CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST
A series edited by
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Presenting the
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Reflections on the History of Historic Preservation

Immediately on moving into the White House, Ronald Reagan replaced the Thomas Jefferson portrait hanging in the Cabinet Room with one of Calvin Coolidge. Then he set out to restore Silent Cal’s 1920s, rather as if the last sixty years of history were a movie that could be run in reverse. That Reagan intends to dismantle civil rights, environmentalism, the welfare state, and the entire panoply of New Deal and Great Society reforms is a commonplace. But he and his team also want to scour away a host of secondary programs that are no less pernicious, in neoconservative eyes, for being less well known. One of these is historic preservation, which the right accuses of constraining the “free market” from demolishing the nation’s built inheritance whenever it is profitable to do so.

The charge is accurate. Indeed, the historic preservation movement was born, over a century ago, in opposition to a free-wheeling, free market era, when profit-seeking Americans—as disrespectful of the past as of the environment—routinely demolished what prior generations had constructed. Historicide, like ecocide, had become embedded in the culture.

Slowly, some groups began to resist these attitudes and activities. Boston Brahmin anthropologists sought to rescue the remnants of Indian cultures. Old New England families preserved their homesteads. Descendants of southern planters fashioned legislation to prevent the marketplace from demolishing their homes. By the 1920s these gentile classes had carved out some historic enclaves and preserved them from the onrush of development.

The great boom of the late 1940s and 1950s threatened to reverse, even erase, these small victories, as a remorseless juggernaut of development crunched its way through the nation’s heritage. The patricians broadened their

BY MICHAEL WALLACE
movement, rallying a coalition of disparate social groups to contest this historicidal onslaught. Launching a brilliant counteroffensive against the bulldozers, this preservation coalition achieved passage of the Historic Preservation Act in 1966, a law that began to curb the rampage. In the next decade the movement allied itself with a broad spectrum of anticorporate forces ranging from populist neighborhood conservationists to environmentalists and achieved a further series of legislative and judicial triumphs.

For a time, in the 1970s, it seemed as if the entire culture had done an about-face. Community groups and corporations, banks and courts, state governments and private developers—all supported "historic preservation." Thousands of organizations set about saving whole swaths of city and countryside from demolition, rehabilitating old houses, setting up historic districts, reusing old factories, conserving and preserving the past.

In the 1980s, however, this movement has come under attack. To the Reagan right, protecting the past is as objectionable as imposing health and safety rules on corporations. And the historic preservation movement has found its considerable victories quite vulnerable to reversal. In no small part, it will argue, the movement's current fragility stems from its recent tactics—an abandonment of militant allies, an alliance with traditional enemies. This essay will sort out the tangled history of the historic preservation movement in order to assess its critical contemporary situation and suggest an alternative strategy for the future.

In the colonial period and the seventy years of explosive growth following the Revolution, Americans evinced little interest in saving the built environment. Given the country's history to that point, this is not surprising. The European colonists had inherited little in the way of historical artifacts to preserve. The truly old remains were not theirs. Indian ruins were either obliterated (like the Indians themselves) or set aside (again like their creators) on reservations, as trophies of conquest or reminders of a barbarism now happily overcome. Each advance into the continent set transcendence of history more firmly at the heart of the national culture.

The European migrants were ambivalent about their own past. Although they honored Old World roots, they emphasized New World beginnings (a tension nicely caught in the place names they chose: New Amsterdam, New York, New Hampshire, New Orleans, New Haven, New Sweden). The American Revolution enhanced this ambivalence. On the one hand, the re-

bels, staunch republicans and good Protestants, took a historical view of their position; they considered themselves inheritors of a millennia-long struggle against aristocratic, monarchical, and priestly rule. But when the new Republic had been established, most statesmen, businessmen, and men of letters exuberantly dismissed the past. Their youthful society would shed outworn European customs and perhaps break free of the burdens of history altogether.

Certainly the new nation's ruling classes felt little need to base their legitimacy on an appeal to antiquity, as European monarchs and aristocrats did. Quite the reverse—northern merchants and industrialists proclaimed their self-made status and promoted the idea that all Americans were free to escape the past: if ordinary people believed that they were not shackled to an inherited place and could, in time, rise economically and socially, they would have no need to challenge those currently in authority. Even the southern slave planters, who adopted Walter Scott flourishes, claimed that they were "natural" aristocrats rather than descendants of a distinguished lineage—an intelligent strategy, as few of their pedigrees would have withstood close scrutiny.

As a corollary, American elites had little class interest in preserving history's residue. When remains of the past hindered the present accumulation of profit, they were routinely dispatched to the dustbin of history. Such tributes as were due republican forerunners could be made conveniently compatible with the imperatives of progress. New buildings could evoke old forms—Grecian banks and Roman railroad stations allowed a future-oriented culture to pay its respects to an honored tradition.

The majority of the population may have had different attitudes toward preserving the past. Most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European immigrants were displaced peasants and artisans who envisaged America as a Great Commons where they might reconstruct social relations demolished by the rise of European capitalism. They resisted the emerging market culture and considered land less a commodity than a homestead. Urban artisans—staunch upholders of a revolutionary republican tradition—similarly held out against dehistoricizing tendencies. Slowly, during the nineteenth century, this would change as the communal restraints and legal safeguards that had braked the emergence of American capitalism crumbled. Some small farmers would be displaced through the workings of the speculative and mortgage markets, driven west, and disconnected from traditional roots. Others, seduced into the new order by rising land values, would plunge with gusto into real estate speculation, imbibing its attendant disregard for tradition. And artisanal workplaces and communities would be repeatedly torn apart or relocated to suit the demands of capitalist development. Defeat, opportunity, and the con-
tinuing arrival of immigrant newcomers with minimal historical connections to their new locations eventually would produce a working-class variant of upper-class ahistoricism.

But for those who presided over the country’s economy during most of its early history, “progress” took precedence over preservation. As a New Yorker remarked in 1825, “We delight in the promised sunshine of the future, and leave to those who are conscious that they have passed their grand climacteric to console themselves with the splendors of the past.”

Between the 1880s and the 1940s four groups began to protest against the casual demolition of the past. The first was composed of descendants of the merchants and textile magnates of antebellum New England. By the end of the nineteenth century, these patricians found their inherited political and cultural authority ebbing away to plutocrats above and immigrants below. To restore their position the Brahmins assumed custodianship of the “American” inheritance. Banding together in genealogical and historical societies, they underlined their pedigree by preserving its tangible remains, saving threatened properties by passing the hat among members of their class. These crusades helped to crystallize a genteel sensibility that condemned the unrestrained working of the market—a sensibility all the easier to sustain because, like the European aristocrats with whom they identified, the Brahmins were living off an earlier generation’s accumulation.

Brahmins also engaged in preservation activities in the West. After the Civil War, pacification drives broke the back of armed Native American resistance, and the Plains Indians, like so many before them, were put on reservations. Hard on the army’s heels came America’s first anthropologists and archaeologists, many from the northeastern patriciate, intent on exploring the artifacts of Indian cultures. They found, to their dismay, that stockmen and prospectors had preceded them and were busily looting ruins and gravesites to meet the demands of a booming market in Indian antiquities. Using methods preservationists had worked out back East, the anthropologists bought up historical relics and transferred them to public ownership, thus fencing them off from the market. Frederick Putnam of the Harvard’s Peabody Museum, for example, raised funds from preservation-oriented Bostonians, purchased the Great Serpent Mound, and deeded it to the state of Ohio.

But the threatened areas were so vast that the preservationists soon concluded that only Congress could protect the past from the present. In 1906 they obtained passage of the Antiquities Act. The law gave the president authority to set aside public lands as national monuments, to levy criminal fines for excavating or destroying ruins, and to grant permits for field work to scientific and educational institutions. In 1916 management of federally owned “historic properties” was centralized in the National Park Service, within the Department of the Interior.

The second group of 1880–1940 preservationists were descendants of the antebellum planter class living in the backwater river and seaport towns of the Old South, some still wealthy, others reduced to genteel poverty. Like the New England Brahmins, they were preoccupied with the past, the golden days when their ancestors had been undisputed masters of the region.

In the 1920s the aristocracy woke abruptly to find itself under assault. The grillwork and paneling of the homes of the Old South had become fashionable. (This demand, like the earlier craze for Indian relics, may have been fueled by Hollywood’s national circulation of local images, first of the Wild West, then of the Old South.) Northern connoisseurs and avaricious museum directors flocked south to cannibalize the estates of the gentry. Oil companies wanted to set up gas pumps in the middle of southern towns to meet the needs of the new automobile era. Southerners organized to beat back these new Yankee invasions.

