Where Did We Go Wrong?
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE following item was not invented by some gifted pixie mentality; it is from Preservation News, published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The National Trust would not put you on. We quote:

"Babe Ruth's birthplace and a few neighboring properties were recently purchased by the city of Baltimore for $1,850. The home of one of baseball's immortals is located on Emory Street, a narrow alley of humble row houses. The Mayor's Committee for the Preservation of Babe Ruth's Birthplace is now debating whether to leave the house at its present location or to move it and the neighboring houses to a site adjoining Memorial Stadium, to be part of the Babe Ruth Plaza. Vandalism in the present neighborhood has prompted the committee to resolve 'to restore the house at its present location only if environmental amenities are found to be reasonable.' The inaccessibility of Emory Street is also cited as a reason to move the house elsewhere. However, Emory Street is too narrow to move the house intact and dismantling would be the only solution."

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It reads exactly as if Lewis Carroll wrote it.

"Leave the house where it is," said the Red Queen. "I can't," said Alice. "It's inaccessible and there's vandalism." "Then get some environmental amenities," said the Red Queen, "and be quick about it." "What are environmental amenities?" asked Alice. "Don't ask foolish questions; just move the house," said the Red Queen. "But the street is too narrow," said Alice. "Nonsense," said the Red Queen, "don't you know anything? Take the house