

**A Plan for Saving  
New York City's  
Historically and Culturally  
Significant Sites**

Discussion Draft



***History Happened Here***

**The Municipal Art Society  
Committee on Historical  
and Cultural Landmarks**

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The Municipal Art Society of New York  
November, 1996



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project owes a very great debt to the Municipal Art Society, its Board of Directors and Preservation Committee, its Presidents - first Kent Barwick and now Brendan Sexton - and its Preservation Committee Chair, Charles A. Platt, for having the foresight to launch it and the determination to see it through. It owes a large debt also to the donors whose generosity made it possible, including the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

The Municipal Art Society owes special thanks to those who participated in the work of the Committee on Historical and Cultural Landmarks:

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Michael George, Columbia Broadcasting System; member Municipal Art Society  
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Sam Gruber, World Monuments Fund  
Betti-Sue Hertz, Bronx Council for the Arts/Longwood Gallery; RepoHistory  
Evelyn Kalibala, Board of Education  
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Department of Environmental Psychology  
Ken Lustbader, New York Landmarks Conservancy; Organization of Lesbian + Gay  
Architects and Designers  
Kevin McGruder, Abyssinian Development Corporation  
John Manbeck, Brooklyn Borough Historian; Kingsborough Community College  
Joan Maynard, Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History  
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Donald Shriver, Union Theological Seminary  
Arthur Tobier, Public historian; formerly Community History Workshop, St. Marks-in-the-  
Bowery  
Sally Yerkovich, New York City  
Steve Zeitlin, City Lore

We are grateful also to a great many individuals for sharing their expertise with the Committee, whether in meetings, telephone calls, or through their careful reading of the manuscript at various stages:

Ruth Abram, Lower East Side Tenement Museum  
Leslie Agard-Jones, Board of Education  
Robert Baron, New York State Council on the Arts; Folk Arts Program  
Rina Ben Maior, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College  
Rachel Bernstein, New York University, Department of History  
Steve Brier, American Social History Project, Hunter College  
Jon Bloom, Workers Defense League  
Jim Clarke, formerly Public Art Fund  
Honorable Una Clarke, New York City Council  
Jose Colon, Local Development Corporation Del Barrio  
Bill Conklin, Conklin and Rossant; member, Municipal Art Society Preservation Committee;  
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Susan Freedman, Public Art Fund; director, Municipal Art Society  
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Paul Glassman, Pratt Institute; formerly Morris-Jumel Mansion  
Larry Gobrecht, formerly New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic  
Preservation  
Lois Godwin, New York City Councilmember Mary Pinkett  
Jeff Gottlieb, Central Queens Historical Association  
Roberta Gratz, journalist, author of *The Living City*  
Mary Ellen Hearn, formerly New York City Historic House Trust  
Merrill Hesch, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation  
Joe Jamison, New York State A.F.L.-C.I.O.  
David Kahn, Connecticut Historical Society; formerly Brooklyn Historical Society  
Lisa Knauer, RepoHistory  
Michael Kwartler, Environmental Simulation Center, New School for Social Research  
Peter Kwong, author, *The New Chinatown*  
Charlie Lai, Office of Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger  
Frank Lang, Asian Americans for Equality

Paul Lauter, Trinity University, Department of English Literature  
 Bill Lenahan, Italian American Labor Council  
 Jill Levey, formerly Brooklyn Historical Society  
 Ben Levy, Department of the Interior, National Historic Landmarks Program  
 George Lopez, District Leader, 35th Assembly District, Queens  
 Paul Luskin, New York Guides Association  
 Honorable Helen Marshall, New York City Council  
 Gene Norman, director, Municipal Art Society; former Chair, Landmarks Preservation  
 Commission  
 Mark O'Brien, RepoHistory  
 Bob Ohlerking, New York City  
 Jayne Pagnucco, RepoHistory  
 Karen Phillips, Abyssinian Development Corporation  
 Reverend Thomas F. Pike, St. George's Church, Stuyvesant Square; member, Landmarks  
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 Marjorie Pearson, Landmarks Preservation Commission  
 Donald Presa, Greater Ridgewood Restoration; Landmarks Preservation Commission  
 Reverend John Redic, Bronx Landmarks Task Force; Longwood Historic District Community  
 Association  
 Tony Robins, Landmarks Preservation Commission  
 Honorable Annette Robinson, New York City Council  
 Charles Sachs, South Street Seaport Museum  
 Eric Sandeen, University of Wyoming, Department of American Studies  
 Vincent Seyfried, Queens Historical Society  
 Peter D. Shaver, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation  
 Robert Singleton, Bowne House  
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 Clark Strickland, formerly Preservation League of New York State  
 Vernon Takeshita, Museum of Chinese in the Americas  
 Jim Steere, New York City  
 Karen Tabern, Landmarks Harlem  
 David F.M. Todd, former Chair, Landmarks Preservation Commission; Municipal Art Society  
 Planning Committee  
 Anthony Max Tung, former member, Landmarks Preservation Commission  
 Debbie Van Cura, Astoria Historical Society  
 Anne Van Ingen, New York State Council on the Arts, Architecture, Planning and Design  
 Program  
 Marta Vega, Caribbean Cultural Center  
 Danny Walkowitz, New York University, Department of History  
 Sherrill Wilson, African Burial Ground Project; Reclaim the Memories: Black History Tours  
 of Old New York  
 Anthony C. Wood, Ittleson Foundation; formerly J.M. Kaplan Fund  
 John Young, Department of City Planning

The report could not have been written without the dedication of a series of interns and  
 assistants, and to them we owe special thanks: Nina Browne, Lauren Burlison, Joanne  
 Filippone, Ginevra Giorgini, Laura Hansen, Nezska Pfeifer, James SooHoo, and especially the very  
 first, Noela Hooper. Finally, I would like to thank Madeline Rogers for editing this report with  
 enthusiasm, humor, and a fine professional attention to substance as well as expression. It  
 could not have taken shape without her.

## PREFACE

This report aims to set forth a general plan for the preservation of New York's historically significant sites. In part it is a call to action, in part a call to further thought about issues which do not lend themselves to easy solutions. The Municipal Art Society became committed to this project as a result of the long and bitter fight to save the Audubon Ballroom at Broadway and 165th Street. This was a historically significant site by any measure: notorious as the scene of Malcolm X's assassination in February 1965, it is also where William Fox started his movie empire, and where early meetings of the Transport Workers Union were held in the 1930s. The partial destruction of the Audubon Ballroom was followed by the loss of the Dvorák House and of Pier 54, the last of the great Cunard piers. The destruction of portions of the African Burial Ground, and the controversies over the retention of the Naumburg Bandshell in Central Park and, more recently, of the Children's Zoo made it clear that a great many people were responding with passion to the claims of historic sites. The movements to save the Audubon Ballroom and the African Burial Ground, indeed, generated a level of popular mobilization that had not been seen in preservation issues in a long time.

It was becoming clear that historical sites had a great power to arouse controversy. In some cases, indeed, there was no consensus on whether they were of value at all. Did they matter? How could one distinguish important sites from less important ones? What should be done to preserve them, how should they be preserved, and who should do it? The question of historical sites, their value, and their preservation needed a fresh look.

A particular focus of this study from the beginning was the Landmarks Preservation Commission, whose declared public purpose is to "safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage" by preserving the places which "represent or reflect elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history." It appeared that these phrases gave the Commission the authority, or even the mandate, to designate sites for historical reasons. If so, was the Commission fulfilling that mandate? If not, how could it do so?

To address these and other questions, the Municipal Art Society convened a study group. The group began as a subcommittee of the Society's standing Preservation Committee, a group of over thirty architects, preservationists, historians, and neighborhood activists. It was the committee — and particularly its chair, Charles Platt — which pressed for this study. The participants quickly recognized the need to open it to experts in a wide range of subject areas. A loose structure was evolved in which people were brought into the discussion as the need and opportunity arose, so that in the end, well over fifty individuals contributed in some way to drafting, reading, and redrafting this report, taking part in more than twenty formal meetings in addition to less formal working lunches and site visits.

Those who participated included architectural historians; urban historians; oral historians; public historians; social historians; labor historians; literary historians; urban planners; clerics; architects; public artists; museum curators, administrators, and consultants; educators; arts administrators; folklorists; archaeologists; archivists; professional preservationists specializing in the care of religious properties; environmental psychologists; cultural anthropologists; journalists; current and former landmarks staff and commissioners; staff members from the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the National Park Service; City Council members; labor activists; professional tour guides; travel administrators and consultants; community development experts; and neighborhood advocates from the South Bronx, Harlem, the Lower East Side, Chinatown, Corona, College Point, Coney Island, Crown Heights, and elsewhere.

The committee held its meetings at various locations around the city, some of them historic sites: the Weeksville Society in Brooklyn, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, the Brooklyn Historical Society, Kingsland House in Flushing, and the "Alcove Lounge" in Corona. Committee members toured historic sites in Chinatown and Corona, synagogues in the Bronx, rehabilitated tenements in the Lower East Side, and sign markers in lower Manhattan; they assembled a library of printed material from all over the country. In the meantime, the committee was redefining its mandate. From an initial focus on the work of a single governmental agency, its scope expanded to encompass just about anything that anyone might do to protect a historic place or keep its story alive.

This is not, finally, a report about "landmarking;" rather, it is a report about the value of our historic sites and what people can do to safeguard, mark, interpret, and celebrate them. Landmark designation and regulation play a part (as do federal and state preservation programs), but only within a much broader context of options and actions. Broader is indeed the key word of this report. It urges those who love the city and care about preserving what is best and most important in its fabric to broaden their sense of mission: to recognize traces of history in all its many wonderful (and often unexpected) guises, and to care for them with the same solicitude that they extend to the beautiful cornice or the rare fanlight.

The committee found history in neighborhoods all over the city: we wish others the same joy of discovery and recognition that we experienced. The report also urges lovers of the city to broaden their definition of "preservation;" to throw themselves into the challenge of interpreting with the same zeal that they have long applied to saving. For in interpretation lies the saving of the stories, associations, memories, and lessons that make historic sites valuable to people.

The report finally urges lovers of the city fabric to broaden the alliance of its stewards and interpreters. Just as history is the birthright of each of New York's residents — and the shared inheritance of all — the preservation of history is a civic responsibility that can be discharged only if it is shared. Preservationists will need to build partnerships — with folklorists, geographers, historians, artists, museum curators, and no doubt other professionals as well —

to get the job done. And professionals will need to work with amateurs, because communities will always have to be involved in discovering, writing, saving, and telling their own stories.

In the end the committee was ambitious in its goals: We chose to lay out a vision of what the city might look like, perhaps ten years hence, if it were genuinely dedicated to preserving historic sites and if its various public and not-for-profit agencies were able to express that dedication in comprehensively effective programs. The goals are lofty, but we believe that each of the specific recommendations is practical and achievable.

This report presents the views and recommendations of the Society's Committee on Historical and Cultural Landmarks. It is a discussion paper, intended to stimulate and focus public debate. As such, it is a beginning rather than an end. We invite you, the reader, to communicate your thoughts on the subject to the Municipal Art Society, in anticipation of the issuance of a final report.



## A VENERABLE VISION FOR NEW TIMES

It is difficult to imagine that anyone could find the goals set out in this report — to preserve and protect New York's historically and culturally significant sites, and to promote understanding of them through interpretation and appropriate use — revolutionary in any way. This paper is, in fact, based on a venerable tradition. Americans have been working together to save their most beloved historic places ever since a group of women banded together to preserve Mount Vernon in 1858. Sites associated with the Founding Fathers were favorites, as were Civil War battlefields a little later. Thus was America's historic preservation movement born. The effort to protect culturally and historically significant places was, in fact, one of the preservation movement's earliest goals.

Eventually, though, the emphasis shifted and architectural quality became the touchstone. With New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission in the vanguard, this movement has given vitality to our cities and neighborhoods. Now, however, many preservationists are looking back to their roots and rediscovering history — not the same old history, but one fortified by a new appreciation of the richness of our urban society and its many interlinked strands. When we say "history happened here," we mean the history of how we became the city we are. We mean the aspirations and accomplishments — and the sufferings and disappointments, too — of each of our communities. We mean the prologue to our future as a city. And, of course, we mean the historic places that can help us remember and understand this history.

What is an historic place? It is a place where something happened ... an event, a pattern of events, a movement, a way of life, a traditional ceremony or activity. But it is more. It is a place where that something can be understood, remembered, or retold especially because of the physical survival of a structure or landscape. It may also be a place where vital traditions, carried over from the past, are still being enacted; places some people call "cultural sites" or even "living landmarks." Such living landmarks remind us that history not only happened but is *still* happening here, and that the past is connected with the present. Both historical sites and living landmarks enrich our lives as urban citizens. A visit to New York's African Burial Ground brings a long-lost chapter of American history to life as no book can do; a walk through the tenements of the Lower East Side provides a visceral understanding of immigrant life beyond any verbal description. These are examples of survivors — places that can still communicate to us if we know how to look at them and respond. Sadly, when a place is destroyed, very often an important chunk of history dies with it. When the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel was demolished, for example, and its famous clock removed, the unique and cherished New York social tradition of "meeting under the clock" vanished with it, living on only in literary references.

As this committee considered the value of historical and cultural sites and met with people around the city, a shared vision came to motivate our work: a vision of a city whose buildings and spaces proudly display the history of its people, and whose people cherish their historical and cultural sites and use them to understand their past and chart their future. We found that preservationists are sharing this vision in growing numbers; without renouncing the movement's great achievements they are forging new partnerships with schools and museums, with artists, historians and folklorists and above all with communities to save the city's past. Yet we also came to realize there were obstacles to be overcome to fully achieve our vision. Not only were cultural and historical sites threatened with demolition, defacement, or decay, but they faced a special threat: the threat of neglect, of forgetfulness. For this reason the task force articulated the double goal stated above: to protect *and* to interpret.

