
RIGHTER THAN WE
REALIZED?

NEW LIFE FOR A
HISTORIC MOVEMENT

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Opening Plenary Speech by:
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There's a commemorative mood in the air these days.

In fact this conference started off yesterday evening with a commemoration. The party celebrated not only New Jersey's 350th anniversary but also four key New Jersey preservation organizations: the New Jersey Historic Trust, the New Jersey Historic Sites Council, the New Jersey Historical Commission, and the League of New Jersey Historical Societies. All were founded in the aftermath of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (whose fiftieth anniversary we'll soon be celebrating). It's as if the whole institutional universe of preservation here in New Jersey coalesced during the historical nano-second following the Big Bang of the National Historic Preservation Act. That's something to celebrate. But with all this commemoration in the air, we may need to make an extra effort to keep our heads in the game: to stay focused on the present and on where we are heading in the future.

So how are we doing these days? If you go by the numbers, the answer is, pretty well: we have our federal and state agencies, non-profits and graduate programs; and every year adds to the total of National Register listings, local landmarks, easements, tax credit projects, and so forth. Yet despite these markers of success (and there are others), I sometimes worry that the preservation universe (like the real one) is cooling down, drifting apart, losing energy. Some of us feel despondent, and there are good reasons. Politically we've been on the defensive for decades, attacked not only by developers but also by neo-liberal market-worshippers, property-rights crusaders, and even environmentalists. All too often, we're not at the table. We weren't at the table in New York when former Mayor Bloomberg launched the city's sweeping plan for greening the city; we weren't at the table in New Jersey when Governor Christie launched the state's plan for rebuilding the shore after Superstorm Sandy. We're not at the table in cities like Detroit or Cleveland or Philadelphia where decisions are being made about which vacant houses to demolish and which to leave alone. We're not at the table in Washington where big policy discussions have been going on for decades about housing and social programs that could move massive amounts of money either into – or out of – troubled but historic communities. So despite the signs of success, I don't think we're doing all that well. Does anyone think we're actually *winning*?

What's gone wrong? Was our belief in the value of heritage misguided? I don't think so. On the contrary, I believe we were righter than we realized. Americans of all kinds do care deeply about heritage. And heritage could play a much bigger role in national life. But if truth be told, few members of the public care much about the Secretary of the Interior's standards; or about significance or integrity; or criteria and exceptions and eligibility. We, on the other hand, sometimes care too much about these things. Instead of working to ensure that heritage plays a vital role in addressing American society's most pressing challenges –fighting economic injustice, making sense of increasing diversity, confronting global warming – we let ourselves get tangled in the weeds of compliance with arcane rules, debating distinctions of little importance to most Americans. So maybe what's gone right is that we've lost touch with the power of our own idea, that profound realization that the past is still useful to people; and that in the process we've also lost sight of the vital connection between our heritage and our society.

The power of that idea, and the vitality of that connection, can revitalize preservation, and I'd like to share a few ideas about how. But first, permit me to take you back in time...back to the Big Bang, that primordial explosion which gave birth to preservation as we know it. Perhaps, as Maxine Lurie suggested yesterday event, studying preservation's birth can help us figure out how to spark the rebirth we need today.

Learning from the '60s

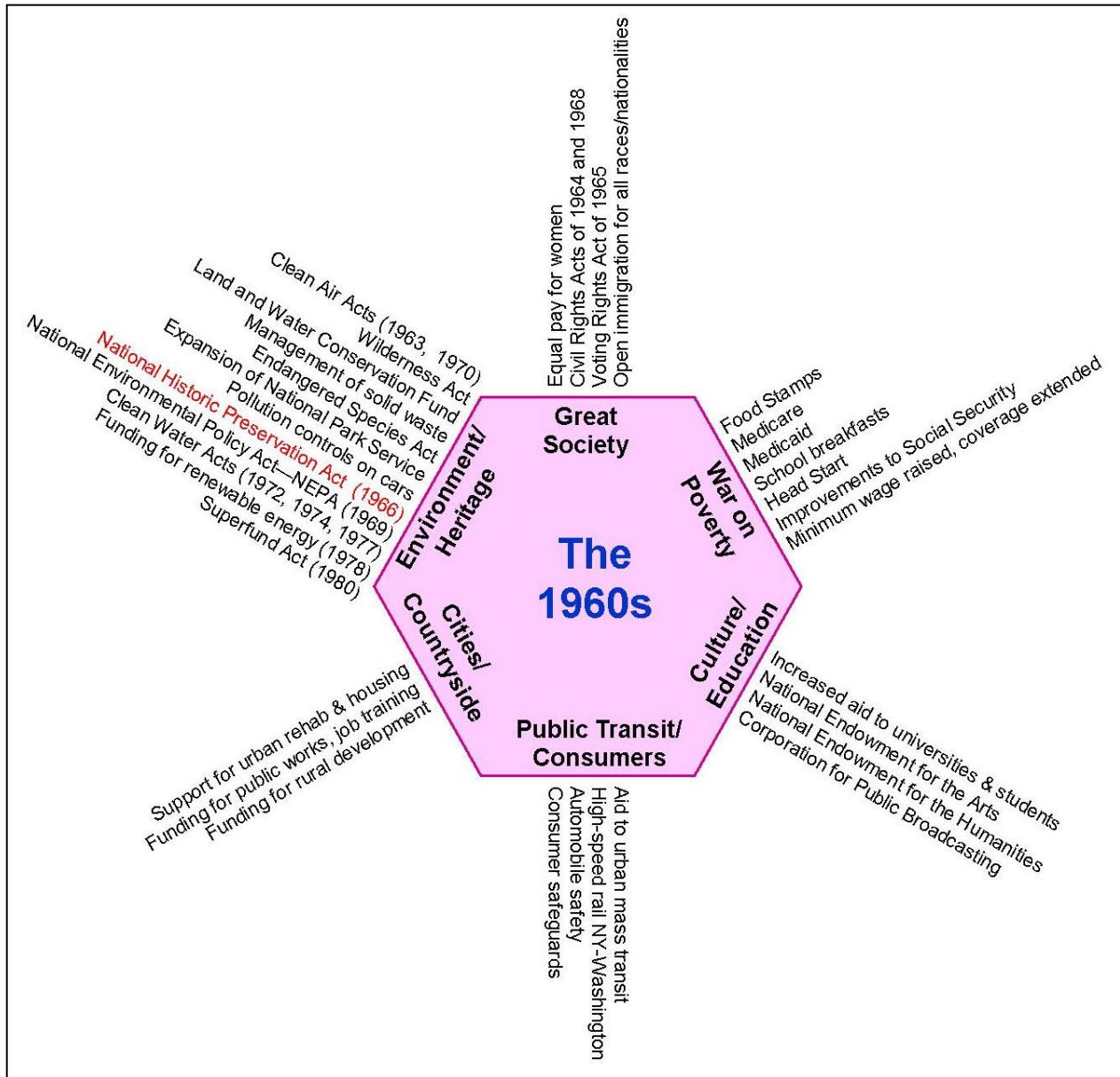
When I think about going back to the 1960s, I think of Brooklyn. I was born in Brooklyn. And I grew up there when it wasn't cool to live in Brooklyn. It's hard to remember now, but there was a time when living in Brooklyn was actually embarrassing. Or funny. These days, as journalist Mark Di Ionno remarked last night, New Jersey is all too often the butt of television jokes. But in those days, it was Brooklyn. A comedian having trouble with his audience would simply say the word "Brooklyn" and everyone would laugh. At some point, that changed. Cleveland became the joke. And eventually Brooklyn became cool. And expensive. In fact, I recently overheard a couple of empty-nesters from Long Island lamenting how they'd been unable to afford a move to Brooklyn: instead they'd had to settle for Manhattan. That sort of remark would have been unimaginable a couple of decades ago. Still, I felt their pain. These days I live in one of Manhattan's few remaining affordable enclaves, a Dominican neighborhood called Washington Heights. I like it there. But even if I wanted to, I couldn't go back to Brooklyn.