Charleston led the way. In the 1920s the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwelling Houses, composed of “society” women from the old battery district, fought to ward off Standard Oil filling stations, but steadily lost ground. Then, as the Brahmin anthropologists had done in the case of western lands, they turned to the state for support. In 1931 the ladies, supported by alarmed civic leaders, got a city ordinance passed establishing the Old and Historic Charleston District. A Board of Architectural Review was given authority to approve all changes in historic buildings in the area.

Thus was born the first “historic district” through an innovative use of zoning, itself a newly popular exercise of governmental authority. Zoning had emerged in the period between 1900 and 1920 as a way of confronting the obstacles private ownership of property presented to profitable urban investment. City zoning began by blocking uses of the land that could “ruin” a neighborhood; in New York, Fifth Avenue stores got industrial sweatshops zoned out. Initially frowned upon because it restricted property rights, zoning was accepted once it became clear that by promoting stability it enhanced
property values. In the decade after 1910, zoning underwrote the creation of exclusive upper-class residential suburbs and villa districts as insurance companies and banks flocked to invest in planned and safeguarded communities. Charleston’s law essentially zoned by building age, rather than by building type.10

The historic district device was soon copied, particularly in the South. In New Orleans, for instance, local business groups, architects, civic leaders, and property owners set out to save the Vieux Carre—the historic French Quarter. A constitutional amendment passed by the voters in 1936 empowered the city to create the Vieux Carre Commission, which it did the next year. In 1939 a court ruling established the commission’s authority to place restraints on private property holders’ rights to demolish historic buildings.11

the third preservation-minded group comprised a handful of multi-millionaire industrialists, including Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Though their products were helping to dismantle the old society, they turned to saving parts of it from devastation. Restorations such as Rockefeller’s Williamsburg and Ford’s Greenfield Village became popular enterprises among the corporate rich in the 1920s.

The superwealthy, I have argued elsewhere, sought partly to celebrate their newly won preeminence and partly to construct a retrospective lineage for themselves by buying their way into the American past. Preservation also afforded a way of carving out a distinctive cultural position within the larger capitalist class. Monopolists had little love for the competitive scramble of the marketplace. Some of these millionaires were still involved in direct capitalist accumulation; others, like Rockefeller Jr., were second generation; but all could afford to turn up their noses at imperatives that still ruled regular businessmen. The grand restorations simultaneously demonstrated their disdain for the market and their ability to transcend it.12

A fourth body of nouveaux preservationists came from the professional and managerial strata, a group that assumed a critical role in American life in the 1880–1920 period. Summoned into being by corporations and governmental bureaucracies, professionals developed an independent culture of efficiency with a distaste for the market at its core. Appalled by chaos, congestion, contagion, and class strife, some repudiated capitalism. Most, however, worked within the system to overcome antiquated and irrational practices that blocked the efficient accumulation of capital. This concern led some of them, by a variety of indirect routes, to historic preservation.13

In the 1890s some architects, landscape architects, and engineers tried to rationalize and discipline U.S. cities by beautifying them—reorganizing them around a matrix of broad avenues and monumental classical buildings. The White City at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 embodied their hope that the authority of antiquity could restrain the anarchy of modern America. They soon learned that pseudo-historical architecture alone could not generate a desirable social order.14

Increasingly, many of the new professionals sought state intervention to halt or regulate various anarchic business practices. After the turn of the century, ministers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and architects set out to ameliorate the worst offenses. Land use was a key concern. On the national level, they worked to put western land and water management into professional and “scientific” hands. This dovetailed nicely with Brahmin archaeologists’ wishes to regulate access to Indian relics and contributed to the passage of the 1906 Antiquities Act. At the municipal level, the planning fraternity was instrumental in fashioning zoning legislation, which the southern gentry adapted to preservation ends.

Slowly, alongside the corps of ladies (and some gentlemen) who had been the backbone of preservation efforts, a body of (almost invariably) male historic preservation professionals grew up. Restorationists (Rockefeller, in particular) hired architects and engineers to renovate or reconstruct old buildings. Southern gentry worked with businessmen and lawyers to forge preservation law.

It was not until the 1930s, however, when the federal government began to involve itself in preservation, that these professionals developed a semi-independent operating base. In the early thirties, the National Park Service took on professionally trained historians to do public interpretations at historic parks and battlefield sites and hired 1,200 unemployed architects to survey and record all “historic” buildings in the United States for the Historic American Building Survey (HABS). The Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired archaeologists to excavate and record sites about to be flooded by such massive river-damming programs as the Tennessee Valley Authority and set historians to work on Federal Writers’ Project Programs. And between 1934 and 1941, the Civilian Conservation Corps undertook restoration projects that employed hundreds of historians and technical.

In 1935 came the most dramatic New Deal entry into the preservation field. The Historic Sites Act authorized the Department of the Interior, acting
through the National Park Service, to acquire property, preserve and operate privately owned historic or archaeological sites, construct museums, develop educational programs, and place commemorative tablets. Almost overnight a massive federal presence had been authorized, and the National Park Service swiftly established a Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings to carry out the mandate. This Branch of History, as it was informally known, hired a cohort of historians who began planning a massive educational program linking a chain of historic sites to illustrate major themes in U.S. history.\textsuperscript{16}

The National Park Service was never able to institute a general plan for heritage preservation. It was limited by the Historic Sites Act, which reflected the approach of the traditional preservation community, particularly those responsible for Colonial Williamsburg. (A Rockefeller lawyer drafted the bill eventually adopted by Congress.) The Park Service historians did not have the power to acquire endangered property through the exercise of eminent domain. Nor could they halt the extensive demolition work undertaken by the New Deal itself through its slum clearance and roadway construction programs. Indeed, in St. Louis the National Park Service was forced to serve as a sponsor for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, an urban renewal project cum real estate scam that destroyed a historic riverside area in the name of honoring the frontier past.\textsuperscript{17}

Still, the publicly funded programs expanded the preservation movement and broadened the meaning of "historic" from its upper-class definition. The HABS project, for instance, recorded buildings with no connection to famous white men but with important meanings for local communities, and the WPA state guidebooks, commemorative markers, and collections of local lore reflected a populist conception of public history. The tendency of the rapidly growing body of state professionals, once freed from dependence on private sector employers, to move leftward was arrested by the termination of the New Deal and the outbreak of war. Federal historical programs were slashed and converted to caretaker operations or purveyors of patriotic agitprop. But the experience left its mark on the veterans of the 1930s, people who would form the cadre of postwar preservation programs.

To summarize: between the 1880s and the 1940s—in many ways the heyday of American industrial capitalism—a constituency emerged that questioned the prevailing dismissal of the past. Northern old money, southern patricians, the crème of the monopoly capitalist stratum, and new professionals in and out of government—all developed a distaste for unrestrained capitalism. Historic preservation became an emblem of that distaste: historic artifacts were not to be subjected to market considerations, partly because they were more valuable to these groups as symbols of legitimacy.\textsuperscript{18}

But if preservationists rejected conventional cultural codes, they did not succeed in overturning them. Quite the opposite: "modernist" sensibilities emerged in architecture, fashion, and the fine arts. Twenties intellectuals revered the accelerated tempo of time, the rupture of traditions, the liberating break with conservative constraints, and the exhilaration of commodity abundance. Functionalisists stripped away and cast off nineteenth-century Victorian cultur, but with the gewgaws went much of that culture's historical concreteness. And the new culture of consumption, spurred by the advertising industry, substituted novelty for memory as a cultural imperative.\textsuperscript{19} In such a culture, the best preservationists could do was declare a few sites to be historic "reservations"—off limits to developers. The larger culture tolerated these parenthesized places—New England homes, antebellum planter residences, historic battlefields, colonial reconstructions, and Indian "homelands"—partly because there were so few of them, and partly because they were so utterly irrelevant to the onrushing flow of events.

Nevertheless, by the mid 1940s preservationists were pleased with their limited gains. Moreover, the war had diminished the threat to the built environment by curtailing building programs. Still, preservationists looked to the postwar period with foreboding. They were right to worry.\textsuperscript{20}

After victory, a flood of federal money poured into urban renewal, suburban development, and highway construction. A government-fostered "growth coalition" of real estate developers and urban planners, city Democrats and suburban Republicans, bankers and construction workers, quasi-public "authorities" and corporate-dominated planning bodies, ripped up slums and "blighted" areas, replacing them with the corporate command and control centers that the new multinational economy required. The middle class left happily (or was squeezed out) and motored to the new suburbs on the new highways.\textsuperscript{21}

The impact on the historic environment was devastating. Roads were rammed through city centers, urban renewal demolished vast downtown tracts, and by 1966 fully one half of the 12,000 properties recorded by HABS thirty
years earlier had been torn down. The growth coalition seemed to revel in leveling the past. It was the Age of Robert Moses, and theorists of capitalist civilization cheered, applauding the system's willingness to destroy the old in the interest of innovation and productivity.22

The growth coalition's activities between 1945 and 1966 galvanized the various preservation constituencies. It drew them together, forced them to pool resources and expertise, and eventually led them to broaden their social base in order to resist the onslaught on the past. In a sense the bulldozer battalions created the modern preservation movement.