This report presents the recommendations of the Municipal Art Society's Committee on Historical and Cultural Landmarks. It is our hope that this report will inspire thought and spirited discussion that may eventually lead to both a change in thinking and a change in the way we do things. We address both in the report that follows. In the first part, "Premises for Preserving New York's History," we propose new ways of thinking about preservation; ways that preserve sites and buildings not solely for their architectural merit, but also for their historical importance. In it, we invite preservationists to take up a wide-angle lens and begin looking not just at extraordinary buildings, but at typical ones; not just at single structures or small units, but at communities; not just at one moment in time but at the layers of history that exist in aging structures and sites. It is an approach that emphasizes inclusion; encourages different — even conflicting — views of history; and calls for the involvement of many disciplines, communities, and institutions in the process. We also explore — and invite the readers of this report to reflect on — the need for interpretation of sites and buildings that may not yield up meaning as readily as buildings of more obvious "importance."

The second part of the report explores the value of partnerships in identifying and protecting historical and cultural sites. The report's final two sections address the roles of the New York City Landmarks Commission and the state and federal agencies that administer preservation programs. These sections of the report make specific recommendations designed to improve the way these agencies deal with historical and cultural sites.

preservation. The challenge is often to look past the architecturally oriented criteria of value that many of us bring with us, and to recognize historical significance in its many guises.

In New York the range of building types in which historical significance may be found is broad indeed. In Chinatown, barbershops, general stores, the headquarters of political and community organizations, the sites of important advances for garment and restaurant workers; on the Lower East Side, synagogues, buildings that once housed *landsmanschaften* and *schteeble*; in East Harlem and the South Bronx, *casitas*, storefront churches, markets, salsa clubs and record shops, and the sites of political rallies; in Greenwich Village, coffee houses, restaurants, and piers; in Harlem, nightclubs, public libraries, churches, and sites of street-corner oratory; in the Financial District, skyscrapers, clubs, and countinghouses; along the waterfront, warehouses, docks, grain elevators, sugar refineries, oil storage tanks, and the Coney Island Boardwalk; in the Garment District, lofts and the site of famous political rallies; in mid-Manhattan, mansions, corporate headquarters, and Central Park; and almost everywhere, apartments buildings, rowhouses, union locals and health clinics, factories, bars, and storefront community organizations.

By pointing to such humble structures, we are not suggesting that we have stopped needing the Mount Vernons, Carnegie Halls, gentlemen's clubs, and mansions that dignify our cities. But if we are to represent the full texture and richness of our history, we must also learn to recognize the factories, workplaces, and tenements in which ordinary people passed their lives; the union halls and drinking establishments where they gathered; the street corners where day laborers endured the daily "shape-up," and the clubs where distinctly new — and New York — forms of popular music were born.

This committee did not arrive at our recommendations lightly. We do not believe that architectural and historical values are mutually exclusive or in opposition — though we have found that proponents of both have helped to enforce a misleading tension between the two. In fact, many architecturally important buildings are historically significant above and beyond their aesthetic quality (though all too often this goes unremarked). Conversely, many historical sites have great aesthetic power: witness City Hall, or the Art Deco lofts of Manhattan's Garment District. Yet some sites of undoubted importance lack aesthetic distinction, such as the famous and much-discussed examples of the Garibaldi-Meucci house on Staten Island and the Louis Armstrong House in Queens. These are both designated landmarks; it should be an easy step to move from them to, say, the quite ordinary house in Corona, Queens, where Malcolm X and his family lived at the time of his assassination. It is perhaps more challenging, yet ultimately essential, to move to a greater appreciation of the cityscape and its historical content.

A particular challenge has long been and continues to be preservation of archaeological resources that often lie undetected beneath the ground until uncovered in surveys preceding new construction. The rediscovery of the African Burial Ground near Manhattan's Civic Center in 1991 has made New Yorkers particularly aware of these hidden resources. Its designation as

part of a New York City Historic District has established a valuable precedent for such sites' protection under local law. But we don't know how many important resources of industrial archaeology still lie unprotected.

Yet another important challenge lies in the preservation of open-air sites, such as the Lower East Side's "Pig-Market," where laborers once congregated in search of day work, or Union Square and Seventh Avenue which both hosted historic labor rallies and parades. Stock market panics, the Draft Riots, Jacob Leisler's execution, and the trading of slaves all took place out of doors. Marcus Garvey first preached his gospel of African nationalism at the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street. Vito Marcantonio addressed a rally for Puerto Rican independence on East 113th Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues. Orville Wright flew the first four flights over American waters from an open field on Governors Island.

### Typical, Extraordinary, and Exemplary

Landmarks have most often been used to present exceptional individuals and achievements, and that is wholly appropriate, especially in a city where so many local individuals and events have had a national and even international impact. But New York is also a city that was inhabited by millions of individuals and groups who, though unsung, are as much a part of the city's development as were its celebrated citizens. In recognizing the exceptional individual, we must not lose sight of these collective stories. Historic sites can help to tell those stories, as the National Park Service (NPS) has shown.

In 1993-94, the NPS, with the help of the Organization of American Historians, National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, and American Historical Association, revised the thematic framework which governs its approach to history in the National Historic Landmark, National Register, and other programs. The result is a series of preservation criteria set in a broad framework that includes social forces and sweeping historical themes that could provide a useful basis for thinking about New York's history.

A few examples will suggest what we mean. While homes associated with famous immigrants present the high points of the immigration story — its most exceptional successes — the synagogues and burial societies of the Lower East Side recall the lives of the great masses of immigrants at the turn of the century. While the handsome apartment building at 555 Edgecombe Avenue in which Paul Robeson and Count Basie lived (a designated landmark) represents the development of Harlem through its most notable cultural achievements, the more modest apartment building at 31 West 133rd Street — had it survived — would have presented tangible evidence of a great population movement which soon made Harlem the capital of black America. For it was here in 1905, that realtor Philip A. Payton moved Harlem's first African American families. The home of Alice Paull, outside Philadelphia, speaks to the heroic determination of the Women's Suffrage movement through the courageous efforts of one of its

leaders. But women have displayed courage and tenacity on smaller stages: as workers in department stores, garment factories, offices, and homes. Their stories need telling, too.

To recognize and attempt to preserve the "typical" does not require us to turn our backs on the extraordinary. It does require us to open our minds to what is significant, extraordinary, occasionally even marvelous in the lives of "ordinary" people. And it demands that we seek ways of presenting the "typical," not just for its own sake, but as the "epitome" of the most sweeping and dramatic episodes in our history.

### **The Centrality of Communities**

New York, it is often said, is a city of neighborhoods. This task force prefers to think of it as a city of communities, a word that suggests groupings that transcend the geographic. While it is true that New York City residents often identify with their immediate neighborhood, whether it's Morrisania, Bedford Stuyvesant, or SoHo, it is equally true that many New Yorkers belong to communities based on professions, religious beliefs, or lifestyle. As our committee explored what we meant by history and examined ways to recognize that history in terms of the built environment, we concluded that community was an invaluable concept. The community is smaller than the city but larger than the individual. The distinctive life experiences of its members stands out more clearly than that of the city's residents as a group or individually. The history of communities thus mediates between the awesome scale of New York and the minutiae of individual experience.

Identifying the significant historical sites in a community's history calls for special survey techniques. Whereas a typical preservation survey might start by seeking a building type or architectural style, then cataloguing and comparing existing examples, a historical site survey typically starts with an understanding of how the community functioned — where people lived and worked, how they interacted socially, educated their children, worshipped, and entertained themselves — and then moves on to a listing of the buildings or places important in the life of the community, and finally to a survey of surviving examples.

The state of California's Ethnic Sites Survey showed how a community-oriented survey method can lead to an inventory of historically significant sites that speaks to community and universal values. The authors' recognition that the religious confraternities known as *Sociedades Guadalupanas* were central to California's Mexican communities led them to buildings which architectural historians might have overlooked. A barbershop was an important landmark to African American history; a canning factory, a ruined borax plant, a laundry, and a general store to the Chinese story; a labor camp and a grammar school to the Japanese story. Each historical experience generated its own particular range of significant building types.

As an example, in New York it would be possible to apply this kind of community-oriented survey to the history of Mohawk steel workers who participated in the construction of the city's skyscrapers and bridges. The Verrazano Bridge is one of their great monuments and memorials.

But their history as a community could perhaps better be told by sites in their downtown Brooklyn neighborhood, like the building occupied by the Wigwam Bar on Nevins Street (a place not only of male drinking and companionship but also of weddings and other community celebrations); the Cuyler Church on Pacific Street (where a young Anglo came to minister to their community and published a Mohawk translation of the Bible); and Local 361 of the Association of Iron Workers on Atlantic Avenue. Similarly, the history of New York's rise to ascendancy in abstract art after World War II could be remembered through the most significant studios, galleries, and other gathering places where Abstract Expressionism was nurtured through interaction among artists and between artists and the public.

As these examples suggest, the places where communities gathered, where information was exchanged and bonds forged, can be particularly valuable in telling their stories. Because they are not always monumental in appearance, such sites may be easy to overlook and can be identified only through a survey process that is firmly rooted in the written, and sometimes in the oral, history of the community.

### Interpreting Change Over Time

Buildings are not static. Often their appearance and configuration change with changing inhabitants and uses. Preservationists have long wrestled with the problem of how to restore a building that has undergone significant changes; practice has generally favored restoration to the original appearance. Even in the exceptional cases where a later "period of significance" is chosen, the interpretation remains static: the building is presented as an object which existed in a certain state at that moment and is revered for its associations with that particular moment. Yet buildings and places pick up significant associations along the way. A preservation practice that is sensitive to historical narrative will treasure and protect those associations wherever possible.

If the typical preservation approach presents the historic site reverently as if it were the cave of a famous hermit, *our* approach is to see historic sites as the shells of hermit crabs, used and reused by generations of occupants. By presenting sites dynamically, rather than statically, preservationists can provide imaginative access to the rich, confusing swirl of urban life that has passed through them.

Some of New York's "shells" bear the distinctive markings of their first occupants or constructors; the dissonance between those marks and their current appearance allows us to measure historical change. On the Lower East Side, buildings marked with stars of David today burst with immigrants from China and Vietnam; in Tribeca, dry goods warehouses — some still bearing their original occupants' company names — are now home to upper-middle-class professionals and successful artists; a once-great cinema in Harlem is now a Baptist church, while another in the South Bronx is a furniture store. But a great many of New York's most richly historic shells have not been so marked. A rowhouse in Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, or

Gowanus may have started as home to an upper-middle-class family, then been subdivided into single rooms for the elderly poor, and may now once again house a single well-to-do urban professional family, all with little exterior change other than in the style of the window blinds and the grime on the glass. The challenge for preservationists is not merely to save the building but to provide access to the sweep of its historical associations. This may mean retaining accretions or alterations even where they compromise the building's original design integrity. Or it may mean simply acknowledging its later history — including the events and forces that led to its preservation or rehabilitation — in its interpretation.

### City of Layers

What is true of individual buildings is even truer of New York's neighborhoods. Dig down into the past of most neighborhoods and you will find a multi-layered story of immigration, settlement, social and geographic mobility, and ethnic succession — processes which are central to much larger American stories of migration, ethnic aspiration, and sometimes discrimination.

Visitors to New York have been especially aware of this ceaseless change and instability. Learning that Harlem hadn't always been an African American community — that it had successively harbored Dutch, German, Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants — was one of Malcolm X's "biggest surprises" on moving there. "Each group left its deposits, as in geology," wrote Michael Gold in *Jews Without Money*, describing the Lower East Side's successive habitation by Native Americans, the Dutch, English, Irish, German, Italians, and Jews. One of the special opportunities of a historical and cultural preservation is to illuminate the processes of history that laid down those layers.

Some institutions have been successful at interpreting this layering. The Museum of Chinese in the Americas, for instance, has done an excellent job of presenting Chinatown's dual nature as a living Chinese community and as a neighborhood that was at various times home to large numbers of Irish, Italian, Jewish, and African American settlers. But marking the presence of former inhabitants within the actual spaces of a neighborhood can be much more difficult than doing so in museums, because such marking may be perceived as a challenge to the current inhabitants' legitimacy. Whether the site is a street in Brownsville once occupied by Jews and now by African Americans, or one in Corona once occupied by African Americans and now by Koreans, such enterprises will require diplomacy and extraordinary efforts at mutual understanding.

There are, however, some relatively simple techniques that can recognize this layering. One is through the identification and interpretation of sites that trace a community's migration. Linking such sites could trace the African American community's trail from lower Manhattan northward, that of the East European Jewish community from the Lower East Side to the Bronx and then on to the suburbs and Queens, and that of successive waves of Chinese immigrants from a

localized Chinatown in lower Manhattan into the former Little Italy and on to Flushing, Queens, and Brooklyn's Sunset Park.

Using birthplaces of well-known figures can demonstrate how one individual's rise represents not just his or her own upward mobility, but the aspirations of the group to which he or she belonged.

A particular challenge is to reveal historical layers whose traces have been erased by time or were never meant to be visible. Little Africa, the neighborhood just north of Manhattan's civic center where so many important African American institutions were founded in the early nineteenth century, has left few if any visible traces. Yet to allow it to vanish is to erase an important part of the city's history. A related challenge is to unmask important themes which by their very nature were invisible: In New York, for example, the earliest gay and lesbian bars of Greenwich Village were intentionally hard to identify – they had to be in order to protect their clientele. Yet even when physical traces of their presence have disappeared, such stories can lend richness to a neighborhood when they are brought to life through plaques, guidebooks, and walking tours. Not to do so serves no cause but the distortion of history.

### **Representing Diversity**

New York has always been a culturally diverse city. This diversity, upon which visitors have always commented, offers a good foundation for a program of historical and cultural landmarks preservation. But it also poses a daunting challenge: how to present New York's many separate histories while also linking them into larger narratives of the city. This committee does not call for a single, overarching narrative (who after all, would have the authority to prescribe it?), any more than we want to see the city's history splintered into countless "specific" narratives, each to all appearances unconnected to the others and speaking only to its adherents. We do urge preservationists and their partners to support multiple narratives than can bring the special insights of an ethnically or culturally specific point of view to bear on the city's history as a whole. We believe that supporting this kind of diversity – a diversity of opinion – can enrich our practice of protecting and interpreting historic sites. The following sections provide some suggestions for achieving this goal.

### **The Contribution of Culturally Specific History**

Culturally specific histories have made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the past, and to our practice as preservationists. In California, the Office of Historic Preservation surveyed the state's five largest ethnic minority groups present between 1848 and 1898. Compared to the state's official roster of historical landmarks, the resulting list not only illuminated specific ethnic histories but also dramatically enriched the overall presentation of California history in ways that all citizens, visitors, and armchair travelers can appreciate.