The 1960s are a bit like that. For decades afterwards, politicians and opinion leaders derided the '60s. Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980 brought a fierce rejection of nearly everything connected with the '60s; and so it was not the age of Kennedy and King that he and his advisors sought to resurrect but rather that of Calvin Coolidge, Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, and Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby. As the century wore on and America's public culture became ever more focused on getting ahead (defining it mainly as getting rich), the free-range activism and idealism of the 1960s came to seem deeply uncool. Yet today, views are shifting once again. A long period of economic stagnation and cultural malaise, not to mention the horrors of 9-11, Iraq, and Afghanistan, have raised questions in a lot of people's minds: is this really the best we can do? The Occupy Movement brought those questions to the surface. All in all, the '60s have become interesting again. Maybe not as chic as Brooklyn, but attractive and definitely intriguing.

But we can't go back, any more than I can go back to Brooklyn.

Would we even want to go back? I'm not so sure. The 1960s were not what you'd call a "nice" time to be around. Life was full of anxiety, sometimes fear, often anger. You'd wake up in the morning and wonder who'd been assassinated the day before, which city would go up in flames that evening, which union would strike. Nothing worked: *nothing*. I missed a high school exam one day because the subway train to Manhattan inexplicably headed for Queens instead. A couple of years later, living in New Haven, I missed an entire opera because the train took six and a half hours to limp the 75 miles to Grand Central. No, despite Woodstock the 60's weren't a

“nice” time to be around. But it *was* a time of tremendous social ferment and creativity which produced long-lasting change.



1. What a legislative agenda for change looks like. (Author)

That’s how we got the National Historic Preservation Act: no isolated innovation, this was just one nugget in a bubbling stew of social movements, all agitating for change. There were the Civil Rights movement, the American Indian Movement, the women’s movement; there were the Black Panthers and the Young Lords and the United Farm Workers. There was the labor movement, and there were black and Latino movements *within* the labor movement. There was of course the anti-war movement. And the environmental movement. And, yes, the preservation movement. It seemed as if everyone was clamoring for change, and to a remarkable extent they got it. Nor was change a matter of activists only. Government undertook massive and daring innovations. In our own times, when most of us are sick and tired of dysfunctional government,

it's instructive to look back at what our much-maligned Washington politicians managed to accomplish during just a few short years of Lyndon Johnson's presidency.

In 1964 LBJ unveiled his Great Society program. Congress had just passed the Equal Pay Act, guaranteeing women equality (at least in theory); and over the next three years it would pass two Civil Rights Acts – one focusing on blacks, the other on Native Americans – and the Voting Rights Act, and would completely overhaul the immigration system, opening the country up to immigrants from around the world.

Then came the War on Poverty. Food stamps, introduced under Kennedy, were made permanent; Medicare and Medicaid were adopted, along with Head Start, school lunches, and improvements to Social Security. Congress also raised the minimum wage and extended its coverage.

Culture and education saw major innovations too, with the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, public broadcasting, and increased assistance to universities and to students. In public transit we got high-speed rail between New York and Washington as well as aid to urban mass transit. We also got automobile safety laws and basic consumer protections.

Cities got funding for urban rehabilitation and housing as well as public works and job training. Poor areas like Appalachia got rural development funds, electrification, roads, and cultural programs.

The environment was a major focus, with laws to clean up air and water, manage solid waste, limit automobile pollution, protect wilderness and endangered species, and expand the National Park system with trails, wild and scenic rivers, lakes, seashores, and recreation areas. We got the Land and Water Conservation Fund and NEPA – the National Environmental Policy Act. The environmental push continued after the Johnson administration, giving us funding for renewable energy as well as the Superfund Act.