In 1947, responding to the quickening pace of development, preservationists organized the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings to plot strategy. The meetings included leaders of genealogical societies, amateur and professional historians, architects, archaeologists, engineers, and civic planners, but were dominated by the National Park Service professionals and the Williamsburg people. Financing was provided by the Mellon family. The council drew up plans for a National Trust that would professionalize historic site interpretation. Like the English National Trust, the new body would also assume title to historic properties whose owners could no longer keep them up, and operate them as museums.23 Congress obligingly created the National Trust in 1949. The Lilly Foundation and the DuPonts chipped in to support the new organization, but the Mellons remained the real underwriters: in 1957 they gave the Trust a $2.5 million endowment.24

The Trust acquired and managed some historic properties; got the HABS revived in 1957; and, with Colonial Williamsburg, worked to "professionalize" historic site interpretation. The period thus saw the strengthening of one of the major constituency groups of the movement, the professional public historians created in the 1920s and 1930s by private organizations and the federal government.25

What the National Trust did not do was make much headway against the 1950s' juggernaut of progress. It succeeded only in supporting the creation of more reservations and establishing itself as the organizational voice—albeit a weak one—of historic preservation. Facing overwhelming odds, the Trust was further hampered by its narrow base in a thin sliver of the upper classes.26

In the 1960s wider support for historic preservation began to emerge, rooted largely in the growing resistance to urban renewal. Some opposition came from working-class neighborhoods resisting demolition, though in this period their efforts were usually in vain. A much stronger counterforce was generated by inner-city middle-class constituencies. In 1961, for example, Jane Jacobs, an editor of Architectural Forum, organized successful opposition to an urban renewal project in the West Village.27

Jacobs, along with Herbert Gans, Edward Hall, and Ada Louise Huxtable, argued that destroying old buildings destroyed the fabric of healthy urban communities. The bleak postwar high-rise structures were inhume: their spatial arrangements shattered social networks, and their bland environmental and temporal homogeneity denied the need for spatial diversity and historical connectedness. Both the suburbs and the projects undermined people's personal and social identities (this was the period of greatest popularity for Eriksonian theories about identity crises). One supporter argued that the continuing demolition of traditional historical neighborhoods and landmarks constituted a "national emergency" because "individuals feel both more secure and more purposeful when they recognize that they exist as part of an historical continuum."28

These concerns dovetailed nicely with the cold war fears of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that destruction of the past might engender a national identity crisis that the nation could ill afford. National Trust leaders played to this concern. They warned of "a future in which America found itself without roots, without a sense of identity, with nothing to lose."29 The marriage of these concerns over personal and national identity was reflected in Jack Kennedy's discourses on national purpose and Jackie Kennedy's restoration of the White House and celebration of its historicity in television tours.

Black urban rioting soon gave power and force to these arguments. The 1964 Harlem eruption, soon dwarfed by those in Watts (1965) and Detroit (1967), had many roots, but prominent among them was the assault of urban renewal and highway construction programs on the already tattered fabric of inner-city life.30 To critiques of social scientists and protests in the streets were added the concerns of some big-city mayors who, much as they liked downtown construction, began to fear the consequences of steady population loss and the consequent erosion of the middle-class urban tax base.

While these diverse opponents eroded the prestige of the growth coalition—planners rethought their theories about urban renewal, Robert Moses began his slide from power, historic districts spread—the developers were being undercut from quite a different direction. The development of mass tourism in the 1950s and 1960s, buoyed by the new roadways and the general prosperity, made it apparent that there was money to be made by preserving the past. There had been hints of this possibility before. The conversion of historic houses into shrines often had promotional overtones. Preservationists, understandably enough, had appealed to entrepreneurial self-interest when soliciting donations. And Ford and Rockefeller had opened hotels to house the growing number of visitors to their restorations. But these harbingers were as nothing compared with the postwar tourist boom.31
In 1964, 94.5 million people drove their 34 million automobiles over 130 billion miles on their vacations and spent more than 20 billion dollars as they went. Many of those millions motored to historic sites. Colonial Williamsburg's paid attendance went from 166,000 in 1947 to nearly 710,000 in 1967, and the increase was not unusual. Old Sturbridge went from less than 12,000 to over 520,000 in the same period, and Greenfield Village passed the 1,000,000 mark in 1960. Between 1960 and 1962 attendance at all historic sites in Massachusetts went up 50 percent.32

The phenomenon transcended the big-name sites. In 1960 New York State's Joint Legislative Committee on Preservation and Restoration of Historic Sites reported: "Tourism has become big business. . . . And historic sites more and more are luring the tourist." In 1964 twenty-nine states listed tourism as one of their three largest industries. As Jonathan Daniels proclaimed, "History has become a cash crop as eagerly tended as the hope for industrial plants."33

Even the historic districts—originally conceived of as residential enclaves—proved to be wildly profitable draws. A 1964 study done for the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce found that the French Quarter brought in more money than anything except the Port itself. Tourism had made New Orleans one of the top four convention cities, influenced the decision of national and regional corporations to locate there, and accounted for much of the extraordinary strength of the city's retail, hotel, and office market. The study set a dollar value of $150 million on the city's historic architecture.34

As the evidence mounted, historic preservation began to appeal to enterprising local boosters, and small businessmen began to rethink the demolition/development approach. Beginning in 1959, for example, a young investment banker, Leopold Adler II, presided over a sharp change of direction in Savannah's preservation community. Working with a successful suburban developer, Historic Savannah employed a revolving fund (basically a line of credit from now-sympathetic banks) to purchase, restore, and resell old buildings with restrictive covenants attached. They worked out public relations themes, designed highway signs, and developed historic house museums, tour routes, brochures, visitors' centers, and restaurants and motels that carried through historic themes. It worked. Construction, real estate activity (with attendant commissions and profits), land values, tourist revenues, bank deposits, the restaurant business, and retail sales all soared. Fortune magazine was impressed: "Anachronism can be made to pay off in urban civilization."35

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y the mid-1960s, then, the original core of genteel preservationists had been joined by potentially powerful allies: middle-class professionals resisting wholesale destruction of old but viable communities and local businessmen sniffing profit in the past. But these groups held quite different perspectives. Traditionalists wanted to save old buildings for their use-value as homes, communities, symbols. Entrepreneurs were less interested in meaning than marketability. How were these traditional enemies to coalesce?

A path to cooperation emerged from contemporary objections to historic museums. The proper way to preserve the past, critics were suggesting, was to integrate it with the present. "Preservation," Ada Louise Huxtable argued, "is the job of finding ways to keep those original buildings that provide the city's character and continuity and of incorporating them into its living mainstream," not placing them in "sterile isolation."36

Thus was born the doctrine of "adaptive reuse." Historic buildings should not be mummified, but recycled. The exterior shell should be kept and the interior devoted to some profitable use. To these preservationists, unlike the DAR types, the original "aura," the building's connection to specific people and events, was unimportant. They shifted their emphasis from meaning to ambiences.

"Adaptive reuse" declared an end to the antagonism between preservation and development. Traditionalists could save and reuse instead of isolate and venerate; (re)developers could incorporate the old into the new; together they could take on the bulldozer developers and their allies in the federal bureaucracy. "Adaptive reuse" was thus a progressive philosophy in its original context, but, as we will see, by justifying "a new building in the old shell" a "modern" solution that still manages to evoke the past," Huxtable and her colleagues were on the road to legitimating the developers she had been battling so long.37

The immediate question, however, was how to forge an effective political program, a problem addressed, in 1965, by a blue-ribbon commission assembled by the National Trust and Colonial Williamsburg. The group issued a manifesto, With Heritage So Rich, condemning unrestrained growth as a danger to national identity: "A nation can be a victim of amnesia. It can lose the memories of what it was, and thereby lose the sense of what it is or wants to be." Adaptive reuse was proclaimed the solution: "Let us save what we have around us that is good, not for exhibition, not for 'education,' but for practical
The federal government was declared the proper agency to accomplish these ends.38