Governmental powers have been used to do more than simply survey culturally specific histories. In 1990, Congress passed the Maine Acadian Culture Preservation Act, aimed at identifying and preserving sites, artifacts, and even cultural traditions associated with the Acadian community that settled in Maine after 1775. The act authorized a comprehensive study of Acadian culture; established an advisory commission; and gave the Department of the Interior authority to make agreements with private property owners for land purchases and the preservation and interpretation of Acadian culture, and to operate historic sites.

In 1992, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council initiated an innovative three-year project, "Raising Our Sites," which aimed to strengthen the presentation of women's history at fourteen historic sites throughout the state. At each site a team, comprising board and staff members, volunteer docents, and local historians, worked with outside consultants to develop programs and work plans aimed at improving exhibits, programs, archival collections, and the dissemination of information.

Even in the absence of official surveys or commissions, published guidebooks are helping to draw public and official attention to neglected cultural heritages and to increase the perceived value of sites associated with them. There are well-known national guidebooks to African American and women's history sites but few such efforts within New York City. A recent one is a brochure on gay and lesbian sites recently published by the Organization of Lesbian + Gay Architects & Designers.

These projects all share a dedication to restore their subject group to a historical record from which it has been omitted. "We were there," say advocates; "our presence should be reflected in the historical record." Many speakers at the public hearing concerning New York's eighteenth-century African Burial Ground spoke with great emotion about the site's role in restoring the community's past and placing it back in the historical picture. But what needs to be emphasized is that efforts to correct the historical picture benefit everyone — not just those newly restored to it, but all those who are part of it.

Yet, compensatory history — what historian and preservationist Daniel Bluestone has called the effort to "crowd more groups and histories, individually told, under preservation's existing tent" — is not the goal. We need narratives that bind the parts, explore their interrelationships, and speak across the gaps — narratives of shared experiences told from different points of view.

### Describing an Elephant

History is interpretation and the history of any place, event, or group is as much a product of the "facts" as of who is doing the telling. As we learn to interpret sites and events in ways that respect and encourage different versions of the same stories, conflicting accounts are inevitable. They should be welcomed. Two RI/examples illustrate the way this encouragement of different points of view can enrich history for everyone.

According to a popular guidebook, the Downieville (California) of Gold Rush days was "known for its spontaneous sense of justice." One collective citizen action earned national headlines. In 1851, a local dance hall girl fatally stabbed a Scottish miner — in self-defense, she said, since he "pressed his attentions" on her. She was summarily convicted of her crime and lynched from a bridge over the Yuba River, the first woman in California executed by hanging."

In contrast to the guidebook's breezy dismissal of the woman involved, California's Ethnic Sites Survey gives her a name (Juanita), a place of origin (Mazatlán), and a nationality (Mexican). It adds that she had a good reputation in the community. It tells us that the drunken miner broke down her door and called her a whore in front of a crowd, and that his fellow miners rushed to hang her even though she may have been pregnant. This account places the incident within the context of the hostility toward Mexicans prevalent in California at the time, giving it greater resonance for all visitors.

In Seattle, an official plaque on the waterfront commemorates the American warships that "bravely repulsed" a group of Native Americans intent on attacking the settlement. A second plaque nearby, recently erected by two local artists, adds another point of view by telling visitors that the Native Americans had not come to attack the city but to protest the federal government's seizure of their lands. In both cases, choosing a different viewpoint resulted in a markedly different narrative from the accepted one.

In New York, broad historical themes such as the impact of public works and real estate development, of municipal services, of immigration, of deindustrialization and community displacement offer numerous opportunities to explore the viewpoints and historical experiences of different groups within our society. Preservationists can contribute to this enrichment of history through their selection of sites as well as their interpretations.

### **Binding Us Together**

As these examples illustrate, groups — even very different groups — and events do not exist in isolation. One reason many will find the "Ethnic Sites" interpretation of the Downieville lynching more satisfying than the popular guidebook's is that it links a dramatic incident to larger historical themes. It gives us insights into the relationships between very different groups of people occupying the same spaces. Interpretation of relationships between disparate groups opens a window onto a larger and more meaningful narrative about American history. Illuminating the complex forces of acceptance and rejection that have shaped the history of many communities offers preservationists an opportunity to transcend simplistic views of cultural diversity or "multiculturalism." By recreating these links, preservationists can close in on the shared history that binds us together.

Another way to build a larger narrative is by focusing on historical experiences that have affected the lives of disparate groups within society. The experience of work, for example, is central to New York's development into an economic powerhouse. Work is an experience shared

by almost all New Yorkers, regardless of occupation or economic status — from salsa musicians to stock brokers, Puerto Rican cigar makers to Native American steel workers, Jewish garment workers to Philippine nurses, teachers to tap dancers.

The history of work is woefully underrepresented in New York City, compared to many other places. In Lowell, Massachusetts, a National Historical Park and a Heritage State Park tell the story of mill workers. There, the National Park Service has preserved mill buildings, worker dormitories, and industrial artifacts; mounted ambitious exhibitions, established a visitors' center with an excellent bookstore; published a guidebook; and developed a program of trolley and canal boat tours in order to preserve and present Lowell's industrial heritage.

In New York State's Capital District the Hudson-Mohawk State Heritage Area, also known as RiverSpark, tells the story of American labor and industry through a twenty-eight-mile Heritage Trail linking over sixty sites scattered across Watervliet, Troy, Green Island, Lansingburgh, Cohoes, and Waterford. In southwest Pennsylvania, the America's Industrial Heritage Project, funded with over half a million dollars of congressional appropriations, has empowered a Heritage Preservation Commission to develop a broad range of strategies for preserving the industrial heritage of nine counties. On the western shores of the Hudson River, Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey has obtained federal funding to preserve, reuse, and interpret industrial sites in Perth Amboy, Trenton, and Paterson.

Yet, in New York City, site of one of the world's great ports, of significant industries ranging from oil refining to dressmaking, of major labor unions including the ILGWU and Transport Workers Union, of Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor, of the country's first Labor Day parade, of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, of Susan B. Anthony's Working Women's Association, of A. Philip Randolph, and of dozens, if not hundreds, of working class immigrant communities, there are few historic sites where visitors can learn about this heritage. Moreover, its survival is anything but assured: New York's most famous working class neighborhoods, such as Chinatown, the Lower East Side, Little Italy, Hell's Kitchen, Red Hook, Gowanus, and Harlem as well as neighborhoods like Steinway, Sandy Ground, Ridgewood, and Belmont remain almost entirely unprotected. So do the workplaces associated with the city's greatest industries, including garment manufacturing, maritime trade, printing and publishing, and public transit.

A program for preserving the history of work in New York might be symbolically anchored in Union Square, recently designated a National Historic Landmark. Union Square hosted the first Labor Day parade in 1882 and was headquarters for several major labor unions, including the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. The square represents a chunk of New York's labor history and the many ethnic groups that participated in that history.

A program of tours and public art could be developed to interpret the rich labor history of Union Square itself as well as the surrounding neighborhood. At the same time, a committee of preservationists, historians, and labor leaders could work to identify other significant sites throughout the city. The selected sites could cover a wide range of building types, including

workplaces, homes, popular gathering spots, union halls, street-corner hiring sites, the routes of political marches, and the sites of important strikes. These sites could reflect the diversity of work experiences in New York — of tabaqueros, garment workers, dock workers, restaurant workers, office and transit workers, railroad porters and domestics, nurses, and homemakers.

In addition to proposing sites for landmark designation, such a "labor history" committee could also develop interpretive programs. These could include posters on bus shelters or in subway cars (a format already used by Local 1199's Bread and Roses project); a permanent or semi-permanent public exhibition in building lobbies and subway stations; public service television and radio spots; banners and/or commemorative observances along Seventh Avenue in the Garment District.

In addition, new interpretations could be developed for historic resources which have already been protected and celebrated for reasons other than their links to labor: for example, the SoHo Cast iron Historic District, generally celebrated for its architectural richness and innovative construction techniques, could be interpreted to tell the story of workers who filled its factory and loft building. Interpretive programs in some of New York's elegant residential historic districts could be developed to tell the history of domestic work.

Finally, the program could include a major initiative by New York's history museums to tell the history of work and working people. The South Street Seaport Museum has ambitious plans for a permanent exhibition on the theme of work; the Brooklyn Historical Society is also developing exhibits on the subject. These are worthwhile efforts that should be studied and used as models by other institutions. The theme of work is universal; its development at historic sites and in institutions devoted to history can only enrich the general understanding and appreciation of a vital force that contributed to New York's greatness.

### **Crossing Lines, Healing Fractures**

Our society is fractured in many directions, and the current emphasis on the separateness of different cultural groups is sometimes cynically misused to drive people further apart. While it is important to recognize and cherish the diversity of historical experience, preservationists should also seek opportunities to tell history in ways that reach across cultural lines. After the Crown Heights riots of 1991, three Brooklyn institutions — the Brooklyn Historical Society, the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History, and the Brooklyn Children's Museum — showed the way to do this by joining forces to develop a series of exhibits and programs focusing on interactions between the Hasidic and African American communities of Crown Heights. Preservationists can participate actively in this process through site selection and interpretation that respect the shared yet divergent experiences of people who may have inhabited and used the same spaces, but who have experienced them very differently. This does not mean trying to convince disparate groups to embrace a single viewpoint; it does mean presenting important issues in ways that promote understanding. It means choosing and

interpreting landmarks in ways that not only reinforce community identity but speak to the outside world as well. It means sharing one another's histories.

### Preserving Living History

Early preservationists recognized the importance of protecting places "where history happened." But how do you approach and evaluate a site where history – in the form of living traditions – is still happening? Do preservationists have a responsibility to protect aspects of the city's cultural legacy that may indeed be still part of a community's everyday experience? The concept of "social value," developed by heritage agencies in Australia and elsewhere, provides one of the best ways of approaching the knotty issues raised by such "living landmarks." The Burra Charter, developed by ICOMOS Australia, defines social value as embracing the "qualities for which a place has become a focus of spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment to a majority or minority group." The Australian Register of the National Estate, the equivalent of our National Register, explains further that places possessing social value are significant "because of strong or special associations with a community for social, cultural and spiritual reasons." An important paper by Chris Johnson, "What is Social Value?", was published by the Australian Government Publishing Service in 1992 and develops the idea further.

The concept of social value posits that feelings of attachment to places are fundamental to our identity as individuals and as community members. They anchor us to the world. Take the places away and our sense of security is weakened. Places that possess great social value may be public areas (Times Square, Brooklyn Heights Esplanade); informal meeting spots (the clock at the old Hotel Biltmore); entertainment venues (theaters, ball fields, community halls, beaches, piers, parks, restaurants, or bars); favorite shopping places (open-air markets, department stores, neighborhood shops); communities with special ethnic or occupational character (Little Italy, Sheepshead Bay); places associated with significant events (Stonewall Inn); commemorative places (cemeteries); or places with longstanding spiritual or religious attachments. They can provide links between past and present, help give disempowered groups back their history, anchor a community's identity, play a prominent role in a community's daily life, provide a distinctive feature within the cityscape, or provide a habitual community meeting place for public ritual or informal gatherings.

If we accept the importance of places like these – their "social value" – then we may conclude that heritage professionals "have lost touch with sentiments that inspire community love of a place and therefore action for its protection." We may also want to acknowledge that an understandable desire to be "rigorous and scientific," coupled with increasing pressure to create specialist roles in heritage conservation, may actually be endangering aspects of cultural heritage by further "distancing its conservation from its traditional guardians." To be fair, few if any guidelines exist to help preservationists define their engagement with concepts of social value, or with sites that embody living aspects of our history. Some indeed may wish to dismiss

the entire issue as irrelevant or unprofessional; others may wish to pursue a more traditionally defined "historical" agenda by distinguishing between historic places and those of contemporary cultural significance. Yet, apart from the difficulty of drawing a clean line between the two, closer attention to the social value of places and their content of living history can enrich the practice of preservation and enlarge its constituency.

One needn't go around the world to find precedents for cultural preservation; much has already been done in this country. The United States Congress addressed the importance of our living cultural heritage through passage of the American Folklife Preservation Act of 1976. The act defined folklife as "the traditional expressive culture shared within the various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, regional..." In 1980 Congress requested the Department of the Interior and the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center (created under the terms of the Folklife Preservation Act) to study the conservation of "intangible cultural resources." The result was an influential study, *Cultural Conservation. The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the United States* (Library of Congress, 1983). This called for an expanded program of "cultural conservation" focusing on heritage issues which affected "community cultural life." Ormond Loomis, its author, emphasized both preservation and encouragement and placed significant emphasis on documentation as a form of protection.

In 1992, the National Register of Historic Places issued *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*, which it defined as properties eligible for inclusion in the register because of their "association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community's history, and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community." In issuing these guidelines, the National Park Service stated that "any comprehensive effort to identify historic properties in an area ... should include a reasonable effort to identify traditional cultural properties." Though the National Register cannot list "purely intangible" cultural values, the guidelines called on preservationists to consider them together with the tangible sites, properties, or objects they inform.

Locally, City Lore, the New York Center for Urban Folk Culture, initiated a program called "Endangered Spaces" in 1988. In his description of the program, City Lore's director, Steve Zeitlin, wrote: "While historic preservationists have fought to preserve landmark buildings," the Endangered Spaces program is "concerned with the culture that brings those building to life." But City Lore also cares, far more than many folklife programs, for buildings themselves, places like the Essex Street Market, Brighton Beach Baths, Shapiro's Winery in the Lower East Side, Philip's candy store in Coney Island, fishing piers at Sheepshead Bay, *casitas* in the South Bronx. Local establishments like these are valuable both as traditional gathering places and as supports for the memories and associations they evoke. Beyond their immediate communities, Zeitlin notes, they "play a vital role in the city's fragile human ecology, contributing to the integrity of neighborhoods and to the sense of continuity between past and present that

renders urban environments habitable." City Lore seeks not only to save "living landmarks" like these, but to create a greater appreciation for the intangible values that make them important.