Amidst this tornado of change it's easy to overlook one other bit of legislation: the National Historic Preservation Act. Seeing it in this context makes it obvious that the NHPA, however big and important as it is to us, was part of something much, much bigger: a complex, ungainly, vital conglomeration of movements that sought to reshape society from top to bottom. Preservation didn't stand alone: rather, it was lifted up by a tremendous wave of social activism.

What the 1960s tell us, then, is that we should hope and work for another such uprising of social activism and energy for change, for that is what will give us the momentum to revitalize preservation. It's probably futile to imagine we can do it all by ourselves. Rather, just as the movement's birth belonged to a larger movement for social change, its rebirth may require another such movement. Of course if such a movement rises up, it won't be the same as the 1960s. The social vision behind it, the sense of what needs to be done and how, will be different. Yet just as the old preservation was part of a social compact forged in the 1960s, the renewed

preservation of our time will emerge – if it emerges at all – as part of a renewed social compact encompassing environmental healing, economic justice, and social inclusion.

From Then to Now

If that sounds as if I'm suggesting we sit back and wait for someone else to do something, that's not at all what I'm saying. We have our own work to do: *we* must take a hard look at the system of laws, policies, and programs we've inherited and ask how well it's meeting today's challenges; *we* must renovate our own institutions. And *we* must take stock of our own policy toolbox, daring to throw out what's not working as we craft new and better tools to replace the old ones. Let's peer into that toolbox. Much of what's in it – the National Register, Section 106, and all their accessories – is pushing fifty years old, and it's getting rusty. Little wonder that frustration is widespread. It's easy to blame the problems on shortcomings on the original design, but the truth is that these were probably the best tools that could have been designed fifty years ago; the real problem is how they've been maintained over the years. Brown Morton, who helped write the original National Register regulations and worked on staff at the Register's inception, recalls that the mood was one of excitement and adventure. Flexibility was the keyword: guidelines and criteria were understood not as rules but as concepts to guide discussion. Years later, as Morton puts it, "where possible" turned into "shall," and flexible guidelines were codified into rigid rules. The gears stiffened, the tolerance for deviation narrowed. Little wonder, as I said, that many members of the public as well as consultants and agency staffers worry that formal compliance with rules has all too often taken the place of genuine searches for solutions.

As the 1966 machinery has aged we've acquired some new tools. The 1970s gave us adaptive reuse: naturally people had been adapting and reusing buildings since time immemorial, but the energy crisis gave this old idea new stature as a policy tool. The 1980s gave us the federal rehabilitation tax credit as well as national heritage areas. The 1990s saw a proliferation of programs focused on African American and other culturally specific heritage. In the case of Native Americans this took the form of legislation to protect graves and sacred sites. The 1990s also saw the National Register's adoption of the traditional cultural place rubric, an idea sparked by Native American needs but applicable to everyone. These were all important innovations. Yet even some of the new tools have become rusty with age. The tax credits, now such a central institution for preservationists, are themselves over thirty years old, and though many of us feel compelled to defend them each time they come under political attack, the truth is that they were never better than an inefficient solution. Besides, as we gained the tax credits, we lost other funding tools which might be more relevant now. In the 1960s and '70s urban preservationists could collaborate with neighborhood activists in rehabilitating housing for low-income residents; yet by the 1980s the funding streams that supported this kind of work had pretty much dried up. As for the innovations of the '90s, the traditional cultural place concept could have sparked a broad renewal of preservation's relevance to communities, yet federal and state officials have often interpreted it in the narrowest rather than in the most inclusive possible sense. So while there has been some renewal, there has also been a good deal of stagnation. Today's preservation system still looks a lot like the machinery that was fired up in 1966 – just rustier and more rigid.

Today's America, however, doesn't look at all like the America of 1966. As a result, the gap between what is asked of preservation and what it can deliver has widened to a dangerous degree. How different is today's America? Let's take stock of a few major developments that have taken place since the mid-'60s: understanding how our society has changed is the first step towards assessing the need for change in our preservation institutions.

Let's start with racial and cultural diversity. In 1966, the U.S. was a largely white country. This may surprise some readers, but America back then had just about the lowest percentage of black people in its history, *and* the lowest percentage of immigrants. Of course, America in the 1960s had a serious race problem, and indeed much of the decade's energy was focused on confronting it. Yet in 1966, fully 85 percent of Americans were white. Today that number has dropped below 64 percent, and it's sinking steadily. In fact the Census Bureau predicts that white folk will become a minority by about 2043; and younger readers should bear in mind that they will be roughly at the midpoint of their careers when this transition occurs. As for immigrants, they are up from less than 5 percent in 1966 to about 13 percent today, which is nearly (though not quite) a historical record. Of course the sheer number of immigrants today does represent a historical record, setting the contemporary U.S. apart both from its past and from other nations. Some demographers project that the proportion of foreign-born residents may rise as high as 19 percent by mid-century, but certainly it is very unlikely to fall below its current level.

We are, in short, a diverse society in ways that the preservation system of 1966 was never designed to address. If we were to design a new system today, we would certainly take account of diversity.

Second, let's look at economics. In 1966 we were moving towards a broadly shared prosperity. Real wages were rising; the gap between rich and poor was shrinking, and people assumed prosperity would continue both to grow and to be more fairly shared. Yet the very reverse happened. After 1973, the gap between rich and poor started widening, and it's been widening ever since, to the point where today we are the most unequal country among the world's advanced economies, and one of the most unequal anywhere in the world. Hard as it may be to believe, our equality statistics are on a par with El Salvador and slightly worse than Rwanda. Today, low-wage workers are paid less in the U.S. than in any other advanced economy. The social safety net does less to cushion inequality than in other countries. Poverty, after sinking rapidly during the 1950s and '60s, is back, and with a vengeance: in 2010 the official rate hit 15.1 percent, which meant that over 46 million Americans were living in poverty. That's a record number, equal to the *total* populations of Haiti, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Tunisia, all of which receive substantial amounts of foreign aid to alleviate their poverty. Nor does our poverty problem stop at the official poverty line. Fully one third of Americans now live either in poverty or in what economists and statisticians call "near poverty," essentially one illness or job loss away from the real thing. Our middle class is shrinking and slipping. There is no good news. In New York City, that glittering mecca of wealth and ostentation, a recent study found half of all residents living near or below the poverty line. CBS News reports that 80 percent of all

Americans – four out of every five – struggle with joblessness, near poverty, or reliance on welfare at some point in their lives. By some measures, no more than one tenth of Americans are truly prosperous. Meanwhile, racial disparities, having handily survived the 1960s, are hardening into economic walls: in 2011 median financial wealth for white households was \$97,000; for Latinos it was \$1,300.