A whirlwind legislative campaign followed, orchestrated by National Trust Chairman Gordon Gray, a powerful man with entree into the highest congressional circles through his connections with the R. J. Reynolds family and high-level service under Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson.39 In response Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act, which wrote virtually every one of the Trust’s recommendations into law, a wholesale victory for the “adaptive reuse” approach. The law established a National Register of Historic Places, which was to list all sites, buildings, structures, and objects found by professionals to have been “significant” in American history, architecture, archaeology, or culture. It also authorized matching grants to states to further local preservation projects; required each state to develop coherent plans to preserve its historical legacy and to appoint a State Historic Preservation Officer to coordinate the program; and put the National Trust on the federal payroll. Finally, and crucially, the act created the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which all federal agencies were required to consult before demolishing properties listed on the National Register. The Advisory Council did not have authority to halt other federal bureaucracies, but the prior review process did slow the hitherto smooth workings of the highway and urban renewal machines.40

Two other 1966 acts rounded out the victory. The Department of Transportation Act blocked destruction of historic properties by five major agencies unless they could prove that there was “no feasible and prudent alternative,” and even then they were required to “minimize harm.” The Demonstration Cities Act—a major reaction against urban renewal—enjoined the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to “preserve and restore areas, sites and structures of historic or architectural value” and authorized grants of two-thirds of the cost of surveys of such sites.41

The growth coalition did not roll over and play dead with the passage of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966. For a time (1966–72) Secretary Weaver at HUD slowed the pace of bulldozing and increased that of rehabilitation (by 1972 it was three times as high as the 1955–65 rate). But soon the Model Cities program, under fierce pressure, backed away from social and environmental planning, aid to the poor, and citizen involvement. Selling out to the growth interests, the program became a public works bonanza for medium-sized cities.42

Nixon and Ford scrapped or consolidated many of the 1950s and 1960s programs (Urban Renewal, Model Cities) through the 1974 Housing and Community Development Act. The act was supposed to eliminate urban slums, and it required that low- and moderate-income populations be included in the planning process and benefit from the programs. But under the “New Federalism,” local governments were given Community Development Block Grants to subsidize private development projects and allowed to do as they pleased with the money, so local power elites sent the money flowing to convention centers, office buildings, shopping malls, and the like. This process accelerated with the 1977 institution of the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) program, which provided, as urban renewal had, federal money for land acquisition, site clearance, and infrastructure improvements. Responsibility for complying with federal environmental legislation was transferred to local governments’ hands and once again hotels and convention centers began to replace historic structures. Despite the preservationists’ victories, it was still open season on the cities.43

Faced with these ongoing challenges and responding to the climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the preservation movement expanded to include a burgeoning new urban gentry and militantly populist neighborhood conservationists, who drew energy from the black, women’s, ecology, anticorporate, and antiwar movements. By the mid-1970s the strengthened preservation coalition had scored a succession of legislative and judicial triumphs against their bulldozer enemies.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as corporate and financial headquarters flourished in city centers, demand for white-collar professional, managerial, and technical workers rose significantly (25 percent between 1960 and 1970). Most commuted to the central business districts from the suburbs, but many others—especially those who had come to the city as youths to study or work—sought housing near their work. This stay-in-the-city trend was fed by the demographic and cultural upheavals of the times: smaller and more numerous households (widows living alone, children leaving home earlier, couples marrying later and divorcing more often, wives working outside the home). The baby-boom singles and working couples either did not care for the child-centered suburbs or found that housing and commuting costs priced them out of the suburban market. These young professionals and managers formed the core of a new urban gentry.44
What attracted them to a section of the city, apart from location and price, was the neighborhood's "historic character." Perhaps their sensibilities had been shaped by rebellion against the rootless suburbs in which they grew up and a desire to live in a community with an authentic and aged heritage. The "urban homesteaders" researched their homesite's past, got caught up in the excitement of restoration work, and lovingly defended the built environment against developers. But in their attentiveness to their neighborhood's past, some gentry ignored its recent history—and, most crucially, how they themselves had displaced the former residents.

Realtors and developers insulated many from such realities, buying up houses, evicting tenants, rehabbing, and reselling at fat markups to wealthier buyers. Surviving old residents were flushed out at the next stage as tax assessments went up, fancy shops arrived, the old infrastructure crumbled, and it became too expensive or too alienating to hang on. And if they stubbornly did remain, local governments would enforce long-unused codes and condemn old housing for investors waiting in the wings. If need be, thugs and arsonists would finish the job. The end result might be an exquisite "golden ghetto," restored to a pristine moment in time, stripped (as Williamsburg had been) of all traces of those who had been its inhabitants in the intervening years.

If some gentry were blind to displacement, others knew perfectly well what they were doing. They wanted temporally scarce commodities because they knew their value would rise. The existing community was a hindrance: it undermined the "historic" ambience that would make the investment pay off.

Still other gentry responded with neither naiveté nor calculating ruthlessness but with moral righteousness: they were not destroying impoverished communities with long-established folkways and deep roots, but wiping out "blight" and crime. The head of the Spring Garden Civic Association, noting that Hispanics were being driven out of that gentrifying Philadelphia neighborhood, was pleased: "When all else fails, try capitalism. It works... The private market is changing the neighborhood, and it's changing it in an appropriate way." Others cultivated an imperial attitude; seeing themselves as beleaguered islands of civility, the new gentry sought to expand their territory. One New Orleans proponent of transforming the multiethnic Irish Channel community admitted: "Renters are being displaced. It's sad, but the only hope for the neighborhood."

Living in a historic area became a badge of class distinction. Such areas were expensive and, given their scarcity, exclusive in a way that even the fanciest suburb could not be. In an echo of the DAR era, proprietorship of the past once again became a vehicle of legitimation (though now it did not require ancestral connections) and it afforded a source of accumulation at the same time.

The ultimate gentry objective was to have their neighborhood designated as a historic district. District status roped off an area and forbade demolition or unapproved alterations within it. Like suburban zoning, the districts attempted to freeze time and the accumulation process at a moment favorable to the gentry. "Historic" status would protect them from both the slovenly poor and crude developers, yet would not unduly restrict their right of private property: individual historic buildings remained saleable commodities.

In 1955 only twenty cities had historic district commissions. By 1966 there were 100, and by 1976, 492, in all fifty states; by 1982 there would be 900. At first—in keeping with the precedent set by Williamsburg and the Brahmins—only the eighteenth century would do. But the increase in demand meant that soon there were not enough eighteenth-century remains to go around. The historical charm and values of the nineteenth century were accordingly discovered. After the Victorian craze had run its course, the Art Deco style of the 1920s—previously scorned—was reevaluated and found desirable. The expanding definition of "historic" opened new terrain to speculative assaults and ensuing displacement.

Ironically, those who refused to rein in the market fell victim to it themselves. In New Orleans' French Quarter, for example, rents and prices did not stop climbing after the poor were gone. Upper-middle-class whites soon found themselves priced out of the historic district as "unassuming little houses were converted into spiffy pads for the very rich." In New York, those squeezed out of Manhattan were forced willy-nilly to become the agents of gentrification in new areas in Brooklyn. The spread of the "brownstoners" often had a negative impact on preexisting communities, but at the same time it widened the territory controlled by those with the resources and the commitment to fight the wrecking crews.

The second set of 1960s recruits to the preservation movement were working- and lower-middle-class people, largely white ethnics, who set out to save their neighborhoods from demolition. Their goal (similar to that of the original Charlestonians) was to preserve not simply historic buildings, but historic communities. Adopting the tactics of the civil rights and antiwar movements, grassroots organizations sat in, picketed, petitioned, and began to slow the bulldozers. The Chicano community
of Tucson, Arizona, for example, learned in 1971 that a planned freeway would destroy their barrio. They were particularly incensed that the projected route ran right through El Tiradito (the Wishing Shrine), the symbolic, spiritual, and historical center of the neighborhood. They marched on the State Highway Department, circulated petitions, worked with local architects, historians, journalists, and churches, turned the freeway into a major political issue, and won. Even when local groups were not able to stop projects, community fury made developers increasingly wary and raised the cost of doing business.52

These neighborhood groups linked up to form support networks such as National People’s Action and the National Association of Neighborhoods. These umbrella groups in turn demanded and got reforms such as the antirelining laws—the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (1975) and the Community Reinvestment Act (1977). In 1977 the Carter administration responded to their growing political muscle by creating the National Commission on Neighborhoods. The commission recommended establishing neighborhood cooperatives; attacked growth-industry-related banks, state legislatures, and municipal unions; asked for an end to federal support for suburbs; and called for federal development money, winning, in 1978, a $10 billion community investment fund to finance, purchase, and rehabilitate 300,000 housing units.53

The neighborhood conservationists were a complex lot. At times they were classic populists, beating off the attempts of speculators, developers, bankers, and state bureaucrats to commodify their neighborhoods. They had a strong commitment to the traditional. They contested the homogenization of their culture and stood for particularity, originality, and irreplaceability against the monolithic uniformity of corporate architecture, which had blotted out neighborhood distinctiveness. They often supported micro-history movements and underwrote local museums, oral history programs, community pageants, grassroots Bicentennial celebrations, and ethnic revivals. The local historians reminded many neighborhoods that they had once been independent municipalities. This fostered local pride and sometimes, though not inevitably, led the community to seek historic district status; some actually refused a historic designation.

