmoded. Institutional owners may take a similar view, particularly with buildings such as hospitals, which must adapt to fast-changing technologies. The residential subdivision that attracted young married couples in the early 1960s now houses people nearing retirement age or may even be host to a markedly different kind of population. Seldom does the landscape created during the post-World War II era still seem young. The changes that have occurred may be more a matter of perception than reality, but often the fabric itself has been altered in conspicuous ways, sometimes beyond the point of easy recognition.

Popular interest in the environment of the recent past is thus, not surprisingly, on the ascent. While the primary thrust of this phenomenon may be fueled by nostalgia, a concern for rethinking the substance rather than just resurrecting selected images of this legacy also is on the rise. Calls to address the issue are more frequent than they were even a decade ago and less subject to dismissal as eccentric offshoots of preservation. Campaigns have been launched in a number of communities to protect mid-20th-century buildings, even whole districts. Much of the initiative comes from people in their late 30s and 40s who have witnessed the destruction or denaturing of work that they remember as new from childhood. For others who were infants or not even born in 1966, probing into the mid-20th century may seem as natural a course of action as protecting the work of earlier centuries.
Under the circumstances, no serious obstacles may arise to block the preservation movement from embracing the recent past; however, ample indication exists that this shift in outlook may remain outside the mainstream of practice for some time to come. Indifference, if not open hostility, to the mid-20th century could persist, paralleling attitudes that long festered toward the Victorian world. Like many other people, preservationists are inclined to think of a work as “historic” when it not only differs from present tendencies in design, but also represents ones that were ostensibly better. The products of the recent past, on the other hand, tend to be seen simply as no longer new and are still tainted by association with a world that people would like to improve. Victorian development likewise was scorned as early as the late 19th century, when proponents of the academic and City Beautiful movements were certain that their own agenda in shaping the environment was far better. Several decades later, both eras were debunked by modernists who saw the previous 100 years as bestowing a legacy on the nation that was wrong in fundamental ways. Not until the 1950s, when the impact of modernism itself began to be questioned, did a concerted effort take form to protect work beyond the neoclassical period.

At present, many preservationists, young as well as not-so-young, view the recent past as an alien environment. For them, the vast landscape created during the mid-20th century seems antithetical to the places they seek to protect. The strength of these feelings runs deep, affecting the core of preservation policy and practice. The root question is thus whether the movement can succeed in turning serious attention to the kinds of work that it has ignored, even vehemently opposed. Can what has been cast as an affront to the senses, a blight on the landscape, become regarded as an inheritance worthy of protection? The matter is hardly a trivial one; it entails the capacity of preservation as a viable force in managing a major portion of the built-environment places that make up much of the world as we know it. If the movement is to meet this challenge, a number of changes must be undertaken, not just in routine activities, but in attitudes concerning what preservation is and the degree to which it can play an active role in shaping the future.

Removing Taste from Decisions

Among the most fundamental changes for which there is an urgent need is the expunging of taste, or current aesthetic predilections, as a force in decision making. While taste is not an official criterion for listing historic properties, anyone who has worked in the preservation field knows that it is an underlying factor and may surface openly to influence the debate. Preservation has long been affected by contemporary aesthetic concerns, and although there is nothing wrong with people working to protect things they find appealing, this sentiment must not supplant professional judgment. Tastes vary; tastes change. Historical significance, which embraces tangible no less than intangible realms, must provide the basis for consistent, even-handed, and professionally valid evaluation.4 Otherwise, strong arguments can be made against as well as for almost any cultural resource.