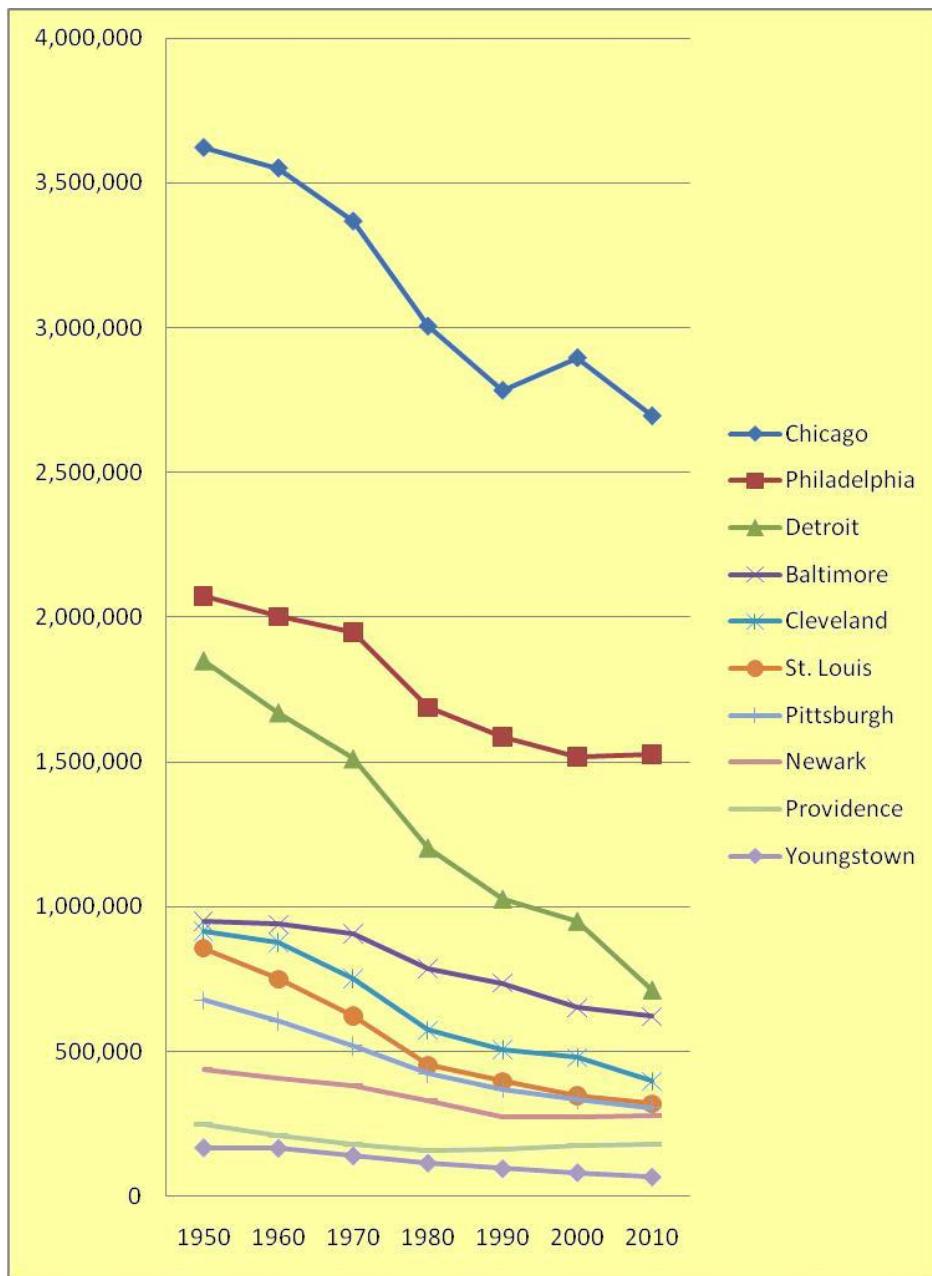
Economic inequality is reshaping not only the economy but also the physical landscape. In 2011 the *New York Times* published a series of maps of Philadelphia which graphically captured the changes. In 1970, there were enclaves of wealth and of poverty, but most of the city was middle-income. By 2007, the situation had reversed. Middle-income areas had shriveled; areas of concentrated wealth had expanded while areas of poverty had metastasized across the city. In effect Philadelphia, like our society in general, had polarized into rich and poor. So geography mimics economics, and preservationists – with fewer and fewer opportunities to serve “average” Americans – must increasingly choose between working for the rich and working for the poor.

Widespread poverty and growing inequality were unforeseen in 1966, and as a result, our preservation system is unprepared to deal with them. If we were to design a new system today, it would take account of these troubling realities.

Let’s turn to another big change, which we may call the incredible shrinking city and the suburb that ate America.

Unlike some of the other trends, urban decline was already a nagging worry by the 1960s; in fact the now-infamous urban renewal program, one effort among many to stem the slide, was launched as long ago as 1949. Yet today urban decline has morphed from a problem into a full-fledged disaster. Declining urban population, already observable by the 1960s, solidified into a long-term trend, so that today, hindsight shows many cities enduring continuous population declines over five or even six decades.

