

“The Past is never dead. It is not even past.”

By Anthony C Wood.

When William Faulker wrote “The Past is never dead. It is not even past,” he was not writing about Historic Preservation in the North. Now, having spent the better part of the last three years deeply immersed in preservation’s past, I think Faulkner’s observation is as valid for the history of the preservation movement in New York City as it is for the history of the American South.

The impact of preservation’s history on what preservation has done and continues to do, has been unexplored because so much of that history has been invisible. Having researched 50 years of almost forgotten preservation history—the period from 1913 to 1965, if you will the back story of how NYC got its landmarks law—I now see that preservation’s past is indeed “not even past,” it is still very much alive. It lives on (both consciously and subconsciously) in current attitudes, behaviors, concerns and issues. There is nothing like spending some time with the past to see the present in a new light. History does have a way of providing missing context and needed perspective.

The influence of preservation’s past is not the sole or even the defining explanation for how preservation in New York City has played out since the passage of our landmarks law in 1965. It is, however, an extremely useful, though unfortunately under-utilized lens, through which we can obtain a fuller appreciation of how preservation got to where it is today.

Today’s symposium seeks to explore key issues of concern to NYC’s preservation movement, past and present. It seeks to do this by using a mix of historical perspective and current insight. One of the purposes of this keynote is to provide some of that historical perspective. The good news is I’m not going to try and squeeze over 50 years and almost 400 pages of almost forgotten preservation history, into this talk--so the bad news is you still have to read my book.

In addition to providing additional context for the specific questions being explored in today’s symposium I also want to provide a somewhat different perspective on what I feel is the most compelling yet unasked preservation question of today: “Even with our enviable landmarks law

in place, why, since 1965 and up to current times, has New York City continued to lose buildings and suffer the erosion of historic neighborhoods that many New Yorkers believe the landmarks law should save?" Whether they be buildings lost early in the law's tenure, like the Singer Building or the Metropolitan Opera or those whose loss is more fresh like the Spanish Camp on Staten Island or the both beloved and reviled 2 Columbus Circle, or buildings that have been doomed but are still on life support, like the exquisite St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem, New York continues to lose wonderful buildings and witness the degradation of special places that many disappointed New Yorkers feel their landmarks law should have protected, but has not. Why do we continue to lose what we would prefer to save?

Instead of raising this highly charged question, I could devote this keynote to celebrating what is in essence a public policy miracle: the very fact that our landmarks law actually exists—and we should not forget that it really is a modern miracle that New Yorkers demanded and received a landmarks law.

At least since the 1840s when Philip Hone wrote in his diary, "Overturn! Overturn! Overturn! is the maxim of New York...one generation of men seem studious to remove all relics of those which preceded them," constant change has been part of New York's sense of self. The city's continued schizophrenic attitude about progress and the past is well stated in *Time Magazine* of 1950, which observed: "Nothing makes a New Yorker happier than the sight of an old building rich in memories of the past—unless it is tearing the damn thing down and replacing it with something in chromium and plate glass, with no traditions at all." Though New York has always been about change, for well over a century, it has also been about New Yorkers trying to find a way to manage that change.

Not only is the very existence of the law remarkable, its successful application--now protecting some over 24,000 buildings is indeed a cause for celebration. Think for a moment of all we have saved: As of February 5 the Landmarks Preservation Commission has granted protection to 1,182 individual landmarks, 120 interior landmarks, nine scenic landmarks and 90 historic districts. Indeed, with such a roster of accomplishment, New Yorkers could just pat ourselves on

the back, take a victory lap, and comfort ourselves with the knowledge that even though the wreckers continue their work, we are so much better off than preservationists in other cities.

However, in all of my years in preservation, I have yet to find that *complacency* is an effective strategy for saving landmarks. Rather, as then MAS council Edward Riley Fitch noted at the time the law was passed: “We have won an important legislative battle but it is not the end of the Landmark’s war by any means. Vigilance is the price of preservation.”

The cold hard fact is we’re still losing neighborhoods and buildings that many of us would prefer to be saving. There are many forces responsible for this: the real estate market with its rapacious developers and their gifted lawyers, municipal politics, economic forces, power brokers with different views of what’s best for our city, budgetary limitations, and changing societal dynamic. For once, however, just for a change, how looking closer to home, at our own attitudes and behaviors? Could preservation itself be inadvertently contributing to our losses?