Mechanisms to protect socially valuable spaces are very limited at present; further study is urgently needed to develop policies that could help in such efforts. One area worth exploring is zoning, which offers some promise of help for both historical and cultural sites. The protection accorded to the world-famous views from the Brooklyn Heights Esplanade provides one precedent for protecting cherished public places. In a similar vein, a report recently published by The Parks Council recommends zoning regulations limiting building heights along the margins of public parks. Special Districts provide another precedent. New York's Zoning Resolution includes a number of Special Purpose Districts, many of which, like the Little Italy Special District, are intended to "preserve and strengthen the historical and cultural character" of particular neighborhoods. In general, they adopt a two-pronged strategy, one that stipulates acceptable uses while regulating aspects of bulk and appearance such as height and setback, street-level wall treatment, signage, and off-street parking. The Little Italy District attempts to encourage rehabilitation of existing housing, the Special Garment Center District to preserve industrial space and employment, the Special Midtown District to encourage retention of theaters through transfers of development rights. The Little Italy district regulations also list eighteen individual buildings whose demolition is discouraged, either because they are "socially or traditionally significant or because they are important physical influences in the life of the community." (The eighteen buildings appear to have been chosen primarily on the basis of their architectural qualities, but this is no reason why neighborhood historical and cultural factors could not form the basis for this or other such efforts.)

The success of Special Purpose Districts as a cultural conservation tool has been limited by their strategy of mitigating against the impact of projects rather than of taking positive action to preserve or enhance neighborhood character. Yet, Special Districts have had some success. In Little Italy, for example, the public campaign to accord recognition to the neighborhood's special character – even more than ensuing regulations themselves – is widely credited with breathing new life into the district. Some would argue that the steady influx of Asians into the neighborhood is proof that zoning regulations are powerless to preserve a neighborhood's character in the face of demographic change, but this misses the point: the Little Italy Special District has succeeded insofar as it has helped to preserve the neighborhood's social value to the city and region at large as a venue for Italian dining and shopping, regardless of who lives upstairs. Special District Zoning thus remains a promising, if limited, tool for cultural conservation.

The environmental review process provides other opportunities for preserving culturally significant sites, simply by providing another level of oversight. The State Environmental Quality Review Act's (SEQRA) definition of "environment" includes "existing patterns of population concentration, distribution, or growth, and existing community or neighborhood character." The

City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR), which implements SEQRA within New York City, includes "the character or quality of ... existing community or neighborhood character" in its definition of environment. These laws, like the National Environmental Policy Act, prescribe few effective remedies for harmful actions, but they do provide a forum for public review and debate of the impact of development projects on traditional aspects of neighborhood culture. Such reviews, even if not immediately productive, could, over time, be highly educational. State and federal review processes could also help to protect publicly owned places of "social value," like piers and boardwalks, from certain kinds of threats.

Beyond these limited protective tools, it is clear that mechanisms of encouragement are needed. The Mayor's Lower Manhattan Plan, adopted in 1995, provides subsidies for rehabilitation in the form of reduced property assessment and utility payments; the Citizens Housing and Planning Commission has recently recommended making similar support more broadly available to property owners, and the potential impact of measures like these on culturally valuable businesses is well worth study.

It is clear that places with social and cultural value, "living landmarks," are at risk in New York. Until more tools to protect them are available, preservationists can begin to make a difference by following the lead of the National Park Services guidelines on traditional cultural properties and documenting living traditions, rituals of place, and relevant oral lore as part of every community survey. Such efforts to survey, list, document, and interpret socially valuable places will contribute in the long run to their preservation by increasing public understanding of their value and by creating an inventory of knowledge about their characteristics.



## PARTNERSHIPS FOR PRESERVATION

Because historical and cultural sites don't necessarily release their meaning to the casual spectator, meaning needs to be teased out and explained. Preservationists, therefore, must be willing, indeed eager, to use every available resource to tell the stories that make places significant, and to tell them in a compelling fashion. The opportunities for interpretation are many and call on a wide range of skills and knowledge. Possibilities include plaques and markers, sculpture and mural paintings, lectures and sermons, museum exhibits and public programs, walking tours, guidebooks and leaflets, inserts in local newspapers, videos, public access television programming, commemorative observances, local newspaper articles, school projects, essay contests, storefront or bank lobby exhibits, posters, public service announcements, advertisements, block parties, street fairs, and house tours.

Many preservation groups are already devoting resources to interpretation. The Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts recently developed an exhibition of endangered sites which highlighted the stories of immigrant groups in those neighborhoods. The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation has taken a special interest in that area's rich social history, developing children's walking tours that focus on the lives of young immigrants; an oral history project to collect the stories of the Village's preservation pioneers; and a series of meetings and tours to compare the historical experiences of Greenwich Village and Harlem. The Organization of Lesbian + Gay Architects & Designers has produced a leaflet map and guide to historic sites around the city. Under the banner of the National Historic Landmarks program, the Women's Landmark Project has not only carried out a nationwide search for sites associated with women's history but has helped to reinterpret many popular sites.

The key to successful interpretation by preservationists may lie in finding partners who can contribute knowledge, production skills, and access to audiences. Such partners may include community boards, council members, borough presidents, community centers, neighborhood literacy programs, public libraries, nursing homes, artists and arts groups, local businesses, unions, newspapers, local bookstores, stationery stores, craft stores and neighborhood art centers, local development corporations, business improvement districts, merchants associations, banks, office building owners, historical societies and museums. New York City's schools represent an enormously valuable resource for stimulating interest in historic sites. By devoting resources to interpreting historic sites, preservationists can not only bring history to public attention but can also increase the perceived value of landmarks. And by engaging in activities that increase their own usefulness and visibility within communities, preservation professionals can enhance their leadership role in the ongoing and important work of identifying and protecting historic sites.

This section explores some of the ways in which partnerships can foster more effective interpretation.

### Working With Communities

Some of preservation's greatest successes have come when preservationists have been in touch with and have advanced community interests. Building alliances with communities need not mean passively waiting for others to discover the value of preservation. Although our committee disagreed about many things, we all concurred that preservation decisions must be based not only on professional expertise but also on the feelings and ideas of communities and affinity groups. It would have been possible, indeed relatively easy, for this task force to propose a set of public history programs and policies that could be carried out by a small number of experts, but this would have flown in the face of the very kind of historical interpretation we are seeking. Our belief is that civic participation is essential if preservation is to be representative of all New Yorkers and of the broad sweep of the city's history.

Many models exist for developing history at the community level. One of the most interesting is represented by Centerprise, one of a number of community-based cultural centers established in London in the early 1970s and partly supported by public funds. Centerprise is located in a dense shopping street in the heart of working class Hackney. Its activities are rooted in the specific culture and history of the neighborhood. When Centerprise's bookstore opened in 1971 it was the only one in Hackney: in addition to standard books it carries pamphlets and books on local history as well as books of particular relevance to the neighborhood's immigrant populations, such as bilingual children's books, Asian-language and Turkish books, and health and educational aids. An adjoining coffee bar serves inexpensive meals and provides a space for exhibitions, performances, and readings of work by local artists. A Reading Centre provides free literacy and basic math classes as well as referrals for other kinds of adult education. An Advice Centre helps residents with immigration, welfare, housing, employment, consumer, and debt problems, dispensing free advice in Urdu, Punjabi, Turkish, and sign language. A Publishing Project instigates and publishes autobiographies, oral histories, and studies of local history, organizes writers' groups, workshops, and readings; and provides a manuscript-reading service. Finally, Centerprise makes its meeting rooms available to community groups. In the historical works it has published, Centerprise, arguably, pays too little heed to the shaping influence and historical value of the built environment: it has not embraced preservation as an important goal. Yet Centerprise shows how an organization can nurture local history by rooting it in a community's day-to-day needs and by providing much-needed community services. Just as preservationists have found it possible to leap from "quality of life" issues like street paving and storefront design to concern for the preservation of a neighborhood's building stock, so Centerprise has bridged the gap from a neighborhood's need for basic cultural services to an interest in knowing — and telling — its history.

Institutions modeled on Centerprise could make a valuable contribution to New York. At the very least, preservationists and local historians can learn from it. Many existing New York City organizations embody some aspects of Centerprise's mission. Some public libraries, for example, run language and literacy programs; the Brooklyn Children's Museum runs an after-school "latchkey" program; museums like the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, Caribbean Cultural Center, and the Jewish Museum, offer their communities a focal point for cultural identity, provide important cultural services, and instill strong feelings of loyalty in return. Preservationists can assist such institutions — which already enjoy support and credibility in their communities — by offering expertise in the areas of identifying, protecting, and interpreting historical sites.

New York's schools, public, private, and parochial, offer extensive opportunities for meaningful collaboration based on neighborhood history. Yet working with schools seems daunting to many preservationists, who lack a dependable road map to working with the public school system. The Historic Districts Council has carried out a useful survey of elementary school programs focusing on the historic architecture of neighborhoods. At present there is no comparable resource for programs that deal with local history, nor is there a single obvious curricular route to instigating such programs. Success appears to depend primarily on developing a good relationship with a receptive school and an energetic, imaginative teacher.

One such program that has produced important results was undertaken at Louis Armstrong Middle School, IS 227Q, in Corona, Queens. As part of a collaborative agreement with the Board of Education, the Center for the Improvement of Education at Queens College augmented the school's staff with college faculty, graduate students, and consultants. One consultant was public historian Arthur Tobier, who developed a program in which students interviewed neighborhood residents. They discovered that a building they had passed numerous times without much thought was a garment factory; through interviews they learned about the lives of workers there. The program's emphasis was on the discovery of such stories throughout the neighborhood. Parents as well as students and teachers became interested, and out of this school program grew an ongoing community history workshop dedicated to collecting, understanding, and passing on the neighborhood's history. Were preservationists to participate in such a project, they could not only contribute their skills but, in so doing, reshape the project to include greater attention to the preservation and marking of the built environment.

For Tobier, such projects exemplify what schools should be doing. He sees schools, ideally, as "community-based institutions" which draw curriculum from their communities: "With schools at their best," he writes, "our curricular activities would need to bring into the school the narratives of the people who live and work in the community. Our children's sense of history would be brushed with an understanding of those strangers with whom they grow... The school would endeavor, as a legitimate part of its work, to bring those who live in obscurity in the community out from the shadows." Tobier has shown how to turn these ideals into a workable

and successful program. Preservationists who believe in the value of historical sites and are willing to work with schools can use the same resources to great effect.

### Involving Museums

History museums can and should play a larger and more active role in the preservation of historically significant sites. Even if every historic site in the city were preserved and marked, we would still need history museums to help us think and talk about them. In fact, history museums should be leaders in promoting discourse about our city's history and its implications for our future. By promoting such discussions, history museums can help provide the framework for preserving our historic sites.

New York has dozens of history museums, including institutions with a broad, city-wide mandate, such as The New-York Historical Society and the Museum of the City of New York; borough historical societies in Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island; institutions with a community or culturally specific focus, such as the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and The Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History; museums devoted to a specialized subject area, like the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration, the South Street Seaport Museum, and the Transit Museum; and house museums like the Jumel Mansion, Rufus King Manor, and the Bartow-Pell Mansion.

These museums could be contributing more than they currently do to the preservation and interpretation of historic sites that are not part of their actual physical plant. The vision of this committee is of a network of history museums that would actively lead the public in an ongoing discussion of New York's many histories and their relationship to our city's future and which would take part in identifying, preserving, and interpreting its historic sites. Some of the specific ways in which museums can do so include:

- *Exhibitions and programs on historical themes of broad contemporary relevance.* The history of capitalism, finance, deindustrialization, neighborhood development and disinvestment, popular culture and religion, public education and public services are examples of themes that have shaped and continue to shape the lives of every New Yorker. Compelling exhibits on topics like these at New York's leading history museums would engage broad interest and spark vital public discussion. They would also provide a context for the work of New York's smaller museums and for the interpretation of historical sites.

- *Provision of a centrally located showcase for the city's local history museums.* New York's city-wide history museums could provide a much-needed showcase for smaller institutions by: holding regular exhibits and events highlighting the work of local history museums (the community gallery run by the Museum of the City of New York offers a useful model). Additionally, they could serve as distribution points for information about the activities of local history museums and provide technical assistance to smaller museums. (The Historic House Trust offers a valuable model, as does the Smithsonian Institution's museum internship program, in

which interns are shared by a major Washington museum and by a smaller institution in another city.) Were the New-York Historical Society or the Museum of the City of New York to take such steps, those institutions could not only bring the work of New York's lively local museums to the attention of visitors, but could also build up their own constituency among the city's residents.

- *Taking a leadership role in preserving community history outside their walls.* Community-based museums like the Schomburg Center, the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and the Weeksville Society, as well as some house museums, are already demonstrating how museums can make history a vibrant part of a community's cultural life. Community-based institutions could also use their influence and resources to help spur public involvement in the process of identifying, celebrating, interpreting, and preserving significant places within their communities.

They can contribute further by participating in neighborhood surveys, working with schools and community groups, organizing local landmarks committees, sponsoring oral history research, presenting lectures and walking tours, contributing to plaque and marker programs, and publishing booklets and maps. And they can work with local libraries, schools, and businesses to present exhibitions that focus on significant sites and the memories and traditions associated with them.

Local history museums and societies possess essential skills for preserving community history; working with preservation groups, they can play a leadership role in protecting New York's historical and cultural sites. To assume that role, museums will need increased public support for building upkeep, utilities, as well as line-item funding in the city budget. This aid could be delivered by giving certain institutions the kind of assistance currently reserved for the thirty-one premiere institutions housed in city-owned buildings and known as the "Cultural Institutions Group." The Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History, whose buildings are a resource of city-wide significance, could qualify, as could the Louis Armstrong House if it is reorganized as a vital public museum.

Neighborhood-based history museums, which cannot match the private fundraising capability of large and well-connected central institutions, might be able to stretch scarce resources by sharing them more intensively. The Historic House Trust currently provides a vehicle for communal fundraising and public relations for sixteen house museums located in city parks, as well as a mechanism for apportioning Parks Department services, such as the use of a skilled restoration crew. The model of the Historic House Trust could conceivably be extended to neighborhood history museums and to areas such as public relations, fundraising, and advocacy.

### Developing Tourism

Tourism to New York is growing, particularly among international visitors. Increasingly, sophisticated visitors want to learn more about the history of New York and its communities, yet the tools for helping them find their way are strikingly inadequate. New York's history museums and its historic communities have not done enough to reach out to these visitors, quite possibly because the task of reaching the market exceeds the resources of all but the largest institutions.