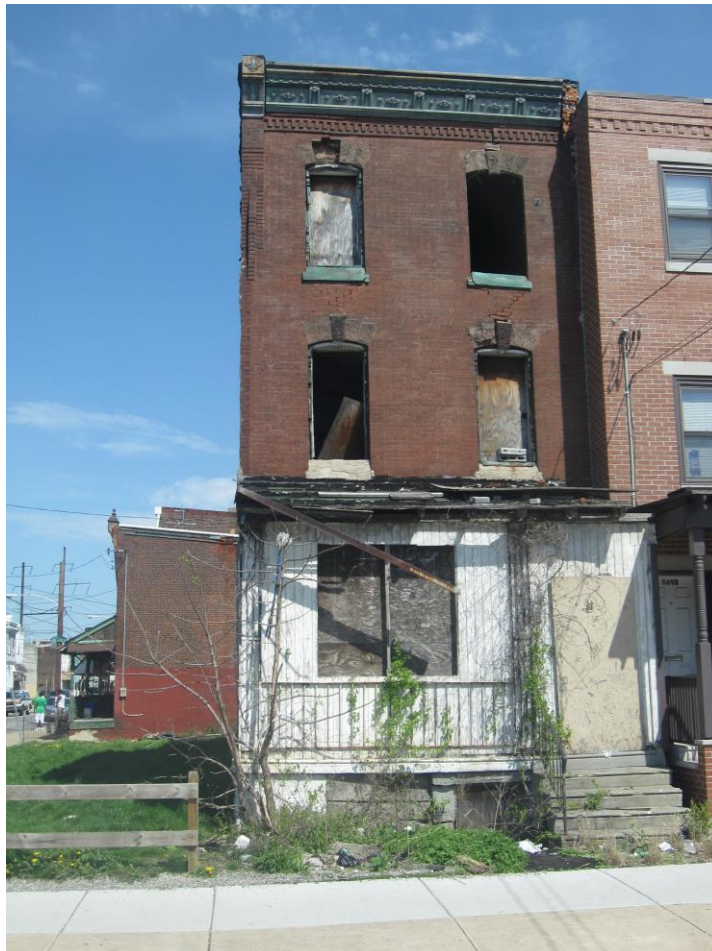
The cumulative losses exceed anything thought possible in the 1960s. Between 1950 and 2010, Camden, New Jersey, lost nearly 40 percent of its residents, Pittsburgh 55 percent, Cleveland 57 percent, St. Louis 63 percent. Detroit, Buffalo, Youngstown, and many other cities have seen similar declines. And even in less severely affected cities, like Chicago or Philadelphia (which lost “only” 26 percent of its population), many neighborhoods have lost 60 to 70 percent of their residents, along with nearly all economic activity. These changes have led to a cluster of intractable problems: chronic unemployment, racial segregation, concentrated and skyrocketing poverty, and rising needs for municipal services at a time when tax revenues and city budgets are collapsing.



2. *Declining population in ten historic American cities, 1950-2010. (Author, based on Populstat and U.S. Census Bureau)*

And, of course, vacant and abandoned buildings. In New York City, whose population began dropping in the late 1960s, abandoned buildings started appearing at about the same time. At first most observers refused to believe the evidence of their eyes: people didn't just abandon real estate, least of all in New York. Yet the problem spread until large areas of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Upper Manhattan were lost. New York eventually recovered, and massive government funding helped renovate the most devastated areas. But other cities, having started sliding earlier, have continued longer, leading to a large and chronic surplus of vacant property for which there is no market. This surplus includes, most obviously, single-family houses and apartment buildings, but it also includes department stores, shops, theaters, office buildings, churches,

synagogues, schools, libraries, warehouses, factories, and so forth. No one knows how many abandoned buildings there are in the United States, as there is no foolproof way to count them. But the Census Bureau's tally of "other vacant properties," which offers the best surrogate, stood in 2010 at over 3.6 million properties, or one out of every 35 housing units nationwide. In some cities the proportion is of course much higher. In 2004, 15 percent of Buffalo's buildings were vacant. In 2010, 40 percent of Youngstown's tax lots held either vacant buildings or vacant lots.



3a. *The two faces of metropolitan America: Collapsing core (Philadelphia). (Author)*

An old preservation maxim holds that unused buildings cannot long be preserved, and indeed America's vacant buildings have been disappearing at an alarming rate – even as the inventory is continuously replenished with newly abandoned buildings which are then launched along the same trajectory. This loss of historic buildings and communities is nothing less than a heritage catastrophe. Yet our preservation system, designed in an era when the threat was too much growth and too much investment, is not equipped to cope with shrinkage and disinvestment. If we were to design a new system today, it would certainly deal with these grave threats.

As core cities (and many inner-ring suburbs) have collapsed, the suburbs have continued expanding. This is partly a demographic shift – in 1966, the proportion of all Americans living in suburbs stood at about 35 percent, whereas it is now over half – and partly a geographical one,

involving outward migration into areas of ever-lower density. The geographical shift has been the bigger of the two, so that suburban *areas* have grown even more rapidly than suburban populations. Of course suburbs existed in 1966, but the kind of sprawl we now take for granted really did not. Millions of acres of traditional landscapes, and hundreds if not thousands of old town centers and rural hamlets have been swallowed up by this expanding tide.



3b. *The two faces of metropolitan America: Spreading suburbs (New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia). (Author)*

In making these observations I do not intend to badmouth the suburbs. These days, in fact, I split my time between Manhattan and an area of suburban Long Island developed between the 1950's and 1980's. Yet I think we can all agree that the suburbs (like cities) have both problems and opportunities. The problems include economic inequity, environmental unsustainability, poor municipal service provision, sheer inconvenience, and often just plain ugliness. The opportunities involve the potential to organize land and use buildings in more sustainable and satisfying ways, to create legible and meaningful histories, and to help localities which are still rather raw and rough around the edges mature into communities rooted in a past and a place. Yet our preservation system, designed before the enormous expansion of suburbs, has little to say about either their problems or their opportunities. If we were to design a new system today, we would surely have a lot to say about the suburbs.

