

Rapporteur Speech
by Tony Hiss

Thank you for your patience, and thank you for loving New York.

Tony began by opening the floodgates this morning. The most compelling question he said is ‘Why, since 1965, has New York continued to lose buildings, and why has there been erosion of historic districts and degradation of sacred spaces?’ When I was growing up in New York, the watchword you saw on every boarding outside every building about to be demolished was the exciting, hopeful sign ‘Watch This Space’. The assumption was what was coming next was going to beat the pants off what had been there before. But after World War II when I was small, the city had paused for sixteen years for the first time in its history. First stopped by the Depression, which stopped building, and then by the War. And suddenly people began to look again at what was there. If the official assumption of builders was ‘Eat my dust’, then it was somehow the Landmarks Preservation Commission’s function, once it came into being, to be the ‘dust eaters’. To follow three steps behind the builders. Like Prince Philip three steps behind the Queen. Or in this case, thirty years behind and be the remnant collectors. The assumption was thirty years later you would hate what was there.

Now nothing worked out that way, because in its first half century, and the Landmarks Commission is only 1/8 as old as the city, preservation has changed the way change comes to New York. With a place at the table, preservationists are challenged to think on behalf of the city. Preservationists are planners. They’re the people making sure that the now around us that they love and that we love will be part of tomorrow’s now as well. They are thinking on behalf of a continuum. A living flame. Working not on behalf of the old or the bygone, but on behalf of the enduring. They’ve taught New York to think in terms of a different timeframe, to think about the purposes of the city.

Look at everything we heard today. I couldn’t begin if I had a week to summarize. Tony began with four uncomfortable, provocative, annoying, troubling questions. Those were not the only questions that have been provocative, annoying and troubling to us today. But they were good ones. I heard as much in the breaks as I heard in the panels and they were superb in both

cases. I heard for instance that we were now behind other cities like Chicago and Denver, who have adopted policies that allow them to preserve things we can't, because they have tax write offs for older commercial buildings that are so yummy that developers demand the right to buy old buildings. Or public housing projects in Charleston where money is being spent to take old houses and turn them into subsidized houses as a way of preserving the social balance.

History, we're told by Andrew Dolkart, has broadened our view of what is historic and what speaks to us has changed. An example given was the Tenement Museum. Visiting a tenement, the kind of building that reformers worked for so many years to tear down, to protect and preserve that part of our past. Ned Kaufman showed us Ayers Rock in Australia, a site sacred to the native peoples of Australia. And downtown cafés in Buenos Aires that were saved after a terrible economic downturn when they might have been swept away. And told us about 'place affection', a term very similar to what I like to think of as sacred sites of a community. Sacred not just because they have a meaning as a single function, but because they organize patterns of people in a community. And we were shown Casa Amadeo and the Bohemian Hall in New York.

But we also heard about places of disaffection. Dorothy Miner brought that up. What I sometimes think of as places of hurt. And we heard about the memorial to the people who died on the hulks in the harbor during the Revolutionary War, The Prison Ship Martyrs Memorial in Washington Park, that more people died there than died in the thirteen colonies during the war. And have we embraced that. The Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was assassinated. The hubbub between sessions was extraordinary. Here we are in a half basement room with the blinds drawn, and yet it was like Union Square in the old days, throughout the day.

We were told that the press has walked away from preservation, although the bloggers are picking up the pieces. It turns out to be hard work to be a blogger. Jonathan Butler says he has to post fifteen pieces a day, and every time he's driving down the street, he screeches to a halt and pulls out his camera to take a shot of something horrible that's happening. And yet he reaches 1.4 million people every year with his immediacy and his passion. We heard about Norman Oder's Atlantic Yards report blog, as a counterpart to the trumpeting of the

spectacularness of that development. The recent boom Jonathan said took everyone by storm. We've been reactive. What can we be working on now that lets us look at what developers might want to tear down five years from now? Someone else said that is no longer any in depth economic investigative reporting about the impacts of big time development.

And yet the original vision is largely fulfilled. If we have protected twenty-six thousand buildings out of a million standing buildings in New York City, the surveys that preceded the Landmarks Commission envisaged the idea that eventually the landmarks might recommend 3.5% of the city, not the 2.6% we have now. That's really only 9,000 buildings short of the original goal. The backlog isn't all that bad, it's the question of are we doing everything that we haven't thought of before. At lunch we had extraordinary discussions. People talking about they're here because their neighborhood is losing its sense of scale, and they feel killed by it. And when they look down, that some development seems to block the streams of time. That all of the time you used to be able to look down Fifth Avenue and sense what Fifth Avenue had always been, but now at certain angles there's a new high rise that blocks your view of the Empire State Building. And that stream of time is dammed.