A good starting point might be joint publication of a brochure featuring a number of smaller institutions, which could be distributed at the city's major visitor centers and hotels. Ultimately, however, a more aggressive and interactive approach will prove more effective. A tourism coordinator, working for a coalition of historic museums and sites, could help local history museums develop programs comprising an exhibit, a walking or bus tour of historic sites, and possibly neighborhood shopping and dining. The coordinator could also be responsible for the logistics of bus charters, parking arrangements, and so forth. She or he could not only provide information to tour operators and guides but could organize visits. A tourism coordinator could be based at one of the citywide history museums or at a not-for-profit such as the Municipal Art Society.

### Preservation and Public Art

For many people, the phrase "public art" conjures up an image of grandiose and somewhat irrelevant monuments standing in splendid isolation. But unlike the celebratory statuary of another era or the abstract art of recent decades, some of the liveliest new public art draws deeply on the history of urban communities. In short, public art can be, in Gail Dubrow's words, a "magnet attracting public interest to historic places." Its power to galvanize public attention depends in part on its imagery, but begins, long before the artwork materializes, in the process of selecting sites, shaping themes, and developing the appropriate form. Public art may take shape as a sculpture, but it could also be a bench, a manhole cover, placards, postcards, signs on buses, advertisements in newspapers, audiocassettes, television broadcasts, children's photography, or an oral history project. Artists are often eager to work with local historians as well as urban designers; they and the agencies that hire them may also be willing to work closely with communities.

Four ambitious public art projects, in Los Angeles, Seattle, Charleston, and Boston, illustrate the power of public art to interpret historic sites and themes. Seattle's deep commitment to public art centers on its Percent For Art ordinance. Passed in 1973, the program was responsible by the early 1990s for generating approximately thirty art projects per year. Seattle has taken a strongly site-specific approach to its public art and has emphasized community

participation, inclusion of culturally diverse groups at all levels of decision-making, and the involvement of underserved audiences and artists. Installations have included street paving, street furniture, and electrical substations, as well as figural artworks based on the history of communities, like Richard Beyer's "People Waiting for the Interurban" (1979), which recalls the rail line (now closed) whose arrival sparked the neighborhood's founding and shaped its working class character.

In 1991, the Seattle Art Commission created a series of temporary works at sites chosen by artists. The Commission provided a talented historian as consultant to the artists, and many of the resulting works drew deeply upon the collaboration. Working with the Port of Seattle, artists Gloria Bornstein and Donald Fels designed a series of markers, placed next to the official historical plaques lining the waterfront, which presented an alternative history of the waterfront. These were so successful that the Port of Seattle is considering making them permanent. An accompanying "interactive voice library" provided further information to visitors and allowed them to record their own comments. Martha Rosler produced a series of public-service television announcements called "Seattle: Hidden Histories," which told stories about Seattle history from the perspective of various ethnic groups.

In 1991, the Spoleto Festival used Charleston, South Carolina, as a site for an ambitious outdoor sculpture exhibition modeled on similar shows in Europe. In the curator's words, each of the festival's eighteen works, almost all temporary, "addressed a location, not just from a design and physical point of view, but also in relation to a social and cultural past. The installations became like chapters in a book that together told a larger, more complete, and alternative story of Charleston.. Some were located within historic houses open to the public, others in the city's streets and public spaces. They included powerful meditations on slavery, the Civil War, and the history of industry in Charleston. Because the project was conceived of more as an international art exhibit than a civic art program like Seattle's, community involvement was not as extensive as it could have been and many visitors criticized the exhibition's sense of detachment.

A 1983 project in Boston provides yet another model. In that year, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority retained a not-for-profit agency, UrbanArts, Inc., to manage its Southwest Corridor public art project, part of a massive building campaign affecting a number of diverse neighborhoods. Residents saw the project as a way to represent their communities to themselves and to the outside world and to enhance the sense of place within their neighborhoods. Their goals for community participation and expression went beyond traditional public art.

For each station, a community-based site committee was responsible for developing a community profile, participating in the artist selection process, and contributing to the project's mission and direction. In addition, a series of educational programs eventually involved theatrical productions, off-site exhibitions, the collection of oral histories, photographic

documentation of communities in transition by students and professionals, poetry readings in local libraries, and the permanent installation of a unique 'anthology' of poetry and prose by local urban writers. The photography project, focusing on the effects of relocation within communities, was carried out by teams of high school students working with professionals. The Southwest Corridor project's most distinctive contribution may lie less in the permanent works of art produced than in the process which shaped them. The consultant Pamela Worden believes that the participatory nature of the project "generated a sense of ownership of place, the right on the part of residents to define and redefine themselves, and, most especially, to project their existence into the future."

The projects described above have all been government sponsored, but perhaps the most remarkable public art project to explore historical themes was developed apart from any official sponsorship by a small not-for-profit organization in Los Angeles, The Power of Place. Founded by UCLA professor Dolores Hayden in 1982, The Power of Place set out to identify and celebrate landmarks of ethnic, women's, and labor history, and to provide witness to some of the ways in which Angelenos had earned their livings — a profoundly important but largely unrecognized historical theme. In 1985, a guidebook to over thirty such downtown sites was published: some had recognized historic buildings that needed new interpretation and marking; others had buildings whose historic value had not yet been recognized; still other sites had no historic buildings at all. Public art was to be a key interpretive component at many of these locations.

A parking lot where Bidy Mason's home once stood became the site of two related art installations. Bidy Mason was an African-American who gained her freedom from slavery, became a midwife, and founded the first predominantly African American church in Los Angeles. With the collaboration of the Community Redevelopment Agency, a sculptural assemblage recalling Mason's life and house was placed in the elevator lobby of a new development at the site. Outside the building, an eighty-foot-long poured concrete wall was ornamented with granite panels telling Bidy Mason's story through a portrait, a midwife's bag and scissors, Mason's freedom papers and homestead deed, and historical texts. A timeline of Mason's life was juxtaposed with maps showing the city's growth.

Hayden and her colleagues understood that the creation of site-specific art was just one part of a larger strategy for restoring Bidy Mason's story to the consciousness and cityscape of Angelenos. They augmented the artworks with a limited-edition artist's book, an inexpensive poster, and a series of articles about Mason. Here and in other projects, they also used the art installations to generate and sustain community involvement in ways that ranged from picking sites that would generate high pedestrian counts to arranging community workshops and dedicatory ceremonies. Bidy Mason's descendents participated in the dedication of the wall, which has become a favorite place for snapshots.

The opportunities to achieve comparable results in New York are enormous, as are the resources for creating public art: Arts for Transit and the city's Percent for Art program have



already been responsible for sponsoring art in the subways, schools, and elsewhere. The Public Art Fund, a not-for-profit organization, has also sponsored major public art projects. RepoHistory, an artists' collaborative, has produced temporary sign projects in lower Manhattan and Greenwich Village and is developing projects elsewhere in which community input is an important part of the process. A new foundation called Minetta Brook is dedicated to producing public art based on collaborations between artists and local historians and is considering several possible themes for a major project.

Preservationists can look at New York's abundant public art possibilities on two levels: while the finished works enhance the cityscape and aid in a greater appreciation of history, the process of developing the art has the potential to foster creative collaborations between communities and professional historians, artists, preservationists, and funders.

### Plaques and Markers — Pros and Cons

Far less expensive than most other forms of public art, plaques can be visually powerful and thought provoking. They offer a direct and attainable way for communities to mark sites and they provide practical and affordable opportunities for collaboration between preservationists, artists, historians, and communities. In our conversations with community leaders and historians, we found broad support for historical plaques and markers. Some preservationists, however, view plaques with suspicion, fearing they will deface landmark buildings or be employed in lieu of true preservation. These are legitimate concerns. Yet properly used, plaques are the allies of preservation, and campaigns to erect them can foster pride in local history, build working relationships with preservationists, and create new constituencies for historic sites and their preservation.

Unlike cities such as London, Dublin, or Charleston, New York has never had a sustained, institutionalized plaque program. This committee considered the merits of such programs — official recognition, broad coverage, and graphic consistency — but does not recommend such a plan for New York. We are in entire support of the Landmarks Preservation Foundation's recently initiated historical plaque program, but would prefer to see it as one component of a broader interpretive scheme rather than as a model for a single, official city-wide plaque program. The reason is simple. If plaques are to be effective vehicles for community organizing — or for conveying diverse historical viewpoints — then local campaigns are preferable to a single, citywide program.

Local site marking campaigns can be spearheaded by historical societies and museums, or by cultural centers and community organizations. Schools have initiated significant local history projects which could form the basis for public art and marker programs. The Bronx Landmarks Task Force, perhaps in combination with the Bronx Council for the Arts could turn its accumulated knowledge of Bronx history and sites into an ambitious marker program. Local religious and political organizations can also make important contributions, as can senior

residences. And of course community-based preservation organizations can play a leading role in public art and marker projects as Landmarks Harlem! has done with its Harlem Landmarks Trail. The Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts' recent exhibition on the "other East Side," or the Organization of Lesbian + Gay Architects & Designers' guide to historic sites could form the basis for significant marker or public art programs.

Most city-wide public art agencies have the capacity to help initiate or lend significant support to community-based historical plaque programs. Both the Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts have supported plaque programs. Another promising basis for historical marker programs exists in the City Council's street renaming program, which has renamed dozens of streets – often to celebrate local figures. Community involvement in renaming is the rule and the signs are frequently inaugurated with festivals or observances which unite community members in commemorative rituals. Were the new street signs augmented with historical plaques or other site markers telling the story behind the new name – or for that matter explaining existing names that reflect local history – street namings and renamings could become a catalyst for community-based historic interpretation.

Plaques are an old idea for marking sites, but they need not be simple ceramic or metal shields imprinted with information. Some recent projects demonstrate how the old idea of plaques and site markers can be made new again through the use of new technologies or the adaptation of older marking devices. In the spring of 1994, for example, a historic preservation studio at Columbia University proposed mounting a series of viewing machines along Manhattan's 57th Street. Resembling the familiar binocular telescopes found on the Staten Island ferries and at other popular lookout points, the Columbia versions would offer visitors historical video images of a site. Visitors would be able to contribute their own thoughts or memories to a computerized data base.

Computers can also be used in lieu of plaques to provide information in an interactive way such as the two computer screens installed in information kiosks at City Hall. The use of advanced audio headsets is currently being studied for lower Manhattan's Heritage Trail. The dynamic and interactive marking of sites through sophisticated audio and video technology is a welcome development, but these systems are expensive and require intensive maintenance if they are not to become broken toys. If site markers are to be a useful vehicle for stimulating community participation and projecting community voices, then more traditional markers, employing relatively simple, accessible, and inexpensive media and technologies, will remain the logical choice.

Regardless of technology, good historical markers share a few important characteristics.

- *A good marker combines a good story and a good location.* It communicates that there is something special about the place – something happened not just anywhere, but right here – and it links that something to larger historical themes. Because a plaque has to speak both to a community that may be familiar with the site as well as to strangers, the plaque's content, both

visual and literary, must attract and reward their attention. A good plaque should be serious, but can also be fun.

- *Effective markers stand at appropriate and prominent locations.* Where will the largest number of passersby be exposed to the plaque? Where will current site conditions be most conducive to explaining the plaque's historical theme? Of various historically plausible sites, which is symbolically the most appropriate at which to discuss the theme?

- *Effective markers attract and hold attention.* Whatever the context, a plaque should catch and hold the eye of the maximum number of visitors. It need not be attached to a building to do this. In Seattle, artists have used banners and tablets attached to railings to commemorate the neighborhood's musical and theatrical past. Sometimes an unusual choice of location, like the tablets set into the sidewalks in front of the Second Avenue Deli and on West 52nd Street, can draw attention to a small, reticent plaque.

- *Effective markers present information in generous, yet not overwhelming, amounts.* Plaques with too little information – which announce that so-and-so was born on the spot without explaining why it matters – fail to tell history: they appear to exist solely for the benefit of those already "in the know." Plaques with too much information leave the visitor equally frustrated and uninformed. The right amount of information is whatever gives the reader a clear understanding of why the site and its history are worth commemorating.

- *Effective markers link history with current concerns.* Plaques that interpret the city's streets and buildings for the people who live there, are most effective when they engage people's current concerns. A site may be timeless, but a timeless plaque will likely be a lifeless one.

- *Effective markers present or invite different points of view.* Historical markers acknowledging diversity of outlook engage visitors' imaginations by prompting active choices. This can be accomplished by erecting a new plaque as a commentary on an existing plaque; by erecting two or more new plaques as commentaries on each other; by presenting contrary statements within a single plaque; by posing a direct question to the visitor; or by presenting a deliberately provocative visual image.

- *Effective markers balance text with compelling visual images.* Images that capture some essential aspect of the story attract attention and make information memorable. RepoHistory's lower Manhattan signs juxtaposed images on one side with text on the other. Each seemed to comment on the other. Though modest in scale and materials, the signs became public art works.

- *Effective markers engage curiosity and prompt thought.* Historical markers are not there merely "for the record;" their perusal should be a positive pleasure. If they are, they will live on in memory.

- *Effective markers direct the visitor to related sites.* Historic sites rarely exist in isolation. Plaques directing visitors to thematically related sites magnify their impact. Plaques placed in groups, as part of walking tours or trails, can do this with special effectiveness.

### Spreading the Word

Researching, designing, fabricating, and installing a good plaque is only half the job of marking a site because, in a sense, a plaque is a pretext for involving people in a site's preservation, a source of talking points about its meaning and future. The next step is to let people know the marked sites exist. Many cities do this by including mention of marked historic sites in walking tours or trails. Many such trails exist outside New York: for example, Boston's Freedom Trail, Florida's Black Heritage Trail, and the Women's History Trail in upstate New York. Interest in trails is growing in New York City. RepoHistory's Lower Manhattan Sign Project constituted an exciting temporary trail in Lower Manhattan in 1995. Lower Manhattan's Heritage Trail is up and running; color-coded street markers and a keyed booklet now guide visitors on several walks through the district. In 1994, Landmarks Harlem joined with the City College Architectural Center and the West Harlem Community Organization to inaugurate a Harlem Landmark Trail along Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Boulevard.