Matters of taste are usually not expressed as such; they tend to be coded in jargon or made implicit rather than explicit in statements. The disguise becomes much more thinly veiled, however, when the resources in question are considered recent. Then, taste may indeed emerge as the dominant force. In places where a distant past (by American standards) retains mythic proportions, even work from 1900 or 1910 can be seen as a lesser sequel to “old and historic” traditions, rendering the entire 20th century as an epilogue.5 Where the 20th century is acknowledged as a more significant contributor to the past, nervousness may still exist toward all but the most purportedly stylish examples erected within the last 50 to 75 years. Initiatives undertaken in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area over the last decade well illustrate such attitudes at play. Washington's local record in preserving work erected since 1930 is impressive; few communities have accomplished more in this realm.6 Yet some of these efforts have entailed open conflict among preservationists, with results that have compromised the process. This problem is by no means unusual; it can occur anywhere unless responsible parties are frank in exposing subjective criticism for what it is and reaffirm historicity as the basis for evaluating work of all periods.
During the mid-1980s a grass-roots effort to secure landmark designation for the Falkland Apartments (1936-38), located just beyond the District of Columbia line in Montgomery County, Maryland, was assailed by a small legion of preservationists. The complex, it was maintained, was of debased design, with a trivialized use of Georgian motifs endemic to run-of-the-mill “suburban architecture” from the mid-20th century. This “ordinary” group of buildings was mere “public housing”; to consider it historically significant would undermine the true objectives of historic preservation. The facts that any form of housing may possess historical significance and that this complex was undertaken for middle-income households; that it was one of the first garden apartment projects realized under the Federal Housing Administration’s insured mortgage program, which effectively injected the housing-reform concepts of Clarence Stein and Henry Wright into the marketplace; that it was much publicized in its day and influenced many subsequent endeavors nationwide—all appear to have eluded the professed experts.7

About a year later a similar assault was launched against Washington’s Governor Shepherd apartment house (1938-39), an important work of a local architect, Joseph Abel, who gained national prominence for his integration of avant-garde design principles with the practical requirements of multiple-unit housing. The thrust of the accusations had a familiar ring: the building was “ugly;” it was not a “pure” example of the International Style; Abel did “better” (that is, better-looking) buildings at that same time. Ignored were the significant place of this work in the emergence of modernism locally and elsewhere in the United States; the ingeniousness of its plan, drawing from recent work abroad to provide an unusual degree of spaciousness in efficiency units; and the scheme as a benchmark in the maturing approach of its architect.8

In both cases, historicity was given scant account by those arguing against designation. The past presented by them was not one founded on thorough research or a command of the particular subject; it was an assumed past, tinged heavily by personal taste. The assailants also conveniently ignored the applicable criteria, instead making comparisons with internationally renowned work of the period. Had the demands for significance made on the Falkland Apartments been the actual ones required for landmark status in Montgomery County, it is doubtful whether any property could pass muster.

Ironically, when considered from a national perspective, the complex ranks among the most significant properties in the county, but arriving at this assessment necessitates more than connoisseurship. The subject of 1930s apartment buildings may be considered “safer” than it was a half dozen years ago as the work is now more than 50 years old, but the problem of taste remains acute for properties of more recent vintage when a constructive precedent has yet to be established in the field. Major monuments of the post-World War II era—a Lever House or Dulles Airport—are accepted by the preservation community in large part because of the enormous amount of acclaim they have received.9 Likewise, key structures of the space program are of such obvious importance to events of the past several decades that it is impossible to dispute their historical merits.10 An occasional roadside building of a type now so rare that it might as well be a survival from ancient Rome also can elicit sympathy. However, most representative work of the same period exists beyond the threshold of knowledge or concern. The campaign to save a much less exotic design such as the Vermont National Bank’s Burlington office (1958) is extremely, rare.11 For most preservationists, such buildings simply are not thought of in historical terms, but rather as the sort of thing that led to creating historic districts in the first place—an intrusive, discordant legacy that the movement has stood stalwartly against.

Even when properties of the recent past receive protection—more often as contributing parts of a historic district than as individual landmarks—changes may be allowed that would never be tolerated in older buildings. In Alexandria, Virginia, local, state, and federal preservation agencies repeatedly snubbed efforts to prevent an extensive remodeling of a 1932 Ford Motor Company plant designed by Albert Kahn, who ranks among the most distinguished architects of industrial buildings to have practiced in the United States. The building’s rarity as an intact example of his work from the period on the East Coast, combined with the protective covenants established when it was transferred from federal
to private ownership, should have assured a safe future for this contributing property to Alexandria’s historic district. Furthermore, the proposed new project not only reduced the original to facadism-in-the-round, but also included condominiums rising high above the parapet that were so incompatible in character it seemed unlikely the design would gain approval. Yet representatives of the organizations involved made it quite clear that they considered the matter inconsequential. Dubious claims that the building had lost its integrity were later substituted by assertions that it was not a significant contributor to the heritage of Alexandria or Virginia. Such condescension toward the recent past is commonplace. Often there is no controversy; the fact that a double standard is employed and that a historic resource is trivialized beyond recognition may not even enter the minds of preservationists.