On the other hand, many of the neighborhood conservationist groups were fearful, defensive, parochial, and racist. Many—especially those created in the aftermath of the 1960s black riots—sought to keep “traditional” (white) values intact by beating back black inroads, including public housing and school busing. Ethnic roots could be celebrated in a chauvinist and exclusive way.54

In the seventies, the established preservation movement reached out to this new constituency by broadening their definition of “historic.” In 1974 the American Institute of Planners called on the movement to “preserve the unique pasts of all groups.” By 1976, the Advisory Council reported,

No longer does the term “historic district” necessarily mean cobblestones, arching oaks, and serene federal-period houses. It may now also designate a working class area of rehabilitated houses and corner bars that reflect both an epoch of local history and an ethnic or cultural strain that has figured prominently in community development.

Broadening the definition of “historic” to cover entire working-class areas expanded communities’ available defenses against developers by extending to them existing legislative protections.55

A third, quite special set of conservationists were those, chiefly blacks, who set out to preserve their neighborhoods from historic preservationists. In 1970 the president of the Capitol East Community Organization denounced restorationists as “scavengers [who have] come in and squeezed out our people.” His group placed red placards in storefronts and home windows stating “Capitol East Is Our Community and We Will Fight to Stay.” CECO also passed out leaflets that read:

Niggers, wake up! Do you realize that blacks used to live in Georgetown and were pushed out? They were asleep! Do you see blacks being removed daily from Capitol Hill? Brothers, you are sleeping! They are starting to push blacks out again! Everyday you see an expensively restored house it means another black man is out. Wake up!56

In Kansas City, Joe Louis Mattox, founder of the Birdland Historic Preservation Society, agreed: “It is not the time for blacks, the faithful, to turn over the keys to the cities to those who ran off and left their heritage.” Carl Holman, president of the National Urban Coalition, asserted in 1978: “You’re going to start seeing some very rough clashes when those same blacks and browns who could not live in other folk’s neighborhoods find they cannot stay in their own.”57

In the 1970s blacks occasionally blocked foundation or government support for gentrification or engaged in rehabilitation programs of their own. But there was seldom overwhelming support for preservation in black communities. Many were ill-disposed to preserving places indelibly connected with white supremacy or poverty. It was one thing to restore a historic site, like Weeks-
ville in Brooklyn, that black people had constructed and controlled; quite another to be reminded about the bad old days. Blacks preferred, where feasible, to move into new and modern buildings in the cities or suburbs.58

Traditional preservationists had a lot of trouble establishing an alliance with black constituencies, even apart from black reluctance. Partly this was because they felt, in their bones, that “historic” meant beautiful, and many sites of poor people’s housing or worship were not pretty. Another problem was that such strategies as preservationists had developed for dealing with the problem did not work well in black communities. Protecting a black area by making it into a historic district might destroy it. Jackson Ward, in Richmond, Virginia, was a nineteenth-century free black community. In 1976 it was placed on the National Register to protect it from land developers and highway builders. This set off a boom among real estate speculators and affluent young whites attracted to its certified “historic” character. In other situations it proved difficult to get National Register designations for securely black neighborhoods, such as Houston’s Fourth Ward and Austin’s Robertson Hill, if local developers wanted the land for urban renewal projects.59

Even the best-intentioned preservationists could not grapple fundamentally with displacement, because they accepted the framework of a marketplace of privately owned property. Their response to the threatened destruction of buildings or communities boiled down to preemptive buying. But when the potential buyers were poor or lacked the political power to command state funds, failure was guaranteed: the communities would pass to those who commanded stronger purchasing power.

Back in 1964 Arthur Ziegler noted that Pittsburgh preservation was devastating the poor. He founded the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation “to involve them in the restoration activity rather than dislocating them.” But Ziegler’s minimal successes depended on spillover Mellon money (“in Pittsburgh we were blessed with private foundations that invested in our proposals”) and worked only in areas where liberal gentrty wanted to retain a neighborhood’s multiracial character. Foundations and the government refused to support antidisplacement programs in all-black areas.60

Similarly, Lee Adler left the Historic Savannah Foundation in 1967 because it was displacing the poor. He set up the Savannah Landmark Rehabilitation Project with the laudable goal of buying half the houses in a gentrifying black area, restoring them (using minority contractors, neighborhood workers employed under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act [CETA], local capital, and federal money), and then subsidizing the original tenants with federal funds. After two years of work, SLRP had saved just two dozen units; later, the supporting federal programs were eliminated. Their mistake was believing that they could achieve real power through the marketplace. “The one consistent method that does not fail and produces tangible results,” Adler said, “is that of buying and selling properties. So, the name of the game is real estate.” Thinking themselves hard-nosed, they were in fact naïve victims of the utopian capitalist fantasy that profit motives can be harnessed for the public good.61

Still, the established preservation movement did acknowledge the situation of preservation-displaces and tried to respond to the problem. Its members sponsored conferences, wrote books, and launched programs, like the Inner City Venture Fund, aimed at preserving the historical resources of minorities, Native Americans, and ethnic populations.62

In the sixties and seventies, then, the movement reached out to and gathered strength from new constituencies. In 1966 there were 2,500 preservation groups; in 1976 there were 6,000. Moreover, the cultural and political tide seemed to be running in the preservationists’ direction. Everywhere a new sensibility rejected unrestrained “progress,” “growth,” “newness.” Urban renewal was intellectually and culturally discredited in the planning community. In 1974 Robert Caro wrote a biography excoriating Robert Moses and got a Pulitzer Prize for it the next year. Management of scarce resources was the order of the day during the energy crisis. Conservationists, environmentalists, and historic preservationists (considered a species of temporal ecologists) fashioned an emerging alliance under the banner of “heritage preservation.”63

The new allies were crucial because despite the temper of the times and the 1966 laws, the growth coalition’s offensive continued. HUD, for instance, routinely ignored Advisory Council comments and tore down historic areas at the behest of local developers. So the National Trust returned to the cloakrooms and corridors of official Washington seeking an expanded federal role.

First, the Trust sent many of its best people into the bureaucracy to battle for administrative adherence to established legislation. Preservationists in the Park Service’s Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation struggled, in the late sixties, to save immediately endangered sites. They were hampered by minimal funding and checked by experienced fighters in other agencies. Blocked in the bureaucracy, they went back to Congress and helped win the Environmental Protection Act of 1969, which strengthened their hand. In 1971 they got President Nixon to issue Executive Order 11593, which required recalcitrant agencies to conduct inventories of historic properties in their domains and to “exercise caution” about demolishing them.64
These efforts slowed, but failed to halt, the momentum of destruction. A visit by Trust and Advisory Council experts to Western Europe, Japan, and the Soviet Union, where preservation efforts were far more advanced, convinced them that they needed stronger legal authority. In 1974 they set up a lobbying group—Preservation Action—and launched a new legislative drive. They redeployed old legitimation arguments, given new edge by a decade of protest and upheaval. They also tested new arguments, praising the greater energy efficiency of old housing stock and the employment possibilities of labor-intensive rehabilitation projects. Finally, they drew upon their allies in the neighborhood conservation movement, a source of considerable political strength. In the history-conscious Bicentennial year, Congress gave them two crucial pieces of legislation.66

One, the National Historic Preservation Fund Act, expanded their power within the bureaucracy to hinder or prevent other federal agencies from demolishing “historic properties.” The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation was given rule-making authority, upgrading its recommendations from guidelines to laws. The act also declared that properties the Council deemed “eligible” for the National Register were entitled to the same legal protections as those already on it, and it added financial muscle by authorizing a 700 percent increase in funding and 70-30 matching grant funds to states for preservation planning.66

The second law, the Historic Structures Tax Act, opened up a new front on one of the key terrains of the federal government—the tax code. It mandated tax disincentives for the demolition of historic buildings and tax benefits (quick write-offs) for those who rehabilitated historic properties and used them for income-producing purposes. This law went a long way toward eliminating the biases against preservation embedded in the tax code.67

While the National Trust had been engineering a massive expansion of preservationist power in the federal government, states and cities had been energetic in passing historic district legislation. The resultant body of law and regulation, although not as powerful as similar state provisions in the Soviet Union and Western Europe, nevertheless constituted a remarkable assertion of government control over the private land market. It was inevitable that such constraints would come under legal counterattack.68