Let us turn to one more significant area of change, the mother of all looming disasters. I'm referring, of course, to climate change. These days, inundated as we are inundated with bad news, it's become hard to remember a time when global warming wasn't a constant, gnawing fear. Well – how about the 1960s? Though the linkage between rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels and an eventual rise in temperature had been posited as early as 1896, today's

consensus on the existence, causes, and consequences of climate change had not yet formed. That's partly because accurate measurements were still in their infancy (the first precise measurements of atmospheric CO₂ were made in 1956) but also because the mid-twentieth century saw a contrary (but temporary) trend towards cooling, caused in part by certain industrial chemicals in the atmosphere. It was not until the end of the 1970s that the conflicting signals were definitively sorted out and it became obvious that the warming trend would soon win out over the cooling trend. Meanwhile, both greenhouse gas concentrations and global temperatures began to rise rapidly. Evidence of a warming climate proliferated until, by the 1990s, it had become incontrovertible, as had evidence that the change was largely caused by human actions. Growing understanding of climate change's consequences kept pace with understanding of its causes. To Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, the prospect of a warmer climate seemed rather pleasant. But by the end of the next century predictions were more likely to focus on rising sea levels, destructive storms, the loss of coastal cities and populous delta regions, the disappearance of glaciers, shortages of drinking water, killing heat waves, the spread of pathogens, frightening epidemics, declining crop yields, widespread famine, and global political instability.

Today, in short, we face a climate challenge profoundly different from anything the framers of the 1966 law could have imagined. In the 1960s you could be a good citizen – indeed a good environmentalist – without thinking about global warming. In fact the environmental activism of the '60s focused on toxic chemicals, air and water quality, protection of wilderness, endangered species, the disposal of waste, the visual pollution of billboards, and so on – just about everything *but* global warming. That option is long gone. True, there are still some climate change deniers, including a few prominent politicians; but then there are also Holocaust deniers, and in 2012 someone probably tried to persuade you the world would end before Christmas. The world is still here. The Holocaust happened. And global warming is real: indeed it is a defining feature of life in our time.

And yet...our preservation system, designed in an earlier era, makes no reference to global warming. If we were to design a new system today, it would most certainly do so.

Redesigning Preservation for Today's World

Cultural diversity, immigration, poverty, urban collapse, suburban sprawl, climate change – these are all defining features of today's America – and markers that separate us from the America of the 1960s. Given such sweeping changes, is it really surprising that the preservation tools crafted in 1966 have lost their grip? Or that the old preservation rhetoric sometimes rings flat? Given the expanding gap between our tools and the world around us, isn't it time we got ourselves some new tools? I'm not talking about scraping off a little rust or sharpening a blade here or there; not talking about tweaking the tax credits or tacking a new exception onto the too-narrow exception to the too-rigid criterion. I'm talking about designing a new system, one that will be *at least* as useful to our own time as the original one of 1966 was to its.

We can do this. To take one example of how, let's look again at global warming. Everyone knows we need to cut carbon emissions. Everyone knows we need to do it fast. The question is how. One answer arises from asking a second question: where do the emissions come from? The answer is somewhat surprising. Many Americans blame cars and suburban lifestyles, yet in fact, buildings produce more emissions than cars. Worldwide, one third of all energy-related carbon emissions comes from the construction and use of buildings. In the United States, *buildings account for nearly half of energy consumption*, with a similar figure for emissions. By contrast, the entire transportation sector (including private cars, taxis and limousines, trucks, buses, trains, and airplanes) accounts for only 28 percent of energy use. (Besides, it's big trucks, not cars, which are increasingly to blame, as trucking mileage has soared while fuel efficiency has flatlined.) In cities, not surprisingly, buildings play an even more dominant role: in New York, they account for fully 75 percent of energy use. In short, *buildings* produce more carbon emissions than all the cars and trucks on the road, or indeed than all of the country's industry. So buildings should be the first place we look for emissions cuts. Besides the sector's sheer size, there's another compelling reason for focusing on buildings. In many sectors of the economy, cutting emissions is extremely expensive and disruptive, but in the building sector it is cost effective: in fact, you can make money doing it. Not surprisingly, then, both the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the United Nations Environmental Program have concluded that the building sector offers the greatest potential for fast and deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

So what's the best way to slash building sector emissions? An entire industry has grown up to promote green building – the construction of energy-efficient new buildings – as the solution. It makes sense up to a point: there's simply no excuse for any new building to be less than maximally efficient. But some green building popularizers go further and call for demolishing and replacing existing buildings, and this is where it stops making sense. The existing building stock is huge: even with the most massive effort imaginable, it would take a very long time to replace it. That's probably just as well, because if we *could* do it quickly, it would be a disaster. The reason is obvious, and it's a wonder that any so-called expert can overlook it. Before you can have a new green building, you have to build it. And that process releases a sharp burst of carbon emissions *which would not otherwise have occurred*. If demolition is also involved, this initial emissions burst will be that much larger. In fact, it is so big that it takes years – actually decades – before the supposedly efficient new building compensates for the emissions produced in its creation and begins to justify its existence. This is true even if the old building was fairly inefficient, but of course not all old buildings are inefficient, and even those that are can generally be upgraded – and with far fewer environmental costs than replacement. Obviously the more efficient the existing building can be made, the less justification there is for replacing it with a new one. Or, to put it in more technical terms, the longer the payback of the new green building is deferred.

Given the need for emissions cuts *now*, the question of how long it takes for the day-to-day efficiency of a new green building to cancel out the environmental impacts of its construction and start showing a reduction in net emissions is crucial, and a number of studies have attempted

to calculate it. The most comprehensive, carried out by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Green Lab, compared the emissions over time of a range of existing buildings with those that could be expected from the construction and operation of a comparable new building thirty percent more efficient. It concluded that the so-called payback period for a new green building could range from ten up to as many as eighty years. That's a big spread, but for single family residential buildings the range narrows to about thirty-eight to fifty years, and for commercial office buildings, about twenty-five to forty-two years.