Could we be losing buildings and places we thought the law would be able to save because of some of preservation’s own ingrained beliefs and behaviors? Could we be losing buildings because of deeply imbedded attitudes about certain categories of buildings? Could we be losing buildings and historic neighborhoods because of changing societal dynamics we have failed to recognize and develop responses to? Could we be losing cherished resources because of preservation advocacy dynamics and practices established over 43 years ago? Could we be losing buildings because we’ve become too dependent on one preservation tool?

Underpinning all these questions lurks a larger one—could the continued influence of our own past be contributing to our current losses?

Let’s do some digging into that past of ours.

1. Could we be losing buildings because of deeply imbedded attitudes about certain categories of buildings?

The intellectual roots of preservation go back to two streams of thought: the patriotic/historical focus of groups best represented by Andrew Haswell Green's American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society and the second, the aesthetic roots of preservation coming out of the city beautiful movement and the Chicago world's Fair and advanced by New York's art societies with the Municipal Art Society in the lead.

In 1913 organizations from both traditions were involved in the Mayor's billboard Advertising commission of the city of New York whose work led Albert Bard to draft a proposed amendment to the NYS Constriction that would have empowered cities to regulate on the grounds of aesthetics. Both groups were also there over 40 years later in December of 1964 to support the proposed Landmarks legislation, whose legal basis came from the act drafted by Bard and passed in 1956.

The efforts towards advancing the preservation agenda in the early 1940s were motivated in great part by threats to the historic. Behind these threats was Moses: Robert Moses: the great builder whose ends-justified-the-means philosophy of city building made him the villain of many preservation dramas. It was Moses plan to demolish Castle Clinton that enraged the otherwise calm and collected civic sector. That threat agitated and educated by fire, the goo goos—the good government groups of the city. The battle over the castle would rage for a decade. It was framed in historic terms. Carl Van Doren, historian, author said of the site: “Castle Clinton is for Americans of the nineteenth century what Plymouth Rock was for the Americans of the seventeenth. To destroy Castle Clinton seems to me an act of civilized vandalism. Shall the proud city of New York make it possible for posterity to say that the people of the city in 1947 did not cherish so important a monument enough to preserve it.?” Moses tried to raise the aesthetic but also took on the historic value of the site, describing Castle Clinton as “a half-sunken gas tank” “that red wart on the fair face of our city.” and maintaining that “Fort Clinton has no history’ it never fired a shot.”

It was the threat to Castle Clinton and to another historic house, the that united civic groups to focus on the larger issue of protecting historic sites. These nascent efforts would be sidetracked for nearly a decade by Pearl Harbor and World War II.

Postwar, when interest in preservation was renewed in the early 1950s, the aesthetic wing of the movement took the leadership role. The Municipal Art Society and the Society of Architectural Historians launched what turned into a multi-year project to create the seminal “Index of architecturally notable Structures in New York city” which was first formally published and released to the public in 1957. It was based on an initial list developed in the early 1940s by the great architectural historian Talbot Hamlin which was updated and then widely circulated for additions, discussion, and debate. The Index became the basis for Alan Burnham’s book, which was described by Brendan Gill as a “veritable Kama Sutra” for devotees of New York. The Index also became the blueprint guiding the early designation efforts of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. After all, the title of this survey providing the intellectual capital that drove the designation process reflected its dominant value--it was the index of architecturally notable structures” not the Index of Historical Structures. Architecture, not history, had taken the lead.

Logically, from its earliest days, the staff and leadership of the LPC largely consisted of architectural historians and architects. Many of them had been involved in the earlier effort to compile the Index. The Commission was blessed with the likes of chairman Geoffrey Platt and ex. dir, James Van Derpool. The key role of architectural historians and architects in the work of the commission continues to this day.

With this history, is it a surprise that there are so many more sites that have been protected because of their architectural value than because of their historical importance or cultural associations? There are those that feel this tradition of being more oriented to architecture than history or culture, continues to dominate the implementation of the Landmarks Law. The first panel this morning takes on the subject as it addresses the question: “Where Did the “History” Go in Historic Preservation.”

Even within preservation’s focus on the architecturally important, there is a historic attitude that may help explain the continued “heavy lift” facing those trying to protect and preserve post world war two architecture. Helping drive the 1905-s preservation efforts at the Municipal Art

Society were many with visceral hatreds of modern architecture. Edward Steese, long the head of the Society's committee developing the Index, railed against the modern. According to Brendan Gill, Steese "hated glass box buildings...he called them "megahyaline" buildings. Megahyaline buildings were Ed Steese's enemy wherever he turned." He was not alone, Bard had no love lost for the modern and we all know the position of Henry Hope Reed on the subject. That formative anti-modern, anti-glass, steel and concrete attitude was passed on to those who would follow. Recent history suggests it is still alive and well as the sensitivities of newer generations clash up against it.