Improving Scholarship

Equally important and closely related to the matter of taste is the need to improve the role of scholarship in preservation. When sound historiographic practices are adequately emphasized, the question of significance is seldom difficult to resolve. But as taste has long been an undercurrent in preservation, so scholarship has generally been accorded marginal support. Decision makers in the field often view historical research and analysis as a hurdle through which the process must pass rather than a vital and dynamic engine of the process itself.

Probably more by accident than design, preservation did emerge as a vehicle for discovery when hundreds of jobs were created as an outgrowth of the 1966 act. Many of these positions were taken by young scholars who believed that much of what was worth saving had been ignored by academe as well as by their elders in the field. By the late 1970s preservation had become an important contributor to understanding the history of America's built environment, based on the serious study of previously neglected subjects and new methods developed to analyze them. In this way, the movement began to have an impact on academia as well as the public arena. Preservationists' initiatives changed how people thought about the world around them.

During the last decade, however, preservation has lost its drive as a stimulus to learning more about the built environment. Despite the emphasis the National Park Service has given to “context”—an elementary part of historiographic method—survey projects tend to focus on the gathering of data rather than on its substantive interpretation. The mood among many preservationists has become increasingly skeptical and reactive toward types of historic resources that are not well recognized. Supplanting original research, the printed word has been relied on to codify what (and, by implication, what should not) be protected. Publications on the built environment are thus used less as a stimulus to further study than as a substitute.

Similarly, preservationists are often nervous about scholarship in progress because they lack the judgmental base to determine its merits on their own. These circumstances are especially detrimental to saving resources of the recent past because so much research remains to be done in this realm. The need for thorough research is unquestionable, but the passive mode of waiting for others to prepare the way is unwarranted. We still have enormous gaps in our knowledge of work from all periods. The fact that scholarly literature on 19th-century retail facilities, for example, is meager has not prevented campaigns to document and protect hundreds of them nationwide. Claims that preservationists must be told what to preserve, that they are incapable of determining historical significance without some formularized recipe, erode the field's credibility. Had the movement been characterized by such timid attitudes a quarter century ago, it never would have amounted to much of consequence.

Seeing History as a Continuum

Another argument often raised against directing preservation effort toward the mainstream of the recent past is that insufficient time has elapsed to form a truly historical perspective. Such thinking ignores the fact that scholars of the built environment have increasingly focused on phenomena of the postwar years. In the pursuit of understanding a subject, it is pointless to quibble over time frames.
History is a continuum; it has no end. The issue is not when something becomes “historic,” but instead when an adequate historical perspective can be gained on a particular kind of phenomenon. If the topic entails patterns or attitudes that are sufficiently different from those now common, it can be analyzed as a thing of the past.

The threshold of historicity can differ with the work in question. For example, it was not difficult to prepare a landmark nomination for architect I. M. Pei's Third Church of Christ, Scientist (1969-71) in Washington, D.C., primarily on the basis of its formal design qualities, for both thinking and practice in that realm of architecture have changed markedly since. For the historian, the particulars of inquiry always vary with the subject at hand. Each aspect of the investigation process, from the kinds of questions posed to the analysis of material gathered, should be framed accordingly. But such specific adjustments do not alter the fundamentals of technique. To the contrary, examining the recent past should be guided by the same basic historiographic methods used to study earlier periods.

Improving Management Attitudes

Even if scholarship supplants taste, much of preservation’s potential to protect the recent past will go unrealized unless there is an equally emphatic shift in attitudes toward management. The more widespread an activity preservation becomes, the more numerous and diverse are the parties involved, the more complex the problems and the greater the competition among initiatives themselves. All these factors make sound management practices imperative for setting and maintaining standards, establishing priorities, disseminating information, and coordinating efforts. Assuming these responsibilities is important not just for government agencies, but for private-sector groups as well if broad-based programs are to succeed.