These numbers are enormously important. Climate scientists are united in emphasizing the need for haste in cutting emissions: whatever amount we fail to cut this year translates into a need for even deeper cuts next year. Worse, the scientists warn, if the cuts aren't made soon enough, the consequences of climate change are likely to become severe, unpredictable, and even chaotic. So the flaw in any climate change strategy that calls for the demolition and construction of buildings should now be obvious: far from solving the problem, it actually makes it worse. True, it may reduce emissions several decades from now, but only at the cost of raising them now. That's just crazy.

Instead of encouraging any kind of new construction, green or otherwise, we should be *discouraging* all but the most vitally necessary new construction. Instead of demolishing old buildings, we should be saving as many as possible. And beyond saving them, we should be retrofitting them, improving their energy efficiency through means which are sometimes sophisticated but often as simple as attic insulation and better thermostats. This is in fact the conclusion which climate groups including the Clinton Climate Initiative and the Living Cities group have reached. The former calls mass retrofit a key climate-change strategy; the latter labels it the "Holy Grail" for cities seeking to cut emissions: "The biggest and quickest cut that cities can make in carbon," they say, "is from 'greening' current structures."

Great news for preservation! Indeed the best in decades, or maybe ever. We always thought we were saving the world: now it turns out we really were! Once again: we were righter than we realized. So you'd think preservationists would be shouting the good news from the rooftops, showing off our holy grail as if it were, well, the Holy Grail. In short, you'd think that the preservation community would be leading the charge for mass retrofits, and that our professional meetings and journals and syllabi would be dominated by discussion of programs and policy proposals to promote it: proposals like taxing demolition, regulating unnecessary new construction, creating broad "carbon preservation districts," or offering massive incentives for retrofitting existing buildings. If you thought that, you'd be disappointed. Instead of enthusiasm, we find a preservation community mired in diffidence and distracted by debates over far less important things. What a tragic waste of opportunity!

Of course making climate change a priority and really promoting green retrofit would not be entirely risk-free for preservation, because the climate doesn't care about many of the things we care about. It doesn't care about beauty and history. It is entirely indifferent to authenticity,

significance, and integrity. From a climate perspective, what counts is carbon. And while this doesn't mean we'll have to give up our culturally based ways of thinking, it does mean we'll have to learn some new ways of looking at old buildings. The carbon embedded in brick walls and steel frames has become an important heritage asset, along with ornamental plasterwork, rare wallpaper, and elaborate cornices. And that means we'll have to learn how to recognize and protect it – even if doing so sometimes means saving the carbon and losing the cornice. Climate thinking turns old habits of thought upside down. Where aesthetic thinking says save the facade and replace the building, climate thinking says save the building and replace the facade; where traditional preservation puts the decorative finishes first, climate preservation puts them last. And where the old discipline of preservation lauds the unique and special, the new one embraces the ordinary, for there are not enough cultural treasures, even were they greened to their very eyelids, to make a significant impact on the climate. It's not in a handful of cultural icons but, rather, in hundreds of thousands and even millions of ordinary buildings that real climate treasure lies buried, and it is through their rehabilitation that preservation can make a real impact on the climate. That's what *mass retrofit* means; and that's why mass retrofit is something more, and different, than green preservation.

What we need now is nothing less than a national campaign to rewrite the rules by which buildings are put up, fixed up, and torn down. *If* the United States were to adopt sweeping prohibitions against demolition, *if* the U.S. were to offer deep incentives for green retrofit, we Americans might not only save our own skins from the worst impacts of global warming but also meet our ethical obligations to the rest of the world, especially the developing and least developed nations, whose people are suffering from carbon emissions they didn't create and from which they have never benefitted. Preservationists should be leading this campaign. It's a chance for preservation to do something really consequential for our society. And for heritage too. Because such a campaign, if successful, would instantly change the equation for entire neighborhoods and towns and suburbs. Instead of being seen as expendable collections of old stuff, these areas would become de facto preservation zones. Instead of being seen as the problem, old buildings would become the solution. That would cure a lot of our headaches. We'd sleep better. And with so much of our built heritage safely out of harm's way, preservationists might even be able to focus more of their attention on the cultural treasures.

What We Must Do Now

Global Warming is an opportunity to reconnect preservation with today's big challenges – and to revitalize preservation in the process. There are others. Indeed each of the big social issues I've described presents its own opportunities for preservation to make a difference while accomplishing its own ends. But any chance of doing so depends on building a new preservation system, a new machine and a new set of tools adapted to our own time. And so I'd like to close by offering a few suggestions about how to start the process. As I remarked, commemoration seems to be the order of the day. And the celebratory mood is likely to become more pervasive as 2016 approaches, bringing with it the 50th anniversary of preservation's Big Bang – the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. And that's understandable. But let us not be content to admire the achievements of our predecessors. Instead, let us emulate their spirit by making

2016 the year we build that new preservation machine, the system that will do for preservation in America today what the previous one did for America fifty years ago.

The process should start by reviewing the challenges facing American society today and reaching a working consensus on which are most important and relevant. My own list (as I've already suggested) would include environmental healing (especially climate change), economic justice (especially poverty and inequality), and social inclusion (especially racism and cultural diversity). But others will differ, and the debate is of fundamental importance, since its outcome will set the direction for everything that follows.

Next, we should set up working groups to dig deeply into each cluster of issues, researching its historical background, evaluating previous policy responses, and developing a range of proposals to address it.

Finally, the groups should come together to synthesize their work into an overall plan or design.

