HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN A THROWAWAY SOCIETY
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This year’s Western Reserve Symposium addresses the question of historic preservation in the United States, and specifically, in Northeastern Ohio today. The title of my talk, "Historic Preservation in a Throwaway Society," requires some amplification at the outset. What is it that I mean by the two terms: "historic preservation" and "throwaway society"?

"Historic preservation" means to me the saving, restoring and continuing presence of the physical sites and structures of the past that are determined to have historical value. There are different kinds of saving and several recognized techniques of restoring and these range from the stabilizing of ruins, to the continuing use and the adaptive use of a structure that contains the evidence of many prior changes, to the thorough restoration of a building to a particular time in its history—usually for museum purposes. Historical value derives from what is known of the site or structure, an event or action that took place there, an important historical figure or group that is somehow linked to this physical entity, and the structure or landscape itself that may represent rare surviving factual evidence of an architectural style or technological innovation. If I were to evaluate any older structure in historic preservation terms it would be by determining first the historical value, measured against a scale of national significance; and then surveying the extant physical material. A building is not historically important just because it is old and a place where a historical event occurred may be of only marginal interest if nothing remains that would enable the present generation to join itself to the prior action. Historic preservation demands both physical evidence and historical value, each alone are insufficient. Together they provide meaning to the past for the present that goes beyond mere memory and that supplements written accounts.

"Throwaway society," on the other hand, is a term that is open to broader interpretation. Indeed, when the title of this symposium was agreed upon, I think most of us assumed that we were talking about the present day—the era of styrofoam and plastic and the tons of disposable paper products that are immediately convenient but offer long-term environmental nuisance. Well, the more I have thought about it, the more I am persuaded that it is a term that has application throughout American history. And, I think we have to understand this point, if we are to truly understand the historic preservation movement in the United States.

We have been a throwaway society since the first major colonial
settlements of the early 17th century. The desperate struggle for survival in the colonial period left precious little time for anything but the establishment of a foothold in the new land. Both the natural landscape and the native aboriginal peoples were brutally treated by the invading caucasian settlers who seized whatever they wanted so as to make it their own. With the rise of industrialism in the 19th century, this pattern of wastefulness and inhumanity continued as the nation pushed westward to the Pacific Ocean.

From the standpoint of our European cousins, "throwaway" might equally be applied to our ancestors themselves. Despite the sense of veneration that seems to surround those of us who claim direct descent from those who came to the American colonies in the 17th century, the harsh truth is that most of them were misfits where they were and few were missed by those who remained in the mother country. We are a nation of the displaced from Europe, Africa and Asia and that may account in part for the violent and mobile nature of American society.

If we accept this premise, I think it helps to explain how the historic preservation movement has tended to grow in our still very young country.

Let’s say we date our national beginnings to the period of colonization and the Jamestown settlement of 1607. That gives us a scant 383 years of written history. As a nation, we’re only 214 years old! Do we have a past? Yes, we do. Are there historical features in that past? Of course there are. The colonial period established the basic pattern that would lead us to a federal system of government. The rebellion against Great Britain produced our first national heros. The Civil War hardened us into early maturity by its unspeakable horror. Westward expansion, rapid industrialization, massive immigration and international intervention from the Spanish American War through the Cold War have added to the making of something that is distinctively "American", separate and apart from our antecedents. Yet, we are still an emerging culture. We are still shaping ourselves as a people and only time can bring this process to fulfillment; not that it can ever be brought to a static conclusion—or at least not until we cease to exist as a culture will that occur.