But management also has become an excuse for passivity. Many preservationists in the public sector, at least, have come to believe that all of the major challenges in preservation have been successfully met. The role of the bureaucrat, in other words, is no longer to launch major new initiatives, but to maintain current ones. From this viewpoint, preservation can rapidly devolve from an opportunity to a task: the more numerous the historic resources, the greater that task. The fact that so much of the built environment dates from the mid-20th century makes the challenge of documenting, assessing, and taking steps to protect it seem a chore in some official circles. The unstated, but emphatic, reluctance of at least one state preservation office to consider nominations to the National Register of Historic Places of almost anything from the 20th century may be extreme, but it is symptomatic of an outlook found in many other quarters as well.

If the role of management in preservation is to remain purposeful, it must be directed anew toward expanding the base of activity. The field has only begun to make more inroads on the policies and practices that affect the environment. Among the numerous challenges in this sphere, none is as pressing as the need to broaden the conservation of historic resources before they have to be retrieved from states of neglect and decay. Much more can be saved by this method, but the most compelling reason is to foster preservation’s role as a basic instrument of planning that affects places that are an integral part of many people's lives. Preservation must become seen generally as a natural course of action to protect the valued qualities of landscapes that most people may take for granted but that will not maintain their desirable qualities without a concerted effort and that cannot be replaced in kind, should they be lost.

Planning Ahead for Change

The imperative to expand the role of planning in preservation is nowhere more apparent than in dealing effectively with the recent past. As places dating from the mid-20th century begin to be studied in earnest, many of them will indeed prove historically significant. Among the definitive components of the decentralized, low-density landscape created during this period are the freestanding, single-family house and garden apartment complex, surrounded by open space to a degree never before attained in
major metropolitan areas. The pattern is urban in its extent, complexity, and scope of infrastructure, yet it also embodies notions of individual independence in density and spatial freedom that are traditional to small towns and rural areas. Never before had such a great segment of society been able to partake of this kind of environment, nor will it again in the foreseeable future. Increases in land values, construction costs, and population size have led to a markedly denser use of land for new residential development in recent decades. Although it was once fashionable to deride mid-20th-century housing tracts, the time has come to take serious account of this legacy from a historical perspective and to understand the importance of both its physical and social attributes.

The urgency of addressing such matters is apparent when one remembers that most residential areas remain in their prime during the first and often the second generation of occupancy; that is, for somewhere between 30 to 60 years. Thereafter, confidence begins to lessen, and decline eventually assumes concrete forms. This cycle is not necessary; it does not take place in tracts that were carefully planned, with covenants governing use and appearance. Nor does decline occur in places that have instituted comparable measures at a later date. Historic district designation falls within the latter category; its effectiveness lies in generating confidence that the desired qualities of the neighborhood will remain and in enabling residents to take an active part in the process of guiding future change. The belief that ongoing investment in property is warranted, coupled with supportive policies from local governments and lending institutions, can affect the future of residential areas more than any other factor.

Since the proliferation of historic district designations began in the 1960s, the process has demonstrated how effective it can be as a safeguard against neighborhood decline. Indeed, the surge can be attributed largely to the realization among residents that historical designation can give them more of a voice in shaping the future of where they live than almost any other governmental mechanism. But while numerically impressive, the gains encompass only a tiny percentage of the nation's eligible housing stock. Vast areas developed since the mid-19th century lie unprotected, and many of them have experienced needless decay. Many more, including tracts built after World War II, will follow suit over the next 25 years if preservationists do not broaden their sights. To achieve this goal, the preservation process should be emphasized as an incentive for continued investment, not as a set of unwarranted, time-consuming restrictions. While the history of a neighborhood can engage the interest of many residents, a participatory plan to safeguard the things they value spurs concrete action.