Let's turn to the next easy question I want to put to you this morning.

2. Could we be losing buildings because of changing societal dynamics we've failed to recognize and respond to?

One such evolving societal dynamic is the changing role of the media. The press has been an ally of preservation almost from day one. The Herald Tribune was so important in the battle to save Castle Clinton that in 1949 its chief editorial writer, Geoffrey Parsons, received the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society's prestigious McAneny medal for "outstanding efforts in historic preservation." Local newspapers, the *Brooklyn Heights Press* and *the Village Voice* and *Villager* were indispensable allies to the cause of preservation in those neighborhoods. And of course there is the role of the New York Times in the campaign to get the landmarks law passed. Thanks to editor John Oakes and to the gifted writer Ada Louise Huxtable there were over twenty pro-preservation editorials between Dec 1961 and the passage of the law, some like "Farewell to Penn Station" or the "The Rape of the Brokaw Mansion" remain some of the most powerful preservation prose ever to appear in a major newspaper.

Today, politicians and moguls alike seem proud to run against editorials. Mainstream daily papers seem less interested than ever in preservation issues and neighborhood papers are not what they used to be. The new media is out there but not fully understood or utilized by preservation. Our second panel this morning, "The Media and Preservation: New Media, Old Roles?" will dig deeper into this important subject.

After a break for lunch and what promises to be a thought provoking exchange between Robert A.M. Stern and Kenneth T. Jackson on the subject of “Preservation and Progress” the symposium moves to the general subject of preservation advocacy. This brings me to my third easy question:

3. Could we be losing buildings because of preservation advocacy expectations, dynamics and practices that were established over 40 years ago?

From the perspective of today, early expectations for the landmarks law were modest. Despite the compelling language of the law which pronounced preservation a “public necessity” –its implementation at times has made it appear to be more a public nicety. From day one, the Landmark Preservation Commission’s top priority was, appropriately, the preservation of the landmarks law itself . One has to remember just how fragile the Commission and the Law were in the early days. Though Mayor Wagner would come to reflect that “creating the Landmarks Commission was probably the best thing that I ever did while I was the Mayor,” at the time his feeling was very different. At the signing of the bill he reassured property owners that “if indeed the bill was found to be “too restrictive on property rights or did not meet the problems of landmark owners” he has assurances from the city council that it would be amended. Not exactly a ringing endorse.

The top priority of the Commission’s first chair Geoffrey Platt and its second leader, Harmon Goldstone was to “preserve the Landmarks Preservation Commission.” They were shepherding into existence a new agency with no track record, an untested law based on an unchallenged piece of authorizing legislation—the Bard Act. Caution was their only viable option.

Platt and Goldstone knew from personal experience how long it had taken for the law to become a reality and how hard fought the landmarks law had been. They knew the disappointment of the years that had passed between the passage of the Bard Act in 1956 and the city’s first formal step taken towards implementing it, the creation of the Mayor’s Committee for the Preservation of Structures of Historic and Esthetic Importance in 1961. They knew the agony of waiting through

the summer of 1964 hoping that the draft landmarks law would not die a slow death on the Mayor's desk but make it to the City Council. They knew the many times fate had intervened to help move the law forward. They realized that in the ultimate passage of the law, preservation had managed to capture lightning in a bottle. They knew what had been lost in those long years of waiting for a law and they knew what was at stake if the hard fought law were to be lost.

As result the commission developed an understandable culture of extreme caution. It was only when Grand Central Terminal was threatened that the commission drew a line in the sand. As Goldstone put it, "when it came to Grand Central, I said, we may well be torpedoed, but let's go down with all the flags flying."

That was then, fast forward to the present. Despite the Bard Act having been strengthened, despite the supreme court upholding the law in the case over Grand Central in spite of years of supportive case law, and despite the Commission's over 40 year track record within municipal government, some feel that culture of caution still dominates the agency. Perhaps a way to gauge the accuracy of such a perception is to ask yourself, "In recent times has the application of the landmarks law suggested that preservation is a public necessity or more a public nicety?"

If one concludes that the "culture of caution" remains, one next needs to explore whether this is the result of ingrained behaviors and expectations OR is it a conscious response to the political realities of our time? Knowing that answer will help determine how preservation advocates need to respond.