What all of this means for the historic preservation movement in the United States is that it is a participant in the process of shaping American history. It is on the scene as the national story is evolving and the decisions that are made by historic preservationists, therefore, determine to a significant degree, the subject matter and the manner in which this story is told.
We can see this in the very history of the American historic preservation movement. It is generally accepted that the first key manifestation of it in this country occurs just prior to the Civil War when Ann Pamela Cunningham formed the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association and undertook the heroic struggle to save George Washington's home from dereliction. Both Virginia and the United States were indifferent to its fate at that time. It became, however, and it remains today with every intention that it be so, a shrine to the "father of our country". From the 1850's to the mid 1950's American historic preservation tended to follow either the Mt. Vernon approach; that is, the saving of a structure and site because it was associated with a major person or event, or, the romantic approach, where a structure or site is saved because it evokes a sense of nostalgia for what is perceived to have been an idyllic past. Wallace Nutting's "Chain of Houses" in New England, for example, or on its largest scale, Colonial Williamsburg during the period of its forming and, indeed, to some degree, today, leap to mind.

Along the way, a searching historical method emerges. Norman Isham's careful documentation of early Connecticut houses, William Sumner Appleton's concern for preserving original evidence at the original site, his effort in saving vernacular architecture in New England and his lifelong devotion to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, certainly stand out.

From the late 19th century on, beginning with Norman Isham, there is a serious effort made to record older buildings by detailed, measured architectural drawings. This reached its formalizing with the establishment in 1935 of the Historic American Buildings Survey in the Department of the Interior, which in its first phase lasted until the beginning of the Second World War. Resumed in the 1950's, under its founder, Charles E. Petersen, it continues today together with its sister organization, formed in 1969, The Historic American Engineering Record. Along the way, more sophisticated techniques have been developed to supplement architectural measured drawings, with rectified photography and photogrammetry.

The 1960's saw a significant broadening of interest in historic preservation, due primarily to Federal funding and intellectual activism. The former, through the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, provided the funds to encourage the creation of state historic preservation offices and to underwrite programs of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1949 as a non-profit corporation to save historic properties in the private sector as the counterpart to the National Park Service.

Intellectual activism pushed the movement out of an essentially
elitist focus on shrines, romanticism and the houses of the well
to-do, and into the physical evidence of everyday, workaday America. Industrial archeology and commercial archeology appear on
the scene in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Workers housing,
diners, fast food restaurants, roadside architecture and transport
systems in general, and just about everything considered anathema
by the old guard historic preservationist was embraced by the new
guard. Although thought to be more clear sighted and less
sentimental, the latter has become just as drenched in nostalgia as
the former.

Most of us who were involved with the broadening of scope would
still defend its essential premise that true historic preservation
must represent the full range of human activity within a culture,
in some significant way, if it is to represent that culture at all.
Yet, I think, we must concede that there is a climate of chaos and
confusion that has come with it as well. There seem to be no
priorities, vague standards, an avoidance of selectivity.

Let me give one example that troubled both the late Eric Johannesen
and me. You will recall that Eric served as a member of the Ohio
Historic Sites Preservation Advisory Board. In June, 1989, that
body, by a 6 to 4 vote, approved the nomination for listing in the
National Register of Historic Places the site where the Navy
dirigible USS Shenandoah crashed on the morning of September 3rd,
1925. The lighter-than-air ship had been caught in violent winds
and cross-currents and broke into three sections on farm lands of
the rolling hills of Noble County. This was indeed a spectacular
accident and a great tragedy. Of the 43 persons on board, 13 were
killed in the crash, including the airship's captain, and others
suffered severe permanent injuries. The captain, Lt. Commander
Zachary Lansdowne was a native of Greenville, Ohio. The issue
here, however, is not whether or not the event occurred--no one
disputes this fact; the issue is: what does this site have to do
with historic preservation?

On June 9, 1989, Johannesen and his colleague on the board, David
R. Bush, wrote to the National Register office in Washington, D.C.,
to express their minority opinion opposing the listing of the
Shenandoah crash sites in the National Register of Historic Places.
They pointed out what is obvious to anyone who visits the sites
today that nothing survives on them but farmland, the debris having
been cleared away following the accident, and that the nomination
depended upon the associated historical values of the airship and
Captain Lansdowne, neither of which were site specific.