Maintaining Business Districts

The future of residential areas is closely linked to that of the commercial precincts developed to serve them. Decline in a neighborhood business district may not at first have a measurably adverse impact on the property values of nearby dwellings, but the effect will be felt in time and may become
devastating. Despite this integral relationship, the record for long-term performance of outlying commercial districts is poor. Places that maintain their prime as trade magnets for more than as years are the exception. Far more commonly, the district is upstaged by newer developments. After two or three decades, the stores that gave the district its initial draw begin to relocate. Strong alternative plans for commercial use are seldom devised; maintenance levels are lowered; cheap, expedient remodeling becomes the norm.

Although centers of trade situated near the periphery of urban settlement were created as early as the colonial period, most outlying business districts date from the 20th century. The number of such places has increased enormously since 1920, as has the range of their size, configuration, character, and specialized functions. Many examples are modest in scope, serving the routines of a localized audience. At the other end of the spectrum are business centers that afford a full range of goods and services: places intended to rival the function of the urban core began to emerge after World War I and include Jamaica on Long Island, Upper Darby near Philadelphia, the Uptown district in Chicago, and Hollywood in Los Angeles. Since that time, the collective importance of outlying business districts relative to the downtown area has steadily risen to the point where they are overwhelmingly dominant. Yet the fact that, unlike the traditional urban center, few outlying districts experience substantive renewal carries ominous implications for the stability of metropolitan areas as a whole. Most places of this kind created during the interwar decades or even the immediate post-World War II years have experienced substantial decline. There is good reason to fear that, a quarter century hence, many outlying centers that are currently flourishing will be of marginal value, if they continue to exist at all.20

Numerous initiatives have been launched in recent decades to revitalize outlying business centers. Often the strategy has focused on cosmetics, to little effect. In other cases, measures taken have been more profound, yet still failed as remedies. By the mid-1970s, for example, Clarendon Center, which had emerged only a quarter century earlier as one of the primary business districts in northern Virginia, was considered outmoded—a place no longer able to compete with newer regional shopping malls. Demolition of existing structures began in 1974, first for a Metro subway station, later for the more intense, profitable development the rapid transit line was predicted to stimulate. Little now remains of the old district, and relatively little has been built in its stead. The idea that Clarendon could be preserved, with new specialized shopping facilities in place of its original ones, was summarily dismissed by local officials.21

The loss of places such as Clarendon is as unnecessary as it is unfortunate, for preservation has demonstrated that commercial districts can far outlast their normal life spans. Since it was established in 1980 the National Trust’s Main Street program has given new vitality to more than 750 business centers and has provided an indirect model for many hundreds more. The program has succeeded both in bolstering economically fragile districts and in reviving ones that conventional wisdom would have dismissed as hopeless. Indeed, as a strategy for revitalization, the program stands as the single most effective one that has been applied to existing retail centers in the United States since the Depression. To date, most of the communities targeted have been rural centers of comparatively modest size; only a handful of outlying districts in larger communities have benefited.22

The need for a major initiative to stabilize and reinvigorate outlying business centers grows continually as these places account for an ever greater percentage of the nation's aging commercial fabric. The Main Street program affords an important model, not only in economic terms, but also in underscoring the importance of history rather than taste as a guide. Many places that have participated in the program would never qualify under the canons of beauty that once pervaded the preservation field. Fifty years ago the term “main street” was used as a synonym for visual chaos, tawdriness, stagnation, and even decay.23 Preservationists must work just as hard now to overcome stereotyped views of mid-20th-century arterial development, to explore how many of these places can and should stay economically sound on a long-term basis, and to understand their historical significance in the context of urban decentralization.
Taking an Inclusive Approach

To support more than an occasional foray into the mid-20th century, preservationists must begin to look at the landscapes involved and to collect information about them in a systematic and comprehensive way. Many state and locally sponsored surveys are hopelessly out of date; often only a small part of the 20th century is covered; sometimes it is not included at all. Survey programs would do well to follow the example of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, which sets no time limits on the detailed and inclusive surveys it has been conducting, community by community, for more than 15 years.\textsuperscript{25} The task ahead is enormous for those parties that have insisted that “history” begins only 50, 75, or 100 years ago. But no state can afford to defer the matter; a major new initiative is needed now no less than after passage of the 1966 act.