The constitutional basis for preservation law was the state’s so-called police power—the right to enforce regulations that constrained private property owners without having to pay them compensation because such regulation was for the “public good.” This was a shaky position. Since 1909 the Supreme Court had deemed only health and safety sufficient justification for police power intervention. Mere “aesthetic” considerations were not. Preservationists had been unwilling to deploy the far more powerful constitutional basis of “eminent domain”—the unquestioned right of the state to take private property in return for just compensation—because they knew full well that U.S. landed capital would vigorously fight such state impairment of its prerogatives. Besides, having the state buy each and every endangered building would be murderously expensive and require a gigantic bureaucracy.69

In the 1960s and 1970s, pro-preservation lawyers fought for a breakthrough in police power jurisprudence. The National Trust sponsored the first National Conference on Historic Preservation Law in May 1971. In legal briefs and scholarly articles, delegates sought a formula that would reconcile a heightened concern with aesthetics (historic continuity was placed under this rubric) and traditional owners’ rights. But this was difficult to do. Consequently, in the course of confronting the contradiction between private and public desires, some preservationists went so far as to argue that a completely new view of property rights was needed, one that recognized social needs as paramount and curtailed centuries-old rights of private ownership. And the statutes, ordinances, court decisions, and administrative procedures effected in the seventies inched their way toward that position.70

A critical step forward came in 1978. Ten years earlier the Penn Central Railroad had announced plans to build a two-million-square-foot office building on top of a historic landmark it owned—New York City’s Grand Central Station. The city sued to block the project. Penn Central argued that the historic district law, because it prevented it from exploiting the developmental possibilities of its property to the fullest, constituted a “taking” of property that, under the Fourteenth Amendment, required it be paid “just compensation.” The Supreme Court ruled, six to three, that Penn Central’s position was “simply untenable.” The court majority noted that the corporation was already getting a “reasonable return” on its property and that the law allowed it to transfer the unused development rights on its airspace to another property, and found a law “providing services, standards, controls, and incentives that will encourage preservation by private owners and users” to be clearly constitutional. To find otherwise, Justice Brennan noted, “would of course invalidate not just New York City’s law, but all comparable landmark legislation in the nation.” While hardly adopting the proto-socialist arguments advanced by some preservation lawyers, the decision, when measured against the legal situation fifty or one hundred years earlier, was a startling restriction on the rights of private property and the freedom of the marketplace.71
The preservationist alliance's triumph coincided with the collapse—and conversion—of its traditional enemy. In the mid-seventies, a worldwide recession knocked the wind out of the growth movement and brought development to a halt. As boosters and builders suddenly confronted an "age of limits," their attitudes toward historic preservation changed.72

The recession bit immediately into housing construction. Rising mortgage rates lowered demand, high interest rates made new construction more costly, and the federal government imposed a public housing moratorium. Housing starts plummeted. In 1976, for the first time, more Americans repurchased old houses than bought new ones. By 1982, 85 percent of American families had been priced out of the housing market, just at the time the baby boomers were trying to enter it.73

This set off a preservation surge. People who could not afford to move began to fix up what they had. At the same time, it became more profitable than ever to rehabilitate old buildings and gentrify them. A 1980 study confirmed soaring real estate values in historic districts. Prices in Savannah's had risen 276 percent in the previous ten years, compared with an average rise of 184 percent for the rest of the city. Banks that had once redlined inner-city areas now leaped to finance them. By 1977 residential property rehabilitation costs were estimated at $32 billion—38 percent of all construction spending for the year.74 Rehabilitation money also began flowing to the casualties of the previous generation. Main Streets attracted funding in their attempt to combat the malls, undertook façade renovations, and traded on their old-time ambience.

Even more capital flowed into providing services to the residents, office workers, tourists, and regional middle-class shoppers who had been drawn to the central business districts. One particularly lucrative enterprise was the historic market movement. Developers like James Rouse, finding the suburbs saturated with malls, now parlayed historic designations into funding magnets, attracting investment from federal, state, city, and private sources. San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square had pioneered in 1964, it was followed by Denver's Larimer Square, Seattle's Pioneer Square, Atlanta's Underground, St. Louis' Laclede's Landing, and equivalents in Annapolis, Louisville, Boston, and Pittsburgh. They paid off handsomely; one businessman enthused that the markets "demonstrated conclusively that preservation and business are compatible." "We have seen the past," he said, "and we see that it works."75

More dramatically still, whole towns whose economies had been demolished by long-term capital flight or the recession decided to exploit the tourist potential inherent in their history. Relics of former stages of economic development were recycled by private developers blocked from growth projects. They turned industrial plant to service sector uses: factories became boutiques, breweries became museums, warehouses became restaurants and condos, iron furnaces became offices, mining towns became ski resorts. Lowell, Massachusetts, capitalizing on its nineteenth-century industrial "character," attracted $350,000 from banks, $2 million from a bond issue, and $26 million in local, state, and federal commitments.77

The financial rewards engendered a wonderfully expedient development of historical interest. Seneca Falls, N.Y., a declining manufacturing community, had paid virtually no attention to its local women's rights legacy. Following its rediscovery by feminists and historians, and congressional establishment of a Women's Rights Historic National Park, local businessmen poured money into remodeling the downtown district, even designing statues of feminist heroines. As a Village Trustee noted, the enthusiastic merchants "don't give a hoot" about feminism, but "they see the money opportunity. I mean, if you've got Old Faithful in your town, you are in favor of geysers."78

The preservation boom stimulated a demand for more professionals. Williamsburg and Cooperstown had long been running training seminars; now the universities entered the field. James Marston Fitch had started the first graduate course in the preservation of historic architecture at Columbia in 1964. By 1975, ninety architecture schools in the United States and Canada offered either degrees in preservation or preservation-related programs and courses. Some of these graduates joined the cadre of preservation professionals called into being by the new federal legislation. Some worked directly for the Department of the Interior, the Advisory Council, or the many agencies who developed "on-staff" to cope with new regulations, and others labored throughout the country as State Historic Preservation Officers. Others worked, as employees or consultants, for communities and developers, helping them do the bureaucratic paperwork required to qualify for federal funding.79

Finally, in the altered conditions of the 1970s, even the behemoths of business moved toward a preservation stance. From the 1920s until the mid-1960s, U.S. corporations had routinely torn down old plant and built anew, despite steadily rising construction costs, because costs of capital had declined enough to offset them. By the 1970s, expensive capital had generated rethinking. It became apparent that converting old office or factory space was 30 to 40 percent cheaper than constructing from scratch; that rehabbing took
less time because work could continue during the winter; that it was less disruptive of business operations; that it reduced land costs; and that it avoided environmental impact statements, local building code hassles, and battles with preservationists. Given the new culture of retrenchment, preservation even afforded good publicity and advertising outlets. Banks, oil companies, insurance corporations, and heavy manufacturing firms—often using special development subsidiaries—began recycling their own buildings or buying up old plant for adaptive reuse. Between 1970 and 1977 rehabilitation of nonresidential buildings increased from 3.5 percent to 25.0 percent of the construction market, representing approximately $20 billion worth of construction. By 1982 the estimated value of commercial rehabilitation had reached $51.6 billion.

The 1976 tax laws speeded the process. Developers now sought to have buildings or areas designated as historic sites because that entitled them to tax benefits. National Register listings went from 13,538 to 24,347. In four years 2,500 rehabilitation projects, valued at $1.2 billion, qualified for preservation tax benefits. UDAG money began flowing to preservation projects—by 1980, 39 percent of the total allotments. Increasingly, federal dollars would underwrite a historic core (as at Lowell), and developers would benefit from the boost in property values around its periphery.

Diehard developers did an about-face. Businessmen had long viewed preservation as a constraint on their right to maximize returns on their property, and the movement's anticommercial tone had only exacerbated their suspicions of it. Preservation had been grudgingly supported as a prop to legitimacy, but this uncongenial task had been left to genteel elites, patrician women, and super-rich dabblers. And even then most businessmen, believing accumulation itself to be capital's best legitimation, feared that preservation would inhibit the cornucopia of commodities. Now, however, preservation was useful not simply in legitimating capital, but in accumulating it, and business embraced it with enthusiasm. As one mortgage banker explained:

Historic preservation is in many ways a sophisticated type of real estate development. . . . The stereotype of the local ladies club attempting to save some old building is long out of date. . . . It is possible to identify several billion dollars of historic preservation projects in the portfolios of financial institutions in this country.

For their part, the preservationists eagerly welcomed their new allies. A National Trust vice-chairman rejoiced that the movement had "learned to shift from aesthetic appeals to bottom-line shrewdness. . . . After the decades of

For a short period in the depressed late seventies, then, it seemed as if everybody liked historic preservation. People flocked to join the National Trust. Individual membership went from 30,000 in 1970 to 160,000 in 1980. Major corporations such as Alcoa, American Iron and Steel, CBS, Chemical Bank, Exxon, Ford, IBM, Time, and Xerox signed on as National Trust Corporate Associates—over a hundred by 1979.