Someone said very plaintively, "So how do you make me feel better about what's happening in New York?" Tony Tung said, "But these are the same complaints and laments you heard a century ago."

It only got more interesting by the minute. Tony Tung has coined the phrase 'the preservation primal scream'. Somehow in every place in every neighborhood in every city, there is some horrible thing that happens that becomes *the* travesty that no one can put up with any longer, that is so wrenching action must be taken. "It's all motivated by love," he said, "but you rarely hear the word." What are the things beyond jobs and schools that bring people to a community and that hold them there and that anchor their lives?

Then we had the main bout. Bob Stern vs. Ken Jackson. Introduced most interestingly by Mary Schmidt Campbell, talking about her encounter with Harlem in the 1970s, and how it was once a place of excellence that she wanted to restore, and she convinced Ed Koch to give her

a crummy lot, and she got an old building, and then had her own run-in with what she called the 'preservation police' when she wanted to put a fence in front of her house on West 144th to keep the crack dealers off her stoop.

We heard a lot of attacks on preservationists today. I've tried to number them up. They have been accused of being 'moldering opponents of change', 'cultists', 'religious bigots', 'racial bigots', 'aggressive imperialists', 'class warriors', 'elitists', 'almost a Gestapo', 'frivolous dilettantes', 'losers', and 'city-haters'. No wonder Randy Mason finally said, "Don't call me a preservationist."

Ken Jackson, as he said, deliberately tried to be more provocative than he might have been, and yet, as he previously said, he loves New York better than anyplace in the world. So he was going to overstate his case. His case being that we're the greatest city in the world because we embrace change. And woe betides those who try to stop change. Particularly saying if historic preservation had been as strong a force in the late 19th century as it is today, the great 20th Century New York never would have emerged. He challenged us to think. Supposing New York lasts another four hundred years. Can we say now what will be important to them then? Sometimes he said you need a root canal to save a mouth.

And as he pointed out a 1935 aerial view of the city would show a dark wedding cake, with all the development clinging to the spine of the Island of Manhattan, sloping off towards the river, which was an avoided industrial district. But then the industry disappeared. This new growth is moving to the edges, and yet these edges are not served by transit or by traditional city services. We were challenged, I thought in a way that we cannot ignore by Michael Adams, before he was led out in chains. He raised the ultimate question: What *is* the effective way to save what we love about New York City? We're all groping for the answer.

In some ways, I see this meeting as occasioned by two incredible tragedies that didn't get much mention today -- 9/11 and Katrina. 9/11 was the first time New York had experienced demolition and destruction on that scale and without any warning. And Katrina was the first time that the United States almost lost a major city. 9/11 made every building and pattern of life

in the city seem vulnerable. And Katrina, as we watched the national government didn't seem to care. The love that people feel that gets expressed through preservation and through many other ways, as the last panel said 'looking for common cause', comes into someone when their minds and hearts begin to reach out beyond the ordinary to a larger sense of the here they live in and a longer sense of the now that envelopes us. That stretches back really to the moment when the glaciers receded and the city assumed its present physical form. These places every day, every moment, are trying to talk to us, but it's only when we listen to them that we can give voice to them and their standing.

Tony Wood and I have been part of a small group trying to identify what they've come to call the 'heart and soul of rural communities'. What are the places in those communities unassuming to look at sometimes that really knit lives together and that keep people in place? Preservationists originally I think have thought of themselves or have been thought by others to be more concerned with the bones of a place, the bricks and mortar, than with the heart and soul. But their true underlying passion and commitment have been to hearts and souls, and to the lifeblood of the City of New York.

People came up to me and suggested four projects as a way of getting started on the things that landmarking didn't include. Tony Wood talked about view sheds. He talked about reaching out to privately owned cemeteries in backyards. Someone pointed out to me that we still don't have the database. We have blogs, but we don't have online database. We can't punch a button and see what every one of the million buildings in New York looks like and what its history has been. We don't have a visible way of seeing what the zoning envelope is -- that vast invisible tent that stretches over our heads at all times. People don't realize that most places could, as of right, go way sky high. And we don't have, as many of the speakers were beginning to get at, the idea of a threats map. Can we map what will be more vulnerable two years from today than it is now? Five years from today? Ten years? Twenty years from now? And we need perhaps to start sending joint teams out to every neighborhood -- joint government teams and joint advocacy teams -- people who never wanted to think of themselves as partners, forced by the nature of necessity to become partners, and starting to ask themselves the larger question: How can this area grow without losing its soul?

Let's all have a drink, and toast ourselves for staying through to the end of this day.

Thank you very much.