Opportunities for additional trails are almost unlimited. An African American Heritage Trail could extend from Lower Manhattan to Harlem, allowing visitors to trace the growth and movement of Manhattan's African American community over more than 350 years. (A grant from the Municipal Art Society is helping by providing funds for research on churches along the trail.) A labor history trail could be anchored in Union Square, could wind through Chinatown, where sweatshops still operate, and on to the garment district. Or it could focus on the history of maritime labor and labor unions with a trail that starts at the South Street Seaport Museum, with its views of the Brooklyn docks, and then wends its way to the Hudson River piers. An immigration trail could be anchored at Castle Clinton, a Jewish heritage trail (possibly extending into Brooklyn and the Bronx) on the Lower East Side, a Gay and Lesbian liberation trail in Greenwich Village, an American literature and journalism trail in lower Manhattan. A women's history trail would fill a real void in New York and would be widely visited.

The value of a marker can also be amplified through a descriptive leaflet or brochure that visitors can take away with them. Producing leaflets need not be expensive, and banks, businesses, or local newspapers may be willing to underwrite them, thereby initiating partnerships upon which preservationists can build. Distributing the leaflets is the challenge. Not only must appropriate spots be identified and secured but they must be kept stocked and maintained throughout the project's life. Distribution opportunities will depend on the neighborhood. In Philadelphia, Bicentennial brochures were widely distributed in public buildings throughout the center city area, an approach which would work well in Downtown Brooklyn or Manhattan's Civic Center (where a guidebook produced by the Municipal Art Society, the *Juror's Guide* is already distributed in courthouses). Banks, office lobbies, restaurants, bars, newsstands, local businesses, public libraries, cultural and social centers, history museums, and bus shelters may also provide opportunities to reach neighborhood residents or workers.

Mechanisms for disseminating local history information to out-of-town visitors are currently very limited. However, a tourism marketing consortium, like the one suggested on page 27 of this report, could provide access to the display racks at the visitors centers at Columbus Circle and the World Trade Center, which few local history or preservation societies can currently afford. And were the New-York Historical Society or the Museum of the City of New York to act as showcases for the city's local history museums, they too could serve as excellent distribution points for information about historical trails around the city.

## THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION: A KEY PLAYER IN THE CONSERVATION OF NEW YORK'S HERITAGE

This committee was initially charged with answering a single question: Should the Landmarks Preservation Commission use its power to protect New York's historical and cultural sites? The committee's answer was a resounding yes, and it concluded that in many cases a great public benefit would be served by protecting historic sites from unregulated change or destruction. More eloquent and compelling than the committee's views, however, are the words of the 1965 Landmarks Law itself. Its statement of public purpose speaks of the power of landmarks to stir civic pride. It never refers to architectural value alone, but speaks of "cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history," and calls upon the Commission to "safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage, as embodied and reflected in" sites of "special historical or aesthetic interest or value."

Those words recall the earliest days of this country's preservation movement. In 1850, for example, New York State purchased the Hasbrouck House, General Washington's headquarters in Newburgh. A State Assembly committee explained at the time that "if our love of country is excited when we read the biography of our revolutionary heroes, or the history of revolutionary events, how much more will the flame of patriotism burn in our bosoms when we tread the ground where was shed the blood of our fathers, or when we move among the scenes where were conceived and consummated their noble achievements." Highflown rhetoric, perhaps, but the preservers of Hasbrouck House well understood the power of historic places to stir the imagination, a power that has not diminished with time. For our committee, then, the question moved from *whether* to preserve historical and cultural sites, but *which* and *how*. How, specifically, can deserving sites be rationally selected and, once selected, how can they be equitably and intelligibly regulated?

The Landmarks Commission has never entirely neglected its broader historical and cultural mandate. Over the years it has designated many sites of great historical import from colonial and Revolutionary-era wood frame houses to Broadway theaters and skyscrapers, all of which tell important stories of the city's development. But despite these worthy efforts and the law's clear intent with respect to historically important structures and sites, the Commission has tended to favor architectural criteria in its decision-making. It was a tendency fostered by the climate of the 1960s with its tragic architectural losses, coupled with the fierce assault on neighborhoods by urban renewal, highway programs, and one that was largely in harmony with the wishes of professional and community-based preservationists. The challenge now

facing the Landmarks Commission is to address the preservation of New York's historically and culturally important sites in a more determined, systematic, and thorough way.

In making this recommendation, the committee considered several ways of proceeding. One was to advance a list of, say, fifty or one hundred potential landmarks for designation. We rejected that approach because it would contradict our belief in the value of civic participation and of an ongoing process of discussion and action that would embrace many different voices. Another possibility was to urge the Landmarks Commission to undertake a comprehensive survey of the city's history, like the "theme studies" carried out by the National Historic Landmarks program. This, too, was rejected, because any such massive, top-down survey would likely fall short of encompassing the histories of New York's many and diverse communities, and could impede the Commission's efforts to build the partnerships it must foster with those communities. We also felt it could hamper the Commission's ability to act quickly if rapid action were needed to protect a site not included on the list.

The approach we detail below will take longer to carry out. It will be harder to control; its results are less predictable. Yet it will draw many more people into the landmark process, it will help foster a civic dialogue about history, and it will evolve as the city's history — and future — evolve.

Though we are proposing a long-range plan, we would urge the Commission to begin filling the gaps in the record immediately by designating important historical sites that have already been considered: for example, the remnants of the nineteenth-century African American oystering town of Sandy Ground, the remaining undesignated portions of the brickmaking town of Kreischerville (both in Staten Island), the Steinway workers' houses (Queens), the heart of Tin Pan Alley, represented by the Brill Building in Times Square. It could additionally designate a group of landmarks that exemplify profoundly important and relatively underrepresented and unprotected aspects of our history such as immigration (Chinatown and the Lower East Side), labor struggles (the Union Square area), and the Harlem Renaissance.

More important, ultimately, than a list of such immediately achievable landmark designations will be the creation and nurturing of a public process that supports the protection of our history and culture as an ongoing — and never ending — project. That means, first of all, a survey process that is attuned to historical and cultural sites and that fosters partnership with communities and collaboration with a variety of disciplines. It also means a clear yet flexible understanding of what qualities make a historic site a potential landmark. It means, finally, an understanding of how historic sites can be regulated, and even more fundamentally, a level of confidence that they can be successfully regulated. Each of these areas is dealt with in turn in the following sections.

### Toward a New Surveying Process

Because historical and cultural landmarks elude traditional surveying methodology with its bias toward architectural connoisseurship, they pose challenging problems for Landmarks Commission staff. An historical and cultural site survey typically begins with an analysis of the historical themes, communities, or lifeways under consideration, rather than with a search for buildings. This analysis leads to identification of representative sites and building types. This, in turn, can be amplified with a condition survey which identifies the types of resource that are the rarest and most threatened. To achieve maximum effectiveness the survey process should be flexible, open-ended, and very public. Its success will depend on building effective partnerships. Experts in oral history, folklore, urban history, geography, and other fields as appropriate, should be involved early in the process.

Even more important is community participation from the outset, when the basic approach to historical themes or lifeways is being established. This will ensure that preservationists understand the community's history as told from within. Community participation can then be maintained throughout the survey process, as sites are identified, weighed, and documented. Later in the process, public forums at local historical societies or other civic organizations can be used to discuss potential designations long before formal designation hearings are held. Surveys like these can not only lead to good preservation planning; they can also enrich a community's civic life and indeed that of the entire city.

One consequence of carrying out a survey in this way is that preservationists may at times feel pressed to include sites whose significance they would not ordinarily have recognized on their own. Though this may be perceived by some as a threat to professional standards, it may equally be an expansion of vision. The guidelines outlined below will help ensure a rigorous process of assessment, but the key question to ask at this point in the survey is whether the site in question has a significant story to tell about the historical theme or community under review, regardless of preconceptions about aesthetic merit or architectural significance.

Surveys like this could conceivably be funded with grants from the New York State Humanities Council or from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Universities with strong community-oriented history or archives programs, such as the American Social History Project at Hunter College, the archives and public history programs at New York University, and the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives at LaGuardia Community College could assist in organizing and carrying out such surveys. However these surveys are funded and organized, they can best be understood as collaborative processes in which community memories and values are drawn out, shaped, tested, and refined with the help of historians, folklorists, urban geographers, and preservation planners — and vice versa.



### Standards for Designation

The challenge of distinguishing historical sites that merit landmark designation from others which do not has caused considerable anxiety. Some have called for written rules which could set a clear and unchanging standard. Others have argued that, by contrast with architectural excellence, there is simply no objective standard for historical significance. Both attitudes miss the point. The Landmarks Commission has never judged architectural significance according to written rules. Had such rules been drafted at the Commission's founding in 1965, neither the Chrysler Building nor the Jackson Heights Historic District could have been designated. Had they been drafted ten years earlier, neither could Carnegie Hall, the Woolworth Building, the Upper West Side, SoHo, or Ladies' Mile. The architectural taste of the times would not have recognized these buildings as worthy of preservation. Yet all have become cherished parts of our cityscape, landmarks of unquestioned worth.

Neither architectural nor historical significance can be reduced to a formula. Both are based upon generally acknowledged standards that evolve over time. The Landmarks Commission's ability to make appropriate choices has never stemmed from rigid rules but rather from a strong social consensus in favor of preserving important architecture, coupled with high standards of professional staff work, a strong and independent Commission, and an effective public process for reviewing designations. The thirty-year rule — that a building (or the historical events associated with it) must be at least thirty years old to qualify for designation — has effectively protected the process from faddism. The same combination of factors — and not a rigid set of rules — will provide the best underpinnings for a program of historical and cultural designations and will lead most reliably to sound designation decisions.

The following guidelines offer a framework for evaluating nominations for landmark designation:

- *Designate sites whose existence or appearance significantly aid our ability to understand or remember important historical or cultural values associated with them, or to continue a historically important cultural activity associated with them, and whose alteration or disappearance would diminish those abilities.* It is easy to think of buildings that help us retell and understand some chapter of the past. The small synagogues of the Lower East Side, touching in their modest simplicity, help us understand the lives and aspirations of their congregations, and of the immigrant communities they represented. Without the continued presence of these buildings, it would be much harder to understand this chapter in New York's history. The African Burial Ground has proved to be a remarkable resource not only for understanding the lives of eighteenth-century black New Yorkers but actually for remembering them, since before the Burial Ground's discovery they had been virtually forgotten. Now the Burial Ground has become a touchstone of historical memory for all New Yorkers.

Two tests can be useful in assessing a site's value as a spur to memory. One is to ask whether there is a connection between some aspect of its appearance and the historical theme in question. In the case of the synagogues described above, it is the very modestness of their scale and design that speaks to us. At Jarmulowsky's Bank, also on the Lower East Side, it is the opposite: the structure's overweening height and grandeur help explain Jarmulowsky's hold on the imaginations (and money) of his immigrant community — and the magnitude of the bank's fall. Another test is to ask how our ability to remember would be affected if the site were destroyed or altered. Although there is almost nothing about the African Burial Ground today that suggests its eighteenth-century appearance, it is clear that unregulated digging could destroy both its historical evidence and its emotional resonance. Similarly, the removal of 1960s alterations made to the Eighth Street Playhouse at the request of Jimi Hendrix diminish our ability to recall that aspect of the building's history.

The National Register applies a test, known as the "integrity" criterion, which requires that a historic site retain the "essential physical features that made up its character or appearance during the period of its association" with an important historic event. We prefer, for New York City landmarks, the concept of "intelligibility": does the site's appearance help significantly to illuminate its historical associations?

- *Designate sites whose appearance contributes significantly to the symbolism, imagery, mythology, or folklore of New York and its communities; and whose alteration or disappearance would diminish that contribution.* The famous Times Square ball drop, the ball whose descent has marked the New Year for millions of people around the world since just after the turn of the century — is the centerpiece of an important urban ritual. The space of Times Square, essential for the assembly of crowds, is as integral to this culturally significant site as the great pop art neon spectacles that visually define it. Both the Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Bridge form so essential a part of New York's mythology, folklore, and image that their disappearance is almost unthinkable. Both are designated landmarks. So is the marvelous ensemble of buildings that helps define the experience of swimming and socializing at Orchard Beach. Yet, the towers and canyons of lower Manhattan, forming one of the city's iconic images, is still imperfectly protected, despite significant recent gains. If they were to be replaced by boxy buildings in open plazas — or if the historic Dutch street pattern was altered — an essential image of New York would be lost.

- *Designate sites with regard to their historical and cultural significance alone, where appropriate.* This may seem self-evident, yet the suggestion that sites of historical and cultural merit must also possess architectural distinction in order to warrant landmark designation is still often made. The Landmarks Law itself gives no support to this requirement, which would impose a narrow view indeed of our history. In fact, many of our more powerful historic sites

(including some landmarks) are not aesthetically distinguished: the houses of Kreischerville and Sandy Ground, the Stonewall Inn, Louis Armstrong's House, the African Burial Ground, or the Lower East Side's "Pig Market."

In arguing that historic sites can merit protection for their historical values we are not asking for a redrafting of the accepted professional definition of what makes buildings and places visually and experientially meaningful; rather we are asking for an expansion of that definition to one that embraces the far broader range of values that the interested public applies to such sites. Only by doing this can the public record begin to match the richness of our history and the places where it happened.

- *Designate landmarks with community significance where they help illuminate larger themes.*

New York is a city of some eight million people, five boroughs, well over one hundred distinct ethnic groups, numerous languages and religions, and a myriad of professions, trades, and occupations. The histories of this complex organism are entrusted to a single, city-wide Landmarks Commission. How can this Commission pick and choose among the thousands of worthwhile stories locked inside New York's buildings, streets, and landscapes, some of which may be cherished locally, but may be little known outside community boundaries?

The question of how far the Landmarks Commission's city-wide mandate extends to the protection of community heritage is a vexing one, and one that could arise frequently should this committee's recommendations be adopted. This committee believes that in order to protect the history of the city as a whole, it is necessary to protect sites of significance to its communities. At the same time, the Landmarks Commission must be able to hold up such sites to a city-wide standard; we recommend a test that allows the Commission to do so without becoming mired in invidious comparisons between superficially similar sites — or between profoundly different communities. A former Woolworth's store on Northern Boulevard in Corona, Queens, shows how a two-part test might work. The Woolworth's is important to Corona's history because it was here that popular protest first broke the color barrier in hiring in this African American community. Though this event may have had little direct impact elsewhere, the theme it symbolizes — the achievement of equal opportunity in hiring — is important to the entire city's history. The Woolworth's is the best site for marking, interpreting, and remembering how one community, that of Corona, experienced this historical theme.