Johannesen wrote again on September 11, 1989, to Washington and
received a reply dated October 23, 1989, from the Chief of
Registration of the National Register. After reassuring Johannesen
that the Shenandoah case was not precedent setting, the letter continues, and I quote:

In evaluating historic sites, one of the five property types recognized by the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, the factors to consider are, 1) did an event (or series of events) important in American prehistory or history occur at the site, and 2) does the site retain integrity from the time of the occurrence of the event? If the answer to both questions is yes, then the property is eligible for the National Register. While the significance of the event does not depend on the integrity of the site, the National Register eligibility of the site *does*. Deciding whether the site retains integrity is neither a simplistic nor a non-analytical undertaking.

The key word here is "integrity". The integrity of the site with respect to the historical event of the crash itself was lost when the broken airship's parts and the victims were removed from the scene. The integrity of the land remains. That is, it was farmland before the accident, farmland during the accident and it is farmland today. But this agricultural integrity is utterly and completely irrelevant to the historical event.

Again, toward the end of the letter, the Chief of Registration states:

The SHENANDOAH Crash Sites were not listed in the National Register because Zachary Lansdowne and his crew died there; rather, the sites were found to qualify for the National Register because the deaths of these air pioneers had a significant impact on the course of American military history. Recognition of the sites of this event clearly falls within the scope and intent of the National Register of Historic Places.

What this amounts to is historic preservation by inference and, in my judgement, this is totally misguided. As I said at the beginning of this talk, we must have both the historical value and the physical evidence or we do not have a historic preservation equation.

Part of the responsibility for this confusion resides in the intellectual activism within the historic preservation movement that I mentioned earlier. What happened, beginning in the 1960's, was not only the inclusion of non-traditional building types, such as factories and hamburger stands, but the enlargement of scale to include not only individual structures but groups of structures: the "historic district" concept, as it has come to be known to us
today. More recently the historic district concept itself has been expanded to a point where consideration of historical value has been lost due to concern for other important environmental issues.

The essential cause of this historic preservation approach owes little to Colonial Williamsburg or Historic Deerfield, both of which are quite comprehensive in their own way but remain historical in their focus. Rather, the urban renewal pressures of the 1950's, largely fostered by architects and planners who were trained in the anti-historical ideology of the Bauhaus and CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) forced those who had any interest in seeing that the new grew in harmony with the old to take vigorous corrective action. Unfortunately, much was lost to urban interstate highway connectors, and so-called urban renewal (that usually replaced low-rise blight with event more hideous high-rise blight) before countermeasures could be put into effect. In the eagerness to modernize America's cities and to make them more compatible with the dominant motor vehicle transportation system, older buildings were perceived by the planners as nothing but road blocks and symbols of decay. The developers who followed in the wake of the planners—who really hadn't thought out the full ramifications of their grandiose schemes—had virtual carte blanche in what they did to fill the void and most were encouraged to ignore the historical in favor of what was perceived to be new and innovative.

All of a sudden historic preservation found itself in the midst of what many saw as a national environmental catastrophe and the movement took on dimensions that went well beyond what historic preservation had been thought to be about, even by the intellectual activists. It was now a case of fighting the seemingly mindless proponents of progress, who had the civic and economic power, in order to save what remained of our fast-disappearing urban heritage. Old buildings became important simply because they provided a way to thwart blatant, misguided change. Instead of historical value, environmental impact became the governing concern. From this counteractivity have come neighborhood conservation and main street programs that are designed to retain the essential character of a community, a neighborhood or a commercial district irrespective of whether or not it possesses any specific historical importance. In the best examples of this approach, Savannah, Georgia, for example, where there is a serious historical basis, this has not meant excluding new construction. But it has established guidelines that new construction must comply with the scale, texture, materials and character of the larger urban scene in which it is placed.

Historic preservationists were enraged by what was happening in their cities and towns in the post World War II period, and this
led to action, that went beyond their control. Most of the problems that have resulted have centered around the economic value of real estate. When proposed twenty years ago, for example, the transfer of air rights over a threatened urban historic site seemed like a good idea. One wonders now if the end result of taller adjacent structures, in terms of scale relationships, really achieves the desired objective of a harmonious urbanscape, even if the strategy did save the historic building itself.