The coffers and political clout of the National Trust swelled accordingly. Its staff went from forty-seven to over two hundred, and it provided services to all the members of its now wildly contradictory constituency—grants to local neighborhood conservationists and poor tenants threatened with displacement, educational programs and conferences for preservation professionals, vocational training for restorationists technicians, legal information to developers, private owners, towns, and corporations. The Trust dealt with its internal contradictions by fudging or ignoring them. And why not? It worked. The barbarians had been beaten.

In the eighties, the barbarians struck back.

Proctor & Gamble landed one of the earliest blows. In 1980 the company was infuriated to learn of the impending involuntary designation of its corporate headquarters as a historic landmark. Aware that, given the Penn Central decision, its hands would be tied once the designation was announced, it muscled its way onto the floor of Congress. Representative Joseph McDade (R-Pa.) attached to pending legislation an amendment requiring an owner's consent before industrial facilities could be put on the National Register. National Trust lobbyists, hitherto so successful, found to their dismay that they were utterly unable to roll back this "ominous" provision. Indeed, Congress went on to institute owner-consent provisions for all Register designations and repealed the disincentives provision of the 1976 Tax Act.

At the same time, the judicial victories came under attack. The Supreme Court had stated explicitly in the Penn Central decision that the question of
what "historic" meant would remain subject to judicial review. In August 1980 a federal judge in Virginia reversed the Interior Department’s 1974 designation of 14,000 acres in the state as a rural “national historic district”; the court even barred the government from accepting gifts from Virginia landowners of “scenic easements” by which they bound themselves not to alter the architecture or landscape. The court thus upheld a strip-mine developer (behind whom lay W. R. Grace & Company, the chemical conglomerate) who argued that the “historic” designation was improper. As a local preservationist pointed out, “this decision, if it stands, will bastardize retroactively every historic landmark designation in the country. Not one of them is now safe from challenge.”

Another dramatic indication of the shifting temper of the times came on December 4, 1981, when Detroit police removed armed members of the Poletown Neighborhood Council from the Church of the Immaculate Conception, ending four years of resistance by community residents in the courts and the streets to the planned demolition of their homes. General Motors had agreed to build a plant that would provide 6,000 desperately needed jobs within Detroit city limits if the city would seize and raze 450 acres of a mixed Polish and black working-class neighborhood. The residents proposed alternatives that would allow factory and community to coexist. GM was not interested. The unions, city administration, and courts backed the corporation. Demolition proceeded, leveling 1,500 homes, 150 businesses, 16 churches, and a hospital.

GM’s heavyfooted intervention signaled a reversal of attitudes. The takeover was motivated as much by a macho desire to reassert corporate prerogatives as by a simple search for profit in hard times. Most of the cleared land was to be used for parking lots; vertical parking could have avoided much demolition. GM’s decision not to swerve or compromise recalls Robert Moses’ hauteur. Pro-GM spokespeople denounced preservationist attempts to save Poletown. Detroit’s director of planning insisted that a “community whose heyday has passed may glory in the past. . . . But a group attempting to better its condition needs to focus on the future.” She undoubtedly found significant support in the black community when she argued that Detroit could not afford to “dwell excessively on the memories of its former white community or else it will not give living expression to . . . its present population, which is over 50 percent black.”

These straws in the wind accurately forecast the coming of the Reagan administration hurricane.

The right wing considered historic preservation—like rent control, environmental protection, occupational health and safety regulation, and laws against usury—an intolerable constraint on private accumulation. Moreover, preservation, to these throwbacks to the old accumulative order, was a cultural and political danger. No fools, they had sniffed out the antimarket logic in the emerging body of administrative rules and legal decisions. Now creative destruction’s time had come round again, and they set out enthusiastically to reverse every gain the movement had made since 1966.

For openers, Interior Secretary James Watt called for zerobudgeting the entire historic preservation program: he asked Congress to eliminate all funding for the National Trust and the state historic preservation organizations. Other Reaganites fanned out to undermine the preservationists’ position in the bureaucracy. Their agenda, as summed up in the January 1984 report of the Grace Commission (headed by the same Peter Grace involved in the strip-mining lawsuit discussed above), was to wipe out the Advisory Council’s ability to halt other federal agencies from destroying historic properties; to repeal the section of the Highway Act reining in the Department of Transportation; to remove constraints on the Interior Department’s ability to undertake strip mining; to end restrictions on what could be done with funds from Community Development Block Grants. The administration also proposed establishing enterprise zones in U.S. cities (modeled on Hong Kong and Taiwanese practices), which would suspend all controls on entrepreneurial freedom of action: condo-men would be free to bulldoze as they pleased.

On the other hand, Reagan’s 1981 tax laws actually enhanced benefits for preservation. The law provided a 25 percent investment tax credit for approved rehabilitation of certified historic structures: renovators could subtract one of every four dollars spent on preservation work directly from their federal income taxes. Watt explained that the Trust’s “historic mission of working with the private sector is logical and appropriate to this administration’s philosophy.” What he meant was that Reaganism would dismantle any constraints on capital, but had no objection to providing handouts to banks, developers, landlords, and construction firms. If economic forces in the eighties favored preservation over bulldozing, that was fine with Watt.

The response of the preservation movement to the Reagan offensive was to scurry toward its real estate right and away from its populist left. Preservationists largely abandoned attempts to build a mass base, wrote off the displaced, and hitched their wagon to their traditional worst enemies. The National Trust, in particular, cast its lot with
capital. It hired as its new president Michael Ainslie, a thirty-six-year-old businessman with experience in management, marketing, and real estate development, who announced his intention to adopt "more financial- and real estate-oriented approaches." The coordinator of Preservation Action, Nellie Longsworth, enthused that "rehabilitation and preservation have finally made it into a larger arena and we can take pride in the results that are produced by private investment." There were side offerings to the displaced—the Inner City Ventures Fund made limited funds available to nonprofit neighborhood self-help groups to acquire housing in historic districts for low-income and minority residents—but concern over displacement and the neighborhoods dwindled dramatically. Environmentalism and ecology were out; entrepreneurship was in. The editor of the National Trust's magazine, Historic Preservation, laid it on the bottom line: "Making a profit makes preservation possible. . . . If an entrepreneur doesn't have a fighting chance to end up with a profit, it's going to be good-bye old building."93

On the face of things, tacking to the right worked brilliantly. Appeals to Congress for support on the grounds that preservation made money for developers and provided jobs paid off. Here was a constituency that had the clout to withstand the neoconservative offensive. In every year of Reagan's first administration, Congress overrode zerobudgeting and reinstated preservation funding, albeit with serious cuts. The enterprise zone proposal passed the Senate three times, but was thrice beaten back by the House, and was dropped in the 1984 tax proposals. And Congress overruled a direct attempt to slash the authority of the Advisory Council. The preservation position was eroded through countless administrative and budgetary decisions, but far less than Reagan and Watt had intended.

And the strategy saved buildings. Major real estate syndicators who might have torn down old structures now rushed to certify them as "historic," thus qualifying for the tax breaks of the 1981 act. As one certification official noted, "We're seeing a new type of clientele—bankers, lawyers, developers." In 1980, $346 million worth of rehabilitation projects had been approved for tax breaks; by 1983, $2.2 billion worth had passed historic muster. By the end of fiscal 1984, a total of $7.8 billion had gone into 9,000 historic rehab projects, which had generated 310,000 jobs, $5.5 billion in new earnings, and $19.5 billion in increased retail sales. Historic preservation had become big business, and big business could hold Reaganism at bay.94

But the preservation community, seemingly triumphant, was in fact in an extremely dangerous position, having grabbed a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing by the tail. Its strategy ignored the fact that capital had no commitment to preservation except as a convenient cover for quick returns in hard times, a device to transfer state benefits to private developers and give the handouts a "conservative" patina. As Paul J. Goldberger noted, "developers now routinely use preservation rhetoric for their own ends without adopting its values, and their ends are often antithetical to the preservationists."95

One of the many consequences of the rightward tilt was a continuing decline in the traditional preservationist concern for authentic symbolic meaning. Seldom, now, did the adaptively reused artifacts illuminate the roots of the present, set in motion mythic reverberations, or expand contemporary historical consciousness. The DAR and the Rockefellers, for all their distorsions of the past, at least had been concerned with meanings; the contemporary crowd were into surfaces, styles, the historic as stage setting.