- *Protect sites that represent the full range of our historically significant cityscape.* New York's history has taken place in factories, warehouses, tenements, bars and restaurants, laundries, bodegas, markets, storefront churches and synagogues, and on street corners, piers, parks, and squares. Preserving that history requires receptivity to these and many other kinds of sites. Over time, New York's officially designated landmarks should include sites representative of the full diversity of historically significant places.

- *Seek, to the greatest possible extent, to protect historic resources in their entirety.* The nail or scrap of wood that is reverently enshrined in a reliquary is understood to be but a tiny fragment of something larger, now long gone. Its purpose is to inspire. If our historic sites are to instruct as well as inspire, we must make them whole enough to contain the event in imagination. Drawing the boundaries around historic resources can be a contentious exercise. Debate raged after Columbia University and the City of New York proposed to demolish and redevelop the Audubon Ballroom, scene of Malcolm X's assassination. Certain proponents of redevelopment argued that the historic site worthy of preservation was the bloodstained square of floorboards on which Malcolm X had stood at the fatal moment. They then proposed, as an alternative, the preservation of the entire stage. These admittedly political proposals missed the point. Malcolm X was not the sole actor in the drama of his assassination; his killers were there, of course, and so were throngs of people who had come to hear him speak and who ended up watching him die. The floorboards might have served as a relic, but nothing less than the entire room — and, arguably, the entire building — could possibly convey the enormity of the event.

Many historic interiors — those of most houses and apartments, for example — are closed to the public. They cannot be regulated as landmarks. Yet many historic interiors meet the criterion of public access and are eligible for designation. Similarly, many historic resources are larger in scope than an individual building. In such cases, it may be appropriate to designate a group of individual landmarks or historic district.

- *Designate groups of thematically related landmarks that convey the many facets of a historical theme or community.* Two landmarks often tell more than twice the story of one. Often, therefore, there will be much to gain from supplementing existing landmarks with new ones. On the Lower East Side, for example, the *Jewish Daily Forward* Building tells a wonderful story of Jewish immigrants' aspirations to literacy and political involvement. A few blocks away Jarmulowsky's Bank tells the equally important story of their aspirations to economic success. The *Forward* building is protected, the bank is not. Designating the two buildings, each literally rising above the community and representing complementary aspects of its aspirations, would give shape to a historical narrative larger than that suggested by either structure alone. Likewise, a richer, more nuanced story of Jewish religious life would be told if one or more of the Lower East Side's most modest and unpretentious synagogues could achieve the landmark designation already bestowed on the magnificent — and architecturally distinguished — Eldridge Street Synagogue.

In fact, the Landmarks Commission achieved such a result when it designated the church and workers' houses at Kreischerville, thereby amplifying the significance of the already designated Kreischer mansion nearby.

regulatory challenges, the Landmarks Commission has already demonstrated that it can successfully accommodate rear-yard alterations within the rowhouse neighborhoods of Brooklyn or in the factory and loft buildings now being converted to residences in Tribeca. We believe, in short, that the designation of tenements can be compatible with good housing policy, and good housing policy need not be antithetical to good landmarks regulation.

### Goals for Regulation

All too often, the question of how to regulate historical or cultural landmarks becomes a sterile debate over whether such regulation should be "more strict" or "less strict" than that accorded architectural landmarks. Both views miss the point: landmark regulation proceeds from the rationale for preserving a site and the values perceived in it. If a building has historical or cultural values, then regulation should protect the features associated with those values. This may require differing degrees of "strictness" in different circumstances. Since, in practice, few landmarks are exclusively "historical" or "architectural," regulation will often have to recognize and arbitrate potentially conflicting values. The important point is that, wherever present, historical and cultural values should be recognized and their protection advanced as a regulatory goal. Significant differences can then be clearly articulated and submitted to public hearings. The committee therefore proposes the following simple, predictable yet flexible guidelines for regulation:

- *Regulation should aim to protect those physical aspects or features of a site that convey its historical or cultural values. When significant conflicts arise between this and other regulatory goals, they should be submitted to public hearings.*

In applying these guidelines, it is useful to remember that though the values represented by historical sites are associational, rather than aesthetic, they are conveyed by qualities of form and matter — height, color, texture, roof pitch, window shapes — that are just as visible and tangible as those of "architectural" landmarks. There is no meaningful distinction to be made on a regulatory level between the protection of such elements for their associational or their aesthetic value.

However, because elements sometimes considered undesirable from an architectural viewpoint may possess great historical significance, their protection may lead to results substantively different from those produced by a purely aesthetic approach to regulation. Fire escapes, for example, are often thought to detract from the architectural qualities of buildings. Yet photographs and written accounts of life in the Lower East Side (and in tenements elsewhere) stress their importance as social spaces, sleeping balconies, and outdoor linen closets. Landmark regulation should protect them. Alterations may also be historically significant even while detracting from the host building's architectural purity, as the example of The Eighth Street Playhouse in Greenwich Village, discussed above, makes clear.

Signs, though often considered an architecturally unfortunate (albeit at times necessary) intrusion, may preserve the most telling evidence of a building's or a neighborhood's history. Though the building housing the famous Minton's Playhouse in Harlem has been rehabilitated, the removal of its sign has rendered its history unreadable. Small's Paradise, though for some years an empty shell, still fortunately retains its neon sign, which offers an authentic and (quite literally) legible element of continuity with the building's history.

Though signage is often thought of as ephemeral, historically significant signage has not always given way to changing use of occupancy, nor need it do so. Though the Kletzker Brotherly Aid Association on the Lower East Side is now an Italian funeral home with its own new sign, its original inscribed cornice remains unaltered. Such layerings can be part of the richness of New York's historic fabric, and the eradication of historically significant signage is a tragedy that frequently need not happen. When the Garden Cafeteria, a famous Lower East Side institution, became a Chinese restaurant, all traces of its former identity were removed. This did not have to happen; intelligent landmarks regulation would have provided a framework for preserving some of the signage without impeding a change in use. Even where full preservation is impossible, landmarks regulation could mitigate such losses by requiring or persuading an owner to incorporate all or part of an old sign in a new design, make less severe modifications than originally proposed, maintain historical continuity through installation of a plaque or marker, or donate the historic sign to a museum. Solutions like these, though falling far short of preservation, may be preferable to the complete loss of historical elements and can be achieved only if the Landmarks Commission uses its regulatory authority to protect historical and cultural values.

- *Use landmark protection as one part of a larger, more coordinated strategy to preserve cultural and historical resources.* Protecting cultural and historical resources often demands more than simply preserving a physical object or space, however important it may be. At some sites, the challenge is to mark and interpret; elsewhere it may be to protect a pattern of social activity, a view, or a sense of context. These challenges admittedly often go beyond the power of landmark regulation, and this committee debated whether landmark regulation was appropriate in such instances. Our conclusion was strongly affirmative: landmark designation should never be rejected because it does not provide the whole answer to protecting a resource; it should rather be adopted wherever it provides an essential part of the answer.

This committee believes there is great potential in combining landmark regulation with other policies of protection or encouragement, such as special district zoning, tax incentives, state or national Heritage Area designation, not-for-profit management, public art programs. At Kreischerville, Staten Island, for example, historic district designation, coupled with sympathetic zoning and existing individual landmark designations, could protect the surviving architectural elements of the village - worker's housing, church, hotels, school, and mansion. Remainsthe

vast Kreisler brickworks and docks, surviving buried under the ground, could be included within Harbor Park, New York City's State Heritage Area. This would help guide investment in rehabilitation and interpretation within the community. The clay pits upon which the factory depended still exist within Clay Pit Ponds State Park Preserve, whose management plan and interpretive activities should ensure their preservation and appreciation.

With certain "living landmarks," physical preservation could be accompanied by zoning regulations or carefully constructed tax incentives to maintain traditional uses. A combination of landmark and zoning regulation could also help prevent the introduction of inappropriate new uses where that might be highly destructive of a cultural site's benefit to the public. Where the public's use and enjoyment of a cultural site depends on preservation of its visual context, zoning overlays could be adopted, as has been done to protect the view from the Brooklyn Heights Esplanade. In each case, landmark protection can be an important part of the solution, even if not the entire solution. The committee believes there is an urgent need to debate and develop these and similar ideas to the point where coordinated policies of cultural resource protection can be adopted.

#### **Beyond Regulation: Landmarks and Public Education**

As an agency with expanding regulatory responsibilities, the Landmarks Commission must leave the task of interpreting its sites largely to others. Yet the Commission can and should do much to bolster its historical and cultural designations and explain their importance. One of the obstacles to historical landmark designation is said to be the difficulty of explaining their value to City Council members who must ratify them. To address this over the long run the Commission might consider including historical and cultural factors in all designation reports — even those for "architectural" landmarks — thereby giving the Commission opportunities to talk about historical significance where it is not a factor of contention.

The Commission has other opportunities to support its preservation mandate. Guidebooks, brochures, leaflets, and regulatory guidelines produced by the Commission (or with its cooperation) can stress historical and cultural significance. So can plaques erected under its aegis, as the Landmarks Preservation Foundation's new historical plaque program promises.

To bring its historical and cultural preservation efforts to the public, the Landmarks Commission should consider appointing a public historian and educator to work with local history museums and societies, schools, and community groups throughout the city to develop educational and interpretive programs that would exploit the huge and underutilized public history resource represented by historical and cultural landmarks. Such a program would support the Landmarks Commission's legislative mandate to "promote the use of historic districts, landmarks, interior landmarks and scenic landmarks for the education, pleasure and welfare of the people of the city" while building new constituencies for landmarks.

### Toward a More Diverse Landmarks Commission Staff

Landmarks Commission survey, research, and preservation staff are drawn largely from graduate programs in architecture, architectural history, and historic preservation. Such heavy emphasis on expert architectural knowledge inevitably predisposes the staff toward architectural considerations and away from historical and cultural landmarks preservation. We are fully aware of the severe burdens that budget cuts have placed upon the Commission's regulatory staff. Under more favorable fiscal conditions, the Commission could amplify and diversify its professional staff, hiring experts in urban anthropology and folklore, for example; areas that could also be valuable additions to the Commission itself. In the meantime, the Commission could supplement its internal resources by drawing on outside consultants for specific projects. Often community groups can provide appropriate partners. Foundation support could help pay the bill. The issue of ethnic diversity is a touchy one. The Commission staff did superb work on the African Burial Ground, though not one member was African American. (African American representation on the Commission itself, on the other hand, undoubtedly helped gain the issue the attention it deserved.) We do not believe that membership in an ethnic or racial group is a precondition to an informed understanding of that group's history. Over time, however, increasing ethnic diversity tends to foster a greater breadth of historical investigation and openness to exploring new themes. The Landmarks Commission and historic preservation in general can only gain from such a development.



## STATE AND FEDERAL PRESERVATION PROGRAMS

Federal and state preservation programs fall into three areas: listing programs with limited regulatory power (National and State Registers, National Historic Landmarks); site ownership and management (National and State parks and Historic Sites); and programs of public/private property management (state and federal Heritage Areas). In addition, the Department of the Interior publishes a broad array of technical assistance and educational publications that set the tone for historic preservation nationally. State and federal government programs already make an important contribution to preserving New York's historical and cultural landmarks, but it is the sense of the committee that more could be done. The following recommendations address each of the three major program areas in turn.

### **The National Register: Bringing Down the Barriers to History and Culture**

Three federal and state programs list and provide limited protection for historically and culturally significant sites. The National Historic Landmarks program was initiated in 1935 to identify sites of great importance to the nation's history. The National Register of Historic Places was created in 1966 to include sites of local and state significance, as well as a broader listing of national sites. The State Register essentially duplicates the National Register's listings for New York State. As of 1995, there were about 2,100 National Historic Landmarks throughout the country, while approximately 61,000 properties throughout the United States are listed on the National Register. As of 1992, New York City boasted about one hundred National Historic Landmarks and about five hundred fifty National Register sites.

Though the criteria for evaluating properties are clear and reasonably inclusive, the list of New York City sites tells a disappointingly narrow history, emphasizing Manhattan, official institutions, Founding Fathers, finance, upper-class culture, and fine architecture. African American cultural achievements are represented by a group of sites designated during the mid-1970s. Yet the histories of other ethnic communities, of industry, of working people, neighborhoods, business, and the arts are sparsely represented, while "living landmarks" with rich cultural traditions — La Marqueta in East Harlem, the fishing piers at Sheepshead Bay, the Esplanade in Brooklyn Heights, Chinatown, the Lower East Side, Little Italy — are virtually absent.

What concerns us is the effectiveness of the criteria and listing process. Do the criteria support or impede the listing of significant sites? Does the process encourage or discourage applicants? The register's limited regulatory powers have led many New York City preservationists to ask another question: is the prize of listing worth the struggle? There are indeed solid reasons for seeking listing — and for seeking to extend and correct the historical

picture it presents. National and state registers are frequently used as the basis for "official" histories and guidebooks. Perhaps more important, register listing can instill pride in owners and communities, change the nature of public debate over a threatened site, and bolster community preservation efforts. The cachet of national recognition makes register listing a valued prize. "This makes us feel terrific!" said an advocate for a just-listed armory in Brooklyn. Register listing had conferred validity on his arguments in favor of the building; it also gave his group a "win" which might help build institutional strength and credibility.

But the National Register should do more than provide pats on the back for deserving sites. As a preservation planning tool, register listing could help provide recognition and protection for New York's "living landmarks," the socially valuable spaces which contribute so much to the city's cultural richness and sense of historical tradition. Register listing can also help protect historic piers and other industrial structures exposed to the threat of federal or state-sponsored demolition. Finally, the tax credits triggered by register listing can help to encourage the rehabilitation of historic commercial or industrial buildings. An active strategy is needed to achieve these goals, one that aims not only at listing more sites but also at removing the obstacles which hinder the registers from achieving their full potential. The following recommendations below would advance these goals and would be relatively easy to achieve.

- *Remove the "integrity" barrier to listing living landmarks and significant industrial sites on the National Register.* Many historic sites owe their significance not to a discrete event but to a long association with a pattern of events or activities, one that may even continue today. Such sites are often altered, sometimes more than once, during their useful life. These alterations may contribute to, indeed enhance, their historical associations. Yet sometimes they cause important sites to be ruled ineligible for Register listing or National Historic Landmark status. The main office of the Amalgamated Bank on Union Square is such a building. Founded by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, this was the country's first union bank, and today, remains the country's *only* union bank. The banking hall itself is a nondescript modern intrusion into a dignified stone building. Nevertheless, it remains an important landmark of labor history. Yet the building was ruled ineligible for landmark status because of the ground floor alteration.