In the free market economy in which we operate, the developer plays a very specific role. He seeks to improve existing property in order to produce the highest possible financial return. His function in the overall scheme of things is to generate new wealth through the construction of structures and the creation of spaces that meet a contemporary need and produce a financial return for his investors. This is the economic arrangement that caused our American cities to grow in the first place. Most of the urban structures historic preservationists seek to save today were created in this way, by entrepreneurship. The constraints within which a developer operates are set by the local, state and federal governments and, traditionally, have been limited to the protection of public health and safety. If there are to be further controls, as there indeed should be for truly historic property, these controls, too, must be established through the governmental process. It is not the developer’s primary responsibility to determine what is or what is not of historical importance. That task resides with the collective society which must make the decision regarding what it considers to be historic and how much effort it wishes to expend in preserving its heritage. The historic preservationist assists in the process of making the collective determination and is usually best at doing so when the case is built upon solid historical evidence.

The economic argument when used by preservationists is a risky one and can be a two-edged sword. In the first place, if a site, building or cluster of buildings is truly historic, economics should not be a consideration. The only consideration is the retention of the national patrimony. There is no price tag that anyone can assign to the profound evidence of our heritage. It is either saved or it is not. In the second place, preservationists are often poor economists. Saving and maintaining historic structures is expensive and there is no way around this fact. It is cheaper to knock down an old structure and to build a new one, generally speaking, despite the impression given by some rather convoluted and specious arguments to the contrary that preservationists have created in recent years.

However, since, as I’ve pointed out, the increased scale that emerged to counter urban renewal isn’t really dealing fundamentally
with historic values at all, but with environmental impact, then we have considerable latitude with respect to many of the structures within our misnamed historic districts. Away from the clearly recognized historic building, which deserves and must receive the highest degree of historic preservation treatment, regardless of whether or not it is economical to keep it, the nonhistorical or marginally historic building may be adapted to other uses, altered or added to in compatible ways that assure its continued use in a community. It is in this area that the developer can be seen as a partner and colleague, rather than as an antagonist. Unhappily, this distinction in terms of qualitative historic value in relation to a site is all too often overlooked or misunderstood. And, we find in these instances preservationists creating confrontational scenes with developers over property of no particular historic importance.

In summary, we find ourselves in a world of confused values and misapplied energies. What we must do in order to bring ourselves out of this situation is:

First, create a more precise, mutually agreed upon, definition of "historic" and how it applies to historic preservation. A hierarchy of historical sites and structures could then be developed from this, which is of paramount importance in developing effective preservation strategies for the future.

Second, it must be explicitly recognized that a historic site must combine both historic value and significant surviving physical evidence.

Third, we must devise alternatives to historic district designation that clearly identify the main reason for saving those areas not dependent upon historical values, but that should be saved for their environmental integrity. I would suggest here the terms "conservation district" and "economic incentive district" as possibilities that would keep us from the present condition where historical values are inflated or falsely suggested to squeeze non-historical areas into the historic district concept.

And fourth, there should be continued effort on the part of historic preservationists, developers, urban planners and investors to make the most reasonable and effective use of our older communities, within the context of the hierarchy of historic structures mentioned a moment ago.

A situation where there is a polarization of historic preservationists, on the one hand, who want everything frozen in time, and developers, on the other hand, who want no constraints to new
construction, is fundamentally unhealthy for all of us. We must work out a solution that will keep what is truly historic for future generations and will encourage the new that expresses a contemporary generation's highest values and adds continually to our cultural enrichment.

No society can survive if it seals itself in its past. And, no society will survive with dignity and integrity if it severs itself from its past. The challenge we must face squarely is that of resolving the two very different forces of contemporary need and historic preservation in order to establish a society that combines the two in a vital mix that will carry us forward in the decades ahead.