Another important and much more quickly achievable step is to eliminate denoting a period of significance for protection purposes in historic districts. Such a change should not undermine the recognition of a given time span that may be the seminal one for a district; it would, however, recognize the fact that significant work seldom ceased altogether in subsequent years. Thus proposals made for modifications to all properties would be evaluated on a consistent basis, irrespective of date. A 1960s storefront in a commercial area developed primarily between 1880 and 1915 would be assessed on its own intrinsic merits—that is, as it relates to its own type and period as well as to the local context—rather than being automatically dismissed as a noncontributing entity. The process would not, of course, be aimed at saving every shred of fabric. The underlying concern would remain the character of the district as a whole. At the same time, the method would be less formulaic and recognize that designs that diverge from the dominant patterns can nonetheless be enhancing.\textsuperscript{26}

Under current practice, historic districts tend to become artificially homogeneous over time, with many small pieces that are not of the "right" period removed or altered beyond recognition. Sometimes, even important individual works are lost in this way. The Penn Theatre (1935), designed by the renowned New York firm of John Eberson and long a major landmark in Washington’s Capitol Hill neighborhood, was demolished except for fragments of its façade simply because the historic district's period of significance was determined to have ended at 1920.\textsuperscript{27} The remains have been denatured to the point where it is difficult to decipher much about their past or even that they are of the past. The collective result of this and other nearby projects is that a whole era in the historic district's past is being expunged, as if it never existed.

The 50-year provision of the National Register is much less crucial to change because newer properties can be nominated when they possess exceptional significance at the local level. This provision can entail a broad spectrum of properties and be quite inclusive: the largest, most acclaimed middle-income housing tract erected during the post-World War II era in the vicinity of Long Beach, California; a 1960 bank that was the first and, for a long time, the only tall commercial building built after 1930 in Fort Smith, Arkansas; an open-air frozen-custard stand that is the last surviving example of its type in Fairfax County, Virginia.\textsuperscript{28}

Far more important is revising those local practices that give preservation its protective muscle. In some communities, little from the 20th century meets the criteria of the local preservation ordinance, just by virtue of age. In many other places, the rules are somewhat more flexible, but focusing on 20th-century resources is openly discouraged. Such a posture can be tantamount to aggression, creating greater mischief than benign neglect. The fundamental problem with any demarcation line—100, 50, or fewer years—is that it encourages people to conceive history as something not linked to the present. The framework functions as a conceptual wedge as well as a proverbial excuse for not thinking beyond designated realms.

If the recent past can be effectively addressed by preservation, the central issue remains whether the will exists to do so. The matter extends well beyond the logistics of adding yet more to the purview of an already expansive program, for the resistance to the recent past indeed appears grounded in more
fundamental attitudes toward the 20th century and preservation’s role in contemporary life. The mission of providing a sane, rational means to protect large parts of the built environment must be reinvigorated. If preservation has lost its nerve, if most of the 20th century remains ignored or disparaged, then the movement will lose ever more touch with the physical world and the people who live in it. The aim of maintaining a sense of continuity with the past will become ever less attainable, for the past as defined by preservation will become an increasingly limited and distant thing. The shift could eventually result in the insulated antiquarianism that defined most preservation efforts a century ago.

What is needed instead is an integrative, holistic view of the past, one that looks with equal seriousness at all periods, phases, episodes, and phenomena that have ceased their currency. If the record of preservation gives cause for concern in this regard, it also affords glimmers of hope. Since 1966 the scope of things preserved has expanded dramatically. There is no reason why the momentum cannot be renewed if preservationists focus more on understanding the built environment, on fostering a sense of continuity with the work of previous generations, and on a more comprehensive approach to planning. The next quarter century, indeed the next decade, will be a crucial one for what is saved and for the role this enterprise plays in our lives, as more and more of the present becomes the past.


Notes
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1. This sentiment was seldom expressed in print by more than passing inferences. For an exception, unusual too because of its recent vintage, see Allan Greenberg, “Why Preserve Old Buildings?,” Connecticut Preservation News 14 (March-April 1991): 1-3.

2. For purposes of discussion here, I use the term “recent past” to indicate a period characterized by attitudes and practices that differ in some substantial way from those now current but that remain within living memory of many people. It is, of course, impossible to establish precise points at which such a period begins or ends, but for present-day purposes, the time frame would certainly encompass the mid-20th century that is, from the 1930s through the 1960s.