A droll example of this was the emergence of Façadism (also known as Façadectomy and Façadomy). In this form of Potemkin preservation, developers tore down an old building but preserved its streetfront wall. This they affixed, like a historic veneer, to a high-rise condo or hotel. It was, someone said, like preserving polar bears in the form of rugs. The preservation community began to split over this burlesque—interestingly, along the lines of its original formation. In Charleston, where it all started, UDAG money helped a developer plop an office complex (including a 430-room hotel, a 500-car garage, and 64,000 feet of retail space) right in the heart of the 1931 historic district. This was acceptable to the Historic Charleston Foundation (descendants of the business joiners) because the complex was fronted by the preserved façade of the row of old buildings it replaced. But the 2,700-member Preservation Society, with its roots in the preservation movement of the 1920s, denounced this as an outrage, and sued—unsuccessfully—to halt it.96

More alarmingly, it soon appeared that although the Reaganites would assist profitable projects, they had no compunction whatever about reverting to old-style bulldozing when that was the path to profit. In 1981, for instance, UDAG gave $21.5 million to build a hotel in New York City's Times Square (and the city added another $100 million in tax abatements). Standing in the way were three old Broadway theaters; one was on the National Register, another was eligible. Watt muscled the Advisory Council into approving their demolition.97

Worse was to come. In November 1984, to the preservation strategists' shock and dismay, Reagan's Treasury Department issued a tax "simplification" plan that called for the total repeal of tax incentives for historic rehabilitation. The move was not specifically aimed at the preservationists. Rather, Pentagon voraciousness dictated massive cutbacks in domestic spending, and neoconservatives wanted to dismantle a host of tax-code-supported social policies. Some in the administration even regretted the likely impact of
the changes on a program that stimulated private investment. But sacrifices were in order, and repeal seemed likely to pass in some form or other. Repeal would send a wrecking ball swinging toward the preservation edifice, made brittle by its excessive dependence on tax policy and fairweather friends.

Reservationists may survive this current assault, but what of the future? In considerable measure that depends on larger trends in the economy.

If interest rates drop, oil prices come down, and the economy recovers, capitalists will drop their new-found commitment to preservation in a flash. Façadism, Reaganesque, and the Poletown putsch are only indicators of a larger truth: preservation’s allies in the big-business world have no principled concern for preservation. Banks and development corporations have only the thinnest sense of being members of communities whose histories merit recalling. They see their country not as a society, but as an economy—a grid of opportunities—and their actions are dictated by the probabilities of profit. In an economic revival, preservationists, deserted by the right, would find few allies on the left. Indeed, the movement’s inability or unwillingness to confront displacement and its lack of ties to the labor movement leave it wide open to attack by a revitalized growth coalition that appeals for black and working-class support in the name of housing and job development against “limousine liberal” preservationists.

It is also possible that the economy will not recover, but will continue to lurch in and out of recessions. In the presence of continuing high interest rates, and the absence of reindustrialization or a housing boom, real estate and corporate capital will probably continue to accept historic preservation as the best bargain available. But if the current approach to preservation is maintained, it will simply accelerate the paired processes of gentrification and displacement. In that event, older American cities will proceed down the European road. In the last generation, almost every major city in Europe, as well as hundreds of smaller ones, has had its historic center preserved and its social relations transformed by a new urban enclosure movement. One by one, working-class areas have been invaded by the new gentry and their former inhabitants resettled in high rises on the city outskirts. Now only the wealthy and the corporations can afford to reside in the historic centers of Paris, Rome, or Amsterdam.

Unless something is done, U.S. cities will go to the same route. Displacement is the order of the day all over the country. The process is startlingly clear in New York City, where the eighties may well see the gentry invasion of Harlem. Manhattan may become a preserve for corporate offices, small shoppes, theaters, adaptively reused historic markets (South Street Seaport is a harbinger), hotels, and gentry housing, with blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites packed off to the periphery. In a still grimmer vision, American cities will be heavily patrolled and well-fortified “historic” ghettos, defending themselves against beggars, muggers, and squatters, and the past itself will have become a hated emblem of class domination.

Is there an alternative? Perhaps, but it will require a massive reversal of direction by the organized preservation community. Recall its trajectory to date.

For its first century, preservationism remained an upper-class movement intent on blocking the free market demolition of old buildings through either preemptive purchase or state intervention. The genteel and the wealthy were motivated partly by aesthetic concerns and partly by a desire to enhance their own legitimacy through an association with hallowed symbolic artifacts. Between the 1940s and the early 1960s, to gain additional support in their losing battle with developers, they allied with middle-class professionals and small businessmen who were also threatened by the march of progress. This required a shift in strategy from parenthesizing to adaptive reuse. At the time this seemed a reasonable compromise—indeed, a step forward. Huxtable was convinced that putting “a new building in the old shell” was a “modern solution that still manages to evoke the past.” This belief was sustainable for a time, but in retrospect we can see that adaptive reuse, by pulling back from the older antimarket critique, facilitated the process of gentrification. There was nothing inherently wrong with adaptive use except that in practice it meant that only those with market power got to use and enjoy old buildings.

In the late sixties and early seventies, the movement expanded again. It increased its base in middle-class gentry neighborhoods, worked with businessmen attracted by the profitability of the past, and also reached out to working-class neighborhood conservationists and anticorporate environmentalists. The tensions between history as heritage and history as commodity grew sharper, but the overarching imperative of combating the growth coalition kept the contradictory coalition together.

In the early eighties, with growth proponents weakened by recession and a reactionary administration in power, preservationists succumbed to the temp-
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tation to rely on the market, now suitably guided by tax policy. Buildings and communities were saved if they had pecuniary possibilities, gentrification's impact on the poor was benignly overlooked, and the movement's already attenuated concern with historic meaning was weakened to the vanishing point. After a century of sensitivity to the menace of an unrestricted marketplace, the preservationist leadership now convinced itself that the pursuit of profit could be harnessed to serve social needs.104

This was, I believe, a reversible error. Historic preservation can survive without corporate backing, but only if it rebuilds its shrunken political base. The history of the movement suggests that preservationists' natural (if not always comfortable) allies are environmentalists, tenants' organizations, civil rights groups, neighborhood conservationists, unions, public housing activists, and others working for large-scale social change. For historic preservation, like these others, is a reform movement: it goes against the grain of the dominant culture.

To make such a connection, however, would require preservationists to be more aware of and more committed to overcoming the negative effects of the preservation process. Preservationists might establish their sensitivity to the concerns of potential allies by admitting that historic continuity, while an important human need, must be balanced against other human needs, such as that of the present generation for housing. To gain the support of potential colleagues, preservationists might back policies that guaranteed affordable housing for all citizens, even if such policies alienated bankers, developers, and some of the gentry, such as the irate couple who wrote recently: "Housing of the poor never was and should not be an objective of the preservation movement. If we are not housing the poor adequately, our social programs are to blame, not the preservationist, and definitely not those who have made a personal commitment to rescuing the past from obliteration." This may be true, but if the movement is to garner widespread support, it will have to demonstrate its commitment to changing those blameworthy social programs.102

It might do this by making historic preservation part of an overall land-use package that included rent subsidies, nonmarket allocation of credit (replacing private mortgages with direct government grants and low-interest loans), support for nonprofit community-based developers and neighborhood organizers, rehabilitation programs that guarantee current tenants controlled rents or relocation in equivalent housing, city investments in vacant or blighted buildings, tax reassessments, and the abolition of tax shelters for speculators. The experience of popular coalitions in Hartford, Cleveland, Berkeley, and Santa Monica during the seventies suggests that local taxing mechanisms and reg-

ulations can successfully control developers, bankers, realtors, and speculators in the short run. But ultimately the goal might have to be the abandonment of the current government-subsidized "free market" housing system and its replacement with a system that guarantees decent housing to all citizens as a social right.

Preservationists have argued that we must treat city centers as valuable artifacts. But unless they address the pressures that make it difficult or impossible to do so, their chances of success are not high. I am suggesting that if we enhance popular control over the production and distribution of goods, including housing, provide shelter for those who need it, and make resources available to those who want to fix up their own neighborhoods, people would likely be more than willing to honor collective memories. Only when citizens are not confronted with the choice between a preserved past and a squalid present can preservationism have a secure future.103

In a revived coalition, it could be the special role of architects and historians, Park Service professionals and local history amateurs, neighborhood activists and historic house enthusiasts, to forge a preservationism that negotiates the ahistorical, uncritical, and self-centered sensibility of much contemporary culture; that saves the material remains of the past in a way that illuminates the course of American history; that uses historic artifacts to provide more than just sterile ambience and a sense of cozy continuity; that severed the connection between preservation and class privilege, thus avoiding the looming fate of the American city; and raises for popular consideration the possibility that ultimately the only way to prevent the private appropriation, perversion, and destruction of our common heritage is to overhaul the social system that threatens it.104