Also evolving from the earliest days of the Commission, is a certain etiquette of behavior, an unwritten code of conduct, between the preservation civic sector and the Landmarks Preservation Commission itself. In 1961, the citywide civic organizations championing the cause of preservation, were invited inside government by James Felt, seen here seated in the middle, to help invent the Landmarks Law. From that point on the civic community largely deferred to, and took its cues from, the Mayoral committee, then the Mayoral Landmarks Preservation Commission and finally the Commission empowered by the law. This was only natural since the leadership of the LPC was generously populated by the same people leading the civic

community. During the LPC's first 18 years, it had four chairs, three were prominent leaders of the Municipal Art Society. The ranks of commissioner themselves were also heavily populated with civic leaders with strong ties to preservation-minded civic groups and professional organizations.

Over the years criticism of the LPC from within the preservation community has more often than not, been done with velvet gloves firmly pulled on. After all the agency was extremely fragile, had enough natural enemies poised to attack it, and it was being run by colleagues and close associates of the preservation advocates.

Low expectations for the Commission and a velvet glove form of advocacy may well have made great sense in the early years of the Commission but did they make sense after the law was upheld by the Supreme Court, did they make sense after years of the Commission proving itself, do they still make sense today?

Is the very existence of the agency still in question? Is the agency still dominated by those from within the civic community, sharing its preservation ethic? Are most of the commissioners still closely linked to civic organizations? Is the agency still so fragile and untested that robust criticism of it by its own supporters puts it at risk? The answers may still be a resounding "Yes" but we haven't even been consciously asking the questions.

Do changed circumstances demand a new type of advocacy OR does the old "code of conduct" still make sense because of the circumstances of today's historical moment? However you answer the question, what is *absolutely essential* for preservation's future is that we are not functioning on "automatic pilot." We must be doing what we do because, based on a critical appraisal of our moment and taking into account the forces at work today--we feel it is the strategy that is required. Preservation happens in space and time—we have been much more conscious of space than we have been of time.

And now to the last of my uncomfortable questions:

4. Could we be losing buildings because we've become too dependent on one tool? And that tool would be the landmarks law. Stated another way, are we trapped in a cage of our own making?

Since at least the 1940s when New Yorkers started to seriously look to examples from other cities for instruction on how to save threatened buildings and neighborhoods, more and more New Yorkers realized what was missing was a legal mechanism to protect landmarks. In 1950 Francis Keally (seen here in the gray pinstripe suit) President of the Municipal Art Society issued the clarion call for a law. He asked for "legislation to preserve New York's centers of historic, artistic or cultural interest." Legislation for "guidance or control over aesthetic character of private structures." In doing so he referenced the experience of Alexandria Virginia, Charleston, South Carolina and New Orleans Vieux Carre.

Achieving a law took 15 very long years of hard work and many losses: the remembered the less remembered the almost forgotten Brokaw Mansion and many near losses, such as the Percy Pyne block on Park Avenue. Organizations, committees, and individuals lived through years of seemingly endless meetings on the subject.

For so long the law was seen as the missing answer to preservation's problems that once it arrived on the scene it dominated the landscape—it created and defined New York's preservation playing field. It shaped the debate. Other cities with weaker laws have had to more aggressively develop other preservation strategies: other regulatory devices, tax incentives, direct intervention in the real estate market, and the list goes on.

Did preservation in NYC unintentionally cripple itself by focusing the bulk of its attention and resources on the application of the law? Do we need a more fully developed set of preservation tools to augment the law? Are there in fact real limitations to what the law can do, even if it was administered by your own personal choice of landmarks commissioners?

Not only has the movement focused primarily on the use of the law, with the notable exception of the 1973 Amendments to the Law, that focus has not included the option of expanding

preservation's abilities by seeking to enhance the law's powers. Quite the contrary—the fear over the fragility of the Law and the Commission has led to the still *dominant* mind set that any potential benefit in strengthening the law through amendment is outweighed by the potential risk of such action. Though a growing number of voices are questioning that orthodoxy, it still reflects the mainstream preservation position. As a result, preservation has, by in large, played only a defensive game when it has come to the law: that is, trying to keep everyone's hands off it. By only playing defense, success has been defined as maintaining what we have.

With the option of improving our lot by strengthening the law taken off the table, preservation in New York City has not only employed the landmarks law as its primary tool, it has ruled out the possibility of upgrading that tool. Does this “hands off the law” attitude exist because of our past history or does it reflect the realities and constraints of today? Do the risks of trying to strengthen the law outweigh the potential benefits? Again, are we on auto pilot or are we doing what we're doing because of a critical appraisal of our historic moment. It is important to know why we do what we do.