4. Probably the most ambitious local project to date has been the creation of the so-called Art Deco District, comprising some 20 square blocks in Miami Beach. For a detailed account, written by the architect of the initiative, see Barbara Baer Capitman, Deco Delights (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988). Elsewhere the focus tends to be on individual properties, but seldom on post-World War II work. The Los Angeles Conservancy has compiled a list of more than 350 buildings, vernacular as well as high style, constructed in its metropolitan area between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s, and it has taken steps to save threatened examples among them. The Denver-based Modern Architecture Preservation League is perhaps unique in addressing modernist work beyond the realm of Art Deco as its primary mission.

5. For further discussion, see Richard Longstreth, “The Significance of the Recent Past,” APT Bulletin 23, no. 2 (1991): 12-24. Here, as well as in that essay, I use the term “historic” to denote both tangible and intangible attributes of things. The practice in preservation of limiting “historical significance” to the associational realm and using “architectural significance” to define the physical realm (where does one place works of engineering, gardens, parkways, or the cultural landscape generally?) is arcane and needlessly divisive because knowledge of one is often central to understanding the other.

5. Ironically, the “historic” landscape that is the focus of some studies often has been shaped to a considerable degree by preservation efforts over the past century, yet such changes tend to be ignored. As an example, see Christopher Weeks, Where Land and Water Intertwine: An Architectural History of Talbot County, Maryland (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). The author pays scant attention to how places in this Eastern Shore area have been transformed through gentrification beginning in the late 19th century. Many properties whose character owes at least as much to that still continuing process as to their initial period of development are presented as if they had changed little since the time when they were built. Scholarly studies focusing on how preservation has altered the historic landscape are rare. For an exception, see William Butler, "Another City upon a Hill: Litchfield, Connecticut and the Colonial Revival," in Alan Axelrod, ed., The Colonial Revival in America (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), pp. 15-51.
6. Since 1980 protection has been secured for numerous buildings erected in the Washington area after 1930, including a public school in Greenbelt, Maryland (1936-37); a radio transmitting facility in Wheaton, Maryland (1939); National Airport in Arlington, Virginia (1939-40); and, in the District of Columbia, two prototypical drive-in shopping centers (1930, 1935-36); the Greyhound Bus depot (1939-40); model low- and middle-income housing projects for blacks (1935-38, 1942-46); and the region’s first branch department store (1941-42) in the District of Columbia. Landmark applications also have been filed for warehouses serving the city’s two leading department stores (1936-37, 1937-38). See also notes 7 and 16 below.

7. Only one building (the most elaborate) in the complex secured designation; most of the other units won a reprieve through an agreement between the owner and the county’s Housing Opportunities Commission. The complex will remain rental property through the year 2010, by which time arguments over its historical significance will, one hopes, be in the distant past.

Less controversy surrounded the slightly earlier designation of Colonial Village in Arlington (1935-37), which served as the prototype for the Falkland and many others of its kind nationwide. Currently, landmark status is being pursued for another important Arlington example, Buckingham Village (1937-41).


The building failed to win designation and was demolished soon thereafter, constituting one of the major losses of an individual work locally during the decade, as may be gathered from James M. Goode, Best Addresses: A Century of Washington’s Distinguished Apartment Houses (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), pp. 347-50.


In this case, local decision makers, many of whom had some exposure to advanced course work in preservation, displayed an unusual degree of sophistication in avoiding the issue of taste. At the same time, a primary reason for saving the building was cited as being the rarity of its kind at the local and state levels. Had a number of comparable examples existed in Vermont, the initiative might never have advanced very far.

Sometimes efforts of this kind focus on land use concerns, pure sentiment, or other forces rather than an interest in the work itself. See, for example, Thomas W. Sweeney, “Detroitors Protest Ford Auditorium Razing Plan,” Preservation News 30 (November 1990): 10.


