UNITED STATES OF AMERICA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

It is difficult in a country such as the United States of America to be able to provide anything close to a comprehensive view of cultural heritage places at risk in a brief paper. The country is large and spread out, but this, however, is not the only reason. Another reason is that the most significant historical places or cultural artifacts in the United States tend to be non-monumental, and preservation efforts are decentralized. Advocates often work most effectively at the local level. As a result, while one could name specific heritage places and monuments at risk, it is also important to identify types of historic sites that are threatened, rather than attempting to produce a comprehensive list of individual places.

In spite of this limitation, the National Trust for Historic Preservation does produce a list each year entitled "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places." The Trust, a nationally based private non-profit preservation organization, has chosen these sites because they symbolize different aspects of America's past and are currently threatened with decay or demolition. They are threatened by neglect, deterioration, lack of maintenance, insufficient funds, inappropriate development or insensitive public policy.

The sites on the Trust list[1] include industrial relics, such as the Hulett Ore Unloaders, which sit on the banks of the lake at Cleveland, Ohio like huge steel monsters designed to remove the iron ore from freighters. Other sites include a failing downtown residential neighborhood in Baltimore, abandoned urban 19th century hospitals, a 19th century immigrant station in San Francisco, and even a site noted as a stopping point for western explorers. Few of these structures are "monumental" in the classical sense, and some do not contain buildings at all, but all are representative of different aspects of the history of the country.

There have been some encouraging developments in the United States in recent years, and the inclusion of some of the above sites at risk on the Trust's list is illustrative of changes in the preservation emphasis. The definition of what constitutes historic sites worthy of preservation has expanded over the years to include sites that are more representative of the diversity of America's culture and racial makeup than had been in the past. Native American sites are now respected for the cultural values they continue to embody, rather than simply their archeological or historical significance, and sites related to the history of Afro-Americans have now taken their place as recognized historical sites. For example, during the recent trip to Monticello with the ICOMOS Bureau, the emergence of this phenomenon was particularly noteworthy. Following the revelations about Jefferson's liaison with his slave Sara Hemmings, the Monticello Museum has now interpreting the Afro-American slave work and culture at the site with a degree of sensitivity and detail that had been missing before.

Another encouraging trend is the growing interest in inner city life, and in the creation of meaningful town centers in the suburbs. A movement named "New Urbanism," which promotes the creation of a more socially interactive form of residential planning and architecture, has been spreading. While criticized for simply putting a sugar coating on new non-diverse suburbs, it has helped to focus useful criticism on the social alienation of the standard American single-family suburban house and street.

This trend is also manifested in many existing cities by the increasing failure and even demolition of the very downtown malls that had been installed on the sites cleared of their historical buildings under the Urban Renewal of the 60's. In Pasadena, California, for example, the originally highly touted mall of the late 60's, which had replaced many blocks of historical commercial buildings near City Hall, now is under demolition. The shoppers themselves had determined its fate – by abandoning its sterile internal environment for the lively variety and visual richness of the nearby district of renovated older warehouses now filled with shops. While it is sad to think that the original buildings were sacrificed in such large numbers for such a short lived development, the trend away from such city destroying internalized malls is refreshing.

The re-emergence of the importance and attraction of American central city environments not only as places to work, but also as places to live, has had an increasing beneficial impact on efforts to conserve historical inner city properties. However, it is a double-edged sward, with the resulting development pressures threatening the older smaller properties. The results of this are often unsatisfactory with historic preservation being confused with historicist image making. Sometimes disembodied facades of the old buildings divorced from their historical context are all that are retained. This is a particularly on-going feature of redevelopment in the nation's capital, Washington D.C.

Over the course of the recent decades, the scene in the United States has changed from one of widespread, Government sponsored "Urban Renewal," which swept away vast numbers of historic urban and industrial sites, to one of more widespread acceptance of preservation as an important part of urban planning and governmental protection at the Federal and local level. While 30 years ago, despite the enactment of the National Preservation Act in 1966, historic artifacts were widely neglected and wantonly destroyed even by Governmental edict, now some fragile sites suffer from being loved to death. Frequently the genuine power of certain sites is diluted by over-restoration where all evidence of age and use is removed. These sites also lose a great deal when too many people overwhelm them. Vernacular sites symbolic of common life suffer more from this than do the more sophisticated architectural monuments.

[1] The 1999 list of America's Eleven Most Endangered Sites include (1) Lancaster, Pennsylvania, home to the Amish, Mennonites and other plain religious sects; (2) "The Corner of Main and Main," downtown USA; (3) Richard H. Allen Memorial Auditorium (Sitka, Alaska), campus centerpiece of Alaska's oldest educational institution; (4) Angel Island Immigration Station (San Francisco Bay, CA); (5) Country Estates of River Road (Louisville, Kentucky), one of America's most significant cultural landscapes; (6) Four National Historic Landmark Hospitals (New York); (7) Hulett Ore Unloaders (Cleveland, Ohio) considered high-tech engineering marvels at the turn of the century; (8) Pullman Administration Building and Factory Complex (Chicago, Illinois) the centerpiece of a planned community industrial complex; (9) San Diego's Arts & Warehouse District; (10) Travelers' Rest (Lolo, Montana), believed to be the spot where the Lewis and Clark Expedition camped twice on its epic journey; and (11) West Side of Downtown Baltimore.

The largest need in the present is an educational one. The emergence of the so-called "new economy" of dot-coms, and dazzling success of the computer industry tend only to further distance people from their physical environment. The world seems on a trajectory away from "place" to one of "cyberspace" – with life going on divorced from a single location. This trend cannot help but have an impact on people's recognition and sense of attachment to the historical structures that traditionally have defined "place." Preservation, as distinct from environmental conservation, depends on the conservation of individual buildings and sites – each often very different from one another – with efforts to save them being fought one battle at a time. While modern communication does help to support a campaign quickly and broadly, it does little to reinforce the sense of identity and attachment to a particular place that must be at the route of the campaign in the first place. That must come from people locally on the ground – and that is going to be the challenge of preservation in the future.

Case Study – Façadism in Washington

Description of the Risk:

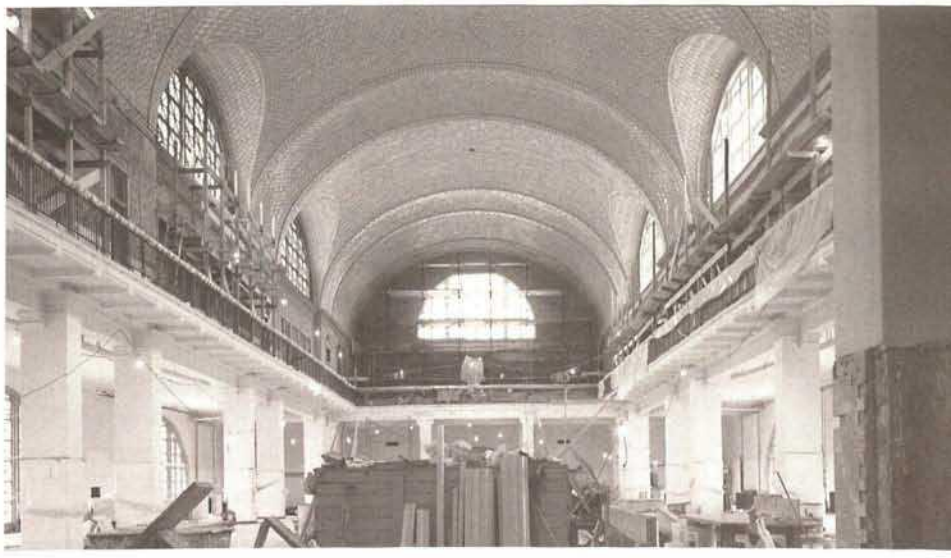
Buildings in the historic city center of Washington are being gutted in their interiors, or the entire structure other than the façade is demolished to allow for a new modern building to be erected behind it, alongside it and above it. Because development in the city center tends to be large scale, the small, narrow façades end up engulfed by larger structures that rise above and along the sides of the historic façades. Where once the traditional Washington urbanscape was marked by building of assorted height (3 to 10 stories) and narrow townhouses, every city square is now being filled to the maximum "envelope" permitted by the ordinance. The city is becoming a homogeneous sequence of boxes, one per city square, some of which have historic facades encrusted in their outer surface.

Heritage at Risk Type: Traditional fabric of the historic city.

Heritage Loss: Historic building interiors; traditional intangible uses, such as neighborhoods, land use; traditional character of the skyline and the urban landscape.

Causes:

1. Zoning ordinances established without any concern for existing urban historic fabric. Zoning permits greater height and construction area than exists.
2. The cost of land is based not on what exists, but on the full potential construction that zoning allows. The existing area in historic buildings is disjointed from the cost of the land. This brings about a pressure for demolition or increase in building area.
3. Zoning ordinance restricts use by urban district, often discouraging the traditional uses for which the buildings were created.
4. Building codes, conceived and written for the safety of new construction, are applied to existing buildings, which often do not have the physical capacity to absorb the required changes.
5. Washington has never recovered from the flight of residents to the suburbs in the 1950s and of commercial and retail to suburban shopping centers as a result of the urban riots of the 1960s.
6. Huge numbers of traditional residential and commercial buildings, buildings mixing the two uses, plus small industrial buildings were abandoned, leading to misuse, underuse, abandonment and demolition.
7. Local preservation/conservation ordinance is weak, and cannot force the building owner/developer to preserve interiors. The local preservation review board, in charge of enforcing the local preservation ordinance, is required to include representatives from the development field, thus weakening the board's ability and inclination to achieve excellence in preservation. Façadism is perceived as an acceptable compromise.



Ellis Island's Registry Room in the Main Building during restoration

8. National legislation is constitutionally limited from enforcing conservation of privately-held historic buildings, even when listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
9. Design professional hired to intervene in historic structures are not required to have preservation background. The most successful architects are those who can get design approval with the minimum preservation components to the project.
10. Speculators and developers require that historic building rehabilitation projects have all the modern amenities of new construction, thereby requiring wholesale alterations to interior spaces and finishes.
11. Because all of Washington has a maximum building height of 120 feet (twelve stories), the transfer of building rights from a historic site to a non-historic site elsewhere in the city is not possible.
12. The local government is under unrelenting pressure to attract new uses to the center city, and office use is the most immediately lucrative and the easiest to attract.
13. At the philosophical level, many in the architectural community perceive urban preservation to be strictly concerned with the visual and spatial qualities of the streetscape. Other important values (historic, technical, scientific, social values) carry little or no weight.

Effects:

1. Washington no longer has tangible evidence of how people worked and lived pre-1950. Gone are the traditional spatial layouts, finishes and details that gave a specific and unique character to the late 19th and 20th century buildings of Washington.
2. Historic façades are being dwarfed, both physically and in visual significance, by adjacent buildings and by multi-storey additions built atop them.
3. The physical record of traditional construction techniques and assemblies is being lost.
4. The traditionally heterogeneous uses of the city are being homogenized into a single office building use. After office hours, the city is lifeless, empty and even dangerous.
5. The city center no longer has a stakeholder population that claims cultural ownership over it and which acts to defend its interests.
6. Government authorities, the architectural community and the general population interpret the above situation to mean good preservation.

US/ICOMOS

Façadism in Washington