Pier 54 in the Hudson River – the last surviving Cunard pier, home berth to the *Lusitania*, point of arrival for the *Titanic*'s survivors, and of embarkation for thousands of World War II soldiers – furnishes a more complex example. Pier 54 was in very poor condition by about 1990. Its survival would have required the replacement of many original elements. Yet its value as one of New York's most powerfully evocative monuments to the age of steam navigation would not thereby have been lessened, because these elements were originally fabricated to be replaceable, and because the structure's value lay in its overall form, rather than in the authenticity of its individual components. Nevertheless, the state declared it ineligible, paving the

way for its demolition. The same reasoning would spell danger for many "living landmarks" that manifest their longstanding community importance through repeated changes or renewals of material. The original wooden planks and pilings of the fishing piers at Sheepshead Bay may long since have been replaced, yet the piers' historical and cultural significance are not thereby diminished: they stem from a tradition of use rather than from a precise architectural form.

As these examples demonstrate, when a site's period of significance is too narrowly defined, too great an emphasis is placed on its architectural or formal qualities, or its original appearance is inappropriately prized over later historical associations, the integrity criterion can become a barrier to designating some of our most cherished and meaningful historic sites, particularly "living landmarks," industrial buildings, and sites whose historical associations do not depend on the authenticity of replaceable materials.

To remedy this situation would require no substantive change to the National Register's Criteria for Evaluation, but merely clarification of their application to historically and culturally significant sites. Amendments to the National Register's informational bulletins spelling out how living landmarks, industrial buildings, sites with long periods of historical significance and a history of frequent alteration, and structures built of replaceable materials can meet the integrity criterion would give applicants, consultants, and preservation staff a sense of certainty in the application of this important criterion.

- *Clarify the fifty-year rule with regard to 'living landmarks.'* "Properties that have achieved significance only within the fifty years preceding their evaluation are not eligible for inclusion in the National Register," with certain exceptions, according to the *Register Bulletin*. This exclusion seems to present an insuperable barrier to the listing of many of New York's culturally significant and socially valuable spaces. It is not, in fact, as insuperable as it seems, if the rule is correctly interpreted. The question concerns sites which owe their significance to an ongoing pattern of use. Must that pattern of use have been so well established fifty years ago that the site was already historically significant for its association with it? Or must the pattern merely have begun *at least* fifty years ago? The Register's *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties* favors the less restrictive standard. They state that a mountain peak used by an Indian tribe for religious purposes is "probably not eligible" "if its use has begun only within the last 50 years," implying it would be eligible had its use begun at least fifty years ago. It is possible that some newer sites could also qualify under the exception alluded to above: namely that "sufficient historical perspective exists to determine that the property is exceptionally important and will continue to retain that distinction in the future." Some of New York's popular public gathering places, such as the Esplanade in Brooklyn Heights, would probably meet that criterion, in that sufficient historical perspective exists to recognize their traditional social value, and that value is likely to be altered only by the sort of catastrophic alteration which register listing could help prevent.

- *Ensure that standards of documentation and evaluation are appropriate for historical sites and attainable by applicants.* As a preservation planning tool, Register listing should be available to communities and concerned citizen groups; in practice, this ideal is not always attained. One reason is that most Register nominations nowadays are carried out by professional consultants at a cost of several thousand dollars (a district could cost as much as \$15,000). The state office sometimes demands a level of historical research and documentation that can be burdensome even for consultants. When this happens, Register listing is effectively placed out of reach of communities, frustrating the Register's preservation goals.

The demand for highly academic forms of data gathering and analysis is in part a consequence of the professionalization of historic preservation, compounded by a requirement which submits nomination forms accepted by state preservation officials to review by Department of Interior preservation officials. Because the state is graded on how closely its Register listings conform to DOI standards – and funding formulas are based on the grade – there is an understandable tendency to bend over backward to ensure correctness. The result can be stifling to preservation.

The Register's requirement that properties be "evaluated against other examples of the property type" can be particularly burdensome. This appears to be founded on the Register's reliance on the concept of historic context, or "broad pattern of historical development in a community or its region," as a basic planning tool. Contexts are generally historical themes or categories within which a property's significance can be evaluated. Where this sensible system breaks down is where historic contexts become too closely identified with particular building types. To evaluate historical sites by reference to building types – often, in practice, by how closely they typify those building types – is to judge them by an architectural standard that can eclipse their associational content. It may also miss the very individuality, even idiosyncrasy, that makes them valuable. And finally it may miss the social role that has lent significance to popular gathering places, religious institutions, workplaces, and other sites.

Establishing reasonable standards for documentation and analysis is a matter both of seeking the right information and setting an appropriate level of effort. The need to screen out frivolous or meritless nominations must be balanced by the need to encourage deserving nominations, so that planning for the long-term preservation of significant sites can take place. Register listing *can* be made more accessible without lowering standards. Where sites owe their significance to their role within a community, they should be evaluated in that framework – not by reference to a building type. At the same time, state and federal preservationists must be reassured that their reputation for professionalism – and their agency's funding – will not be jeopardized by accepting nominations for properties whose historical importance within a community has been demonstrated without a full-scale academic defense.

revitalization. In addition to NHL designations, the process would likely include research which could lead to a larger number of National Register nominations. This would allow more building owners to take advantage of the Rehabilitation Tax Credit without the delays and uncertainties of seeking determinations of eligibility.

In short, working together, downtown business interests and preservationists could use the project to generate favorable public and press attention not only for preservation but also for lower Manhattan in general.

### **Harbor Park: A Sleeping Giant**

Harbor Park, New York's State Heritage Area, is a tremendous resource for preserving our waterfront and maritime heritage. As yet, its potential has hardly been tapped. By expanding its boundaries, it can become a leading force in saving important sites along the Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island waterfronts; by expanding its interpretive programs, it can become a powerful engine for increasing public awareness of these sites and the maritime, industrial, and immigration heritage they represent. Harbor Park has the potential to unlock state funds to support much-needed preservation, rehabilitation, interpretation, marking, and public visitation to these sites. Passage of the 1996 Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act, which sets aside \$50 million in grant fund for municipal preservation, park, and State Heritage Area projects makes this an especially attractive possibility.

Harbor Park is not a park in the traditional sense but rather a hybrid kind of "heritage area" which includes both private and public lands and which is founded on the principle of public-private partnerships. Distantly rooted in the founding of New York State's Adirondack Park in 1892, the "heritage area" concept was first fully developed at Lowell National Historical Park, founded in the 1970s. It has been further developed at the federal level at Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, at Congressionally designated national heritage corridors (Illinois and Michigan Canal, Blackstone River, Delaware and Lehigh Navigational Canal), in the America's Industrial Heritage Project (a nine-county partnership effort in Pennsylvania), and elsewhere. New York State initiated its own heritage areas, the Urban Cultural Park system, in 1977: recent legislation has expanded the system and changed its name to the New York State Heritage Areas System, which currently includes fourteen Urban Cultural Parks plus the newly designated Mohawk Valley State Heritage Corridor. Each of the Urban Cultural Parks has a specific historical theme: Harbor Park's is "maritime trade" and "immigration."

As a state heritage area, Harbor Park aims to identify, interpret, develop, and use its historical resources for public education and recreation. In the words of a consultant, Richard Rabinowitz: Harbor Park "appropriates New York's harbor with all of its history, its life, its people and the evidence of their trade and traffics for fun — and learning. The park is a place for recreation and relaxation, and it is also an outdoor history museum — without walls or

boundaries. Its collection is the sites that cluster at the water's edge; and its story is about the port and its people and how they shaped the peculiar and unique city of New York."

The State Office of Parks (OPRHP) provides general oversight for Harbor Park, but the New York City Department of Parks manages it. Within this system, Heritage Area designation provides mechanisms for directing state financial assistance to local government or "other appropriate entities" to acquire or develop sites, design projects, plan and carry out interpretive exhibits, and mount public programs. Heritage Area designation also empowers OPRHP to award grants to "encourage urban revitalization of, and reinvestment in, urban cultural park resources," and to contract with other state agencies for services and programs, including planning and transportation. Finally, the Parks Commissioner is directed to provide technical assistance in areas such as recreation and preservation planning. In addition to providing valuable state aid for preservation and interpretation, Heritage Area designation triggers a few important regulatory provisions. All state agencies must carry out actions affecting the park in a manner consistent, as far as possible, with the park's approved management plan, and must consult with State Parks. In the words of Title G, "appropriate local action" must be taken "to protect and safeguard the defined resources" and interagency agreements must ensure that local regulatory powers are used in ways consistent with the plan's goals; regulatory power over privately owned property remains in the hands of the local Landmarks Commission.

Harbor Park currently includes six sites: Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty, Battery Park, South Street Seaport, Fulton Ferry/Empire Stores (Brooklyn), and Snug Harbor (Staten Island). All six are publicly owned and, with one exception, already operated as historical or cultural sites or parks. The exception is Empire Stores, a group of nineteenth-century warehouses slated to be rehabilitated and to include an industrial history exhibition. In addition to these sites, the state is also in the process of developing a visitors' center in Pier A at Battery Park.

In the few years since its founding, Harbor Park has taken important steps forward, and the Empire Stores and Pier A projects will take it yet further toward its central goal of increasing public use and appreciation of New York's waterfront and harbor. Yet Harbor Park will not fulfill its potential until it incorporates significant sites not already owned and operated as historical or cultural sites.

- *Expand Harbor Park to incorporate privately owned waterfront industrial sites in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island.* An expanded Harbor Park could facilitate public investment in the rehabilitation of historic waterfront industrial sites and in related infrastructure improvements, provide grant funding and technical support for recreational programs, signage, public art, interpretive exhibits, and bus and walking tours, contract with private operators to provide boat tours, and create financial incentives for private investment in rehabilitation and revitalization. The beneficiaries would be local government, preservation groups, history museums and historical societies, property owners, and private enterprise. Administratively it is relatively easy

to expand a state Heritage Area. The State Parks Commissioner can do so with local legislative approval. Harbor Park's master plan, in fact, envisions expansion along the Queens, Bronx, and South Brooklyn waterfronts. A preliminary site survey, carried out in 1988-90, recommended that the Park "continue searching for suitable sites in other boroughs, including the western Queens riverfront, the South Brooklyn waterfront and other areas." OPRHP and the City Parks Department should work with community leaders, union and industrial representatives, preservationists, and experts on the history of maritime trade and industry to identify and assess significant sites. One good candidate for inclusion would be Kreischerville on Staten Island's west shore. The aging industrial waterfronts of South Brooklyn, western Queens, and Staten Island, including Sunset Park, Red Hook, the Gowanus Canal, Newtown Creek, Long Island City, St. George, and Staten Island's western shore, furnish an impressive array of factories, warehouses, docks, refineries, grain elevators, float bridges, and other monuments to maritime trade which would also make excellent additions to Harbor Park's "museum without walls." Many of these sites are decaying and in need of reinvestment and new uses. Others are still operating and could form the basis for innovative interpretive programs. Harbor Park could fill both needs, funneling much-needed resources for interpretation and reinvestment and providing coordination among regulatory policies such as landmark, zoning, and coastal zone management. Harbor Park, in short, can help preserve New York's priceless industrial heritage while making it accessible to visitors.

- *Expand Harbor Park's interpretive programs to include New York's waterfront industrial heritage.* In the view of consultant Richard Rabinowitz, "the most important program Harbor Park can offer its visitors is the special point of view they command when they are out on the water on New York harbor. Afloat, they see the city as they never have before, and they get a look at port operations that are seldom seen, even by people who live near the docks." Harbor Park should offer boat tours of the harbor, providing access to newly designated waterfront industrial sites: half-hour stops could provide opportunities for visiting historical exhibitions, taking harborside walking tours, viewing public art, or simply enjoying the outdoors. And Harbor Park interpretive material need not be limited to the park's own boats but could be made available to passengers on the harbor's growing number of excursion and commuter ferries. In this way, without owning or managing any sites, Harbor Park could become known as the leading interpreter and historical "tour guide" to New York harbor. Benefits would accrue not only to the agency but also to the many historic industrial sites which would be exposed to visitors.

#### **Federal Historic Sites: Toward a Stewardship Model**

The National Park Service operates seven federally owned historic sites in New York City and has recently assumed partial jurisdiction over an eighth. These include some of our most

significant historical landmarks. These sites should set the standard for the preservation and operation of historic sites. Ellis Island illustrates the problems which bedevil federal site management. Though the Museum of Immigration, housed in the restored main building, is visited by well over one million people each year, many of the island's historic buildings lie derelict and decaying, their deplorable condition hidden from visitors by fences and foliage. The National Park Service cannot fund their stabilization much less restoration, out of its annual budget. Congress has not yet chosen to provide a special allocation for them but has preferred to wait for a private investor to rehabilitate them. It did, however, appropriate \$15,000,000 to build a permanent bridge connecting Ellis Island to Jersey City. This bridge would have had the capacity to carry vehicular traffic onto the island, would have been visually out of character, and would have deprived many visitors of the opportunity to experience Ellis Island in the most meaningful and appropriate way. After public outcry, the plan was rescinded. The episode illustrates one problem that frequently confronts federal historic site managers: no money for maintenance, but large sums available for high-profile construction projects.

Hamilton Grange, the country house built by Alexander Hamilton, provides another illustration. The Grange had to be closed to the public because of long-uncorrected structural problems. A commendable plan to move it into a historically appropriate park setting around the corner from its current site and thoroughly restore it is now moving forward thanks to Congressman Rangel's initiative. Yet it took a state of severe deterioration to prompt a remedy.

The Park Service can provide stewardship of a high caliber, but only if our legislators provide the necessary funding. For this to happen, the public needs to help lawmakers understand the importance of genuine stewardship; that is, stewardship which forestalls drastic restoration — and huge expense — by emphasizing ongoing preservation, maintenance, and repair. Ellis Island could be the site of a demonstration project. For the same sum allotted to the proposed bridge, most, if not all, of the island's unrestored buildings could be stabilized and protected from further deterioration.