13. A number of historians who have been instrumental in the study of vernacular architecture during the last 10 to 15 years began their careers in state preservation offices. A by no means comprehensive list would include Catherine Bishir, Edward
Chappell, Chester Liebs, Carl Lounsbury, Orlando Ridout V, Dell Upton, and Camille Wells. While some scholars of distinction remain with preservation offices, many more have left, a trend that reflects conditions discussed in the following paragraph.


The extent to which the salient issues can get clouded in such cases is illustrated by an opinion piece written by architecture professor and Washington Post columnist Roger K. Lewis. See Lewis, “Save a Shopping Center? What's Next?,” reprinted in Preservation News 26 (November 1986): 5. From a national perspective, the complex in question stands among the most historically significant commercial properties in the city. It has been saved and was restored in 1991 to serve once again as a locus of trade for the community.

15. A comprehensive bibliography on the subject would be vast; only a few indications of the scope of work are given here, and for purposes of brevity, I have not cited any of the numerous articles or scholarly papers that address aspects of the subject.


17. Certainly there is no need to modify the broad criteria established for the National Register of Historic Places to encompass the recent past.

18. Extensive use of such covenants began to be devised as a key component of planned residential communities at the turn of the 20th century. These provisions were then considered an important marketing tool for attracting purchasers, and they are a central reason why the communities remain highly desirable places of residence today. Study of the subject from a historical perspective has only begun. See, for example, Patricia Burgess Stach, “Deed Restrictions and Subdivision Development in Columbus, Ohio, 1900-1970,” Journal of Urban History 15 (November 1988): 42-48; William S. Worley, J. C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), especially chapters 5 and 6; and Roberta M. Moudry, “Gardens, Houses and People: The Planning of Roland Park, Baltimore” (M.A. thesis, Cornell University, 1990).


20. Little has been published on the history of major outlying business centers developed during the 1920s. The comments offered here are derived from some 20 years of firsthand observation in a number of these places and from recent research for a forthcoming study of decentralization in retail development between the 1920s and 1950s.


22. For background on the program, see Linda S. Glisson, Main Street: Open for Business (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1984); Main Street at Work, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1985); and Richard Wagner and Ted Miller, Revitalizing Downtown, 1976-1986 (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation and Urban Institute, 1988). The National Main Street Center established an urban demonstration program in 1984; however, activity in this sphere has been limited. One of that program’s most innovative projects has been in the Nob Hill district of Albuquerque, revitalizing arterial development from the mid-20th century along former U.S. Route 66. For background, see City of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Economic Development Department, “Nob Hill Study,” prepared by Mary Rose Szoka, February 1985.


25. Equally significant is the fact that the findings of these surveys are published and widely distributed to a local audience. To date, the Rhode Island office has issued more than 40 such books. Examples that give a detailed discussion of the recent past include Richard Longstreth, East Providence ... (1976); Stephen J. Roper, Pawtucket ... (1978); Ellen Weiss, North Kingston ... (1979); Robert Elliot Freeman, Cranston ... (1980); Robert O. Jones, Warwick ... (1981); and Win McKenzie Woodward and Edward F. Sanderson, Providence ... (1986). A few published surveys focus on communities of comparatively recent vintage and include work built through the early 1950s. See, for example, Historic Preservation Inventory and Planning Guidelines: City of Las Vegas (San Francisco: Charles Hall Page and Associates, 1978).

States and localities west of the Mississippi River have tended to be the most aggressive in examining the recent past, a mode some preservationists elsewhere attribute to the absence of much that is older. People prone to such snobbery should remember that their European colleagues traditionally have felt much the same way toward almost everything in the United States.

26. Regulations drawn under these circumstances would have to ensure that the concern for inclusiveness did not lead to ossifying the district and hence preclude needed and acceptable changes to its fabric. Perhaps a moratorium of 10 to 20 years could be provided so as to avoid arguments over alterations to more or less contemporary work.

27. At the local level, the Capitol Hill Historic District has never had an official period of significance. The end date of 1920 was determined through an appeals hearing in a federal tax incentives case and stood as precedent because of the unique relationship between “local” and “state” preservation programs in Washington. The problem, nevertheless, extends far beyond such special circumstances.

28. To my knowledge, no one has proposed nominating any of these properties to the National Register; however, some effort has been made to protect the Virginia building.