This morning I've raised a series of provocative, annoying and perhaps even troubling questions and have provided no conclusive answers to any of them. At this historical juncture, what is important is that we start asking these and other questions.

I'm assuming everyone in this room is a passionate preservationist. What other excuse do you have for your being here early on a Saturday morning. That means this is a room full of people all with possible answers to the questions I've raised. Knowing our past, critically thinking about what we are doing, asking why we are doing it, and analyzing how we are doing it, is what today is all about.

The issues being explored at today's symposium have been concerns of preservation, past and present. In addressing them and the overarching question of why we continue to lose that which we want to save, I urge us to study and consider our past and benefit from the perspective and context it provides. We need to appreciate Faulkner's admonition about the past, *that it isn't even past*. Only by knowing the past can we see how it still lives and may be influencing our

actions today AND only by knowing our past can we also consider the advice of that more modern sage, Dr. Laura, and her admonition to just “Get over it.” Indeed, we have to first understand our past and its influence on the present, before we can decide whether or not we need to “get over it.”

Today’s symposium is not an antiquarian exercise. It is critical that we explore these issues of our past and present because they inform us about what it is really all about: the future—both the future that starts today as well as the more distant horizon of 2030. Appreciating how preservation today has been shaped by historical forces alerts us to consider how dramatically preservation is likely to be shaped by the events of the future. As Churchill wrote, “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.”

As we contemplate a New York of 2030, preservation faces a variety of challenges. The Mayor has alerted us to the impending arrival of a million more New Yorkers with all the infrastructure and housing they will need. The mega project is alive and well. Already such projects are being battled across the city. The ghost of Robert Moses is walking in the land. Unaddressed, such forces could lead to a continued loss of buildings we’d rather save. It is important that we start doing some serious thinking about how we want the future to turn out for preservation in NYC. To that end a yearlong project, Preservation Vision as been launched by a consortium of preservation funders with the goal of engaging as many preservationists as possible in a conversation about our future. Its first phase is an online survey seeking to gather, from as wide a mix of preservationist as possible, their thoughts about the future, the role preservation needs to play in NYC’s future, and what it will take to position preservation to play such a role. There are cards on a table in back with the web address to take the survey. If you haven’t already filled out the survey, please do it when you get home.

Now is the time for you and the preservation groups to which you belong, to put the future on your agenda. The Historic Districts Council is devoting its conference to this subject on March 8. Look at the future through your own particular preservation lens. Explore it in your own unique way.

Take on the future before all you can do is lament its arrival.

As we contemplate our present and future, a final thought about our past. It took from 1913 to 1956 for Albert Bard's belief that aesthetic regulations were an appropriate realm for government regulation to become a reality. He was 87 when he drafted the Bard Act, 89 when it passed, without it we could not have had the law. Also remember it took 15 years from when the first Municipal Art Society president publicly called for a landmarks law until had one came into existence. The big transformative ideas take years. The notion of aesthetic regulation and the idea of a landmarks law for New York City, were both radical ideas when first advanced. No informed, sophisticated observer of the civic scene would have given either idea any chance of success when first proposed. Vision, tenacity, and dedication made these transformative concepts, reality.

If such radical ideas dreamt by our preservation forebears could become reality with the passage of time and the investment of extraordinary effort, what radical dreams might preservationists have today that could transform our city's future and in the years ahead, save even more of what Bard called the patrimony of the people. Do we have to continue to lose buildings we would rather be saving or do we still have the capacity to dream and the tenacity to make such dreams come true?

Even more intriguing, what new ideas might emerge for saving sites and resources and aesthetic and historic values that were never meant to fall within the purview of the landmarks law: such things as view sheds, historic uses, privately owned scenic resources, a wider range of interiors, expanded design review—let your imagination roam. Dare to dream.

Preservation's lineage is one of caring, concerned, creative New Yorkers as individuals and united in effective organizations, refusing to accept that it was inevitable that their city would continue to destroy what should be saved. That is our inheritance as preservationists and we certainly don't want to 'get over' that part of our history. Now, more than ever, is the time to embrace it.

In closing, yes, he's almost done, thanks go to Liz McEnaney for her role organizing today's symposium and for assembling the images for this talk, thanks to Vanessa Norton of the New York Preservation Archive Project, thanks to the Museum of the City of New York, thanks to the incredible roster of speakers populating today's program and thanks to you. The fact that today's symposium has been sold out for over a week proves that the tradition of New Yorkers caring passionately about their landmarks continues.

Excelsior and on to our future!