In addition to this programmatic blueprint, the design process must develop a plan to create new institutional capacity. Recall that the creation of institutional capacity was a key feature of preservation's Big Bang, indeed the very one we opened this conference by celebrating. In the state of New Jersey alone, the 1966 law triggered the creation of a Historical Commission, a Historic Trust, a Historic Sites Council, and a League of Historical Societies. Other organizations sprang up in other states. In every state and territory the law created a state historic preservation office. It triggered a proliferation of university programs, which have since mushroomed to over fifty. And of course one shouldn't overlook the new bureaus within the National Park Service, the federal Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, and many other federal (and state) agencies. Meanwhile, as the federal and state system got underway, local preservation was also getting launched, with municipal ordinances in New York and other big cities, and this development called forth yet more new institutional capacity, in the form of municipal commissions and civic advocacy groups. And then there was the private sector, which responded to new opportunities by generating practitioners and consultants skilled in adaptive reuse, preservation design, materials conservation, preservation law, financing, and so forth. In sum, the capacity represented here – which did not exist until the new preservation system brought it forth – is very substantial and represents one of the system's great successes. Nevertheless, this institutional capacity is inadequate to today's challenges. Carrying out the mandates of a new preservation system – even enacting such a system – will require creating new capacity. Not simply more of the same kinds of organizations: rather, new kinds of organizations with new capabilities.

What we need now is the capacity to do sophisticated policy research and analysis, and to publish the kind of policy papers and recommendations that command broad respect. That new capacity can come either from universities or think tanks. As we already have preservation programs in the universities, this seems like the easier route, but it would be wrong to imagine that our existing university programs are equipped to provide the necessary new capacity. They

are not. In addition to being underfunded, they are largely staffed by adjunct faculty who lack the time, are not given institutional support for research, and in some cases are actively discouraged from doing it. As for the full-time faculty, many professors are specialists in fields like architectural history, design, or materials conservation and therefore lack the specific skills for high-level policy analysis. All in all, our professional programs more closely resemble bare-bones training courses than genuine university departments. To generate a significant policy research effort, they would have to be substantially redesigned and funded. One model worth considering is that of the university-based research institute, linked to yet distinct from its associated teaching program. Such institutes exist in many fields; indeed they have proliferated throughout American universities, in part because of their ability to attract significant grant funding. A few efforts have already been made in this direction within the heritage field – the University of Pennsylvania’s Cultural Heritage Center and UMass Amherst’s Center for Heritage and Society come to mind – but so far as I know, no such center or program has yet produced any significant policy research on preservation in the U.S. Setting up one or more genuine university-based policy research centers remains an option worth exploring by any preservation donors interested in making a real contribution to the future of the field.

If the universities present one set of options, think tanks present another. The earliest such institutions go back over a century, but their proliferation and dominance in the policy world really dates to the period since 1970 – making them yet another example of how the world has changed since 1966. While our predecessors didn’t need think tanks, we do need them now, for they have proven to be almost indispensable tools for developing and promoting new policies. One option would be to encourage existing organizations like the Brookings Institution, Economic Policy Institute, or Urban Institute, to take on heritage issues where they intersect their existing areas of concern. That could produce some benefits, but we are unlikely to get the sustained attention we need. A second option is to create our own think tanks. The National Trust for Historic Preservation is already doing this in a limited way through its Preservation Green Lab. The Green Lab’s work is excellent: there just isn’t enough of it. We need additional, independent think tanks. Endowing one or more such institutions is another option well worth considering by preservation donors who want to make a difference.

Regardless of which route we go – university-based centers, free-standing think tanks, or both – we must somehow meet the need for new institutional capacity to develop, analyze, and market policy proposals. For without this capability, the preservation movement will remain severely under-powered in the political marketplace. We will never get to the table.

The Future

Will we see another upswelling of energy for change, comparable to that which propelled the National Historic Preservation Act into being? No one can say. Today’s political climate provides little reason for optimism. But in our post-Occupy-Movement moment, signs of stirring are everywhere. The drum beat for real action on climate action grows more insistent. Opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline won’t die down. The problems of poverty and economic inequality are constantly in the news, with right wingers as well as progressives feeling compelled to

propose solutions. An almost 700-page tome by a radical French economist on capital and inequality becomes an instant best-seller, while New York City's charter is amended to require an annual report on poverty. Dissatisfaction with a government subservient to corporations and the rich grows louder on both left and right: an academic study by a Princeton political scientist, using statistics to analyze the problem, goes viral. This is just what can be seen on the surface. Underneath, who can say? But it is clear that knots of Occupy-Movement veterans as well as Transition Movement and other decentralized groups are organizing around the country. Something similar is presumably happening on the political right. So the signs of ferment are there. And if it does catch fire, it could happen very suddenly and with little warning. That's what happened in the 1960s: as the decade opened, activists railed against society's apathy even more than its conservatism. How quickly that vanished! Looking back, it almost seems as if everyone went to sleep apathetic one night and woke up the next morning feeling committed and brimming over with energy. It didn't happen that way, of course. Yet change, when it came, was abrupt and far reaching.

Perhaps something similar will happen in our own time. Who can say? If it does, that will be our chance for real change, and we must be prepared with plans and visions or else we will miss it. For decades, the wise policy heads of the world have assured us that big thinking is unwise, impractical, pointless, unrealistic – even reckless. They have advised us to focus on what can be achieved in this year's legislative session. And they have reminded us of how little that is. But in today's context, I say that big thinking is not impractical: it is realistic. I say that planning for a future beyond this year's legislative session is not reckless: it is prudent. I say that *not* planning for such a future is unwise – even reckless. And so I would urge us all to set aside the calls for caution, the reasons for retrenchment, and to plan: plan for a different future and a new set of possibilities. In the absence of any certain deadline, let us agree to adopt the symbolic date of 2016 – the fiftieth anniversary of preservation's Big Bang – as our target. For if a new upswelling of change does arise, it will give us the opportunity we need to renovate, regenerate, revitalize, reconnect preservation to the vital needs of today's America, reconfirm the truth of our fundamental insight – that the past is still useful to people – and reanimate us to say:

We were righter than we realized.

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A Note on Sources

As this is not an academic paper I have kept it free of citations and footnotes. Nevertheless, readers may wish to know where I have gotten my facts, figures, and quotations, and so I have provided this information in the notes below. All online sources were checked in May or June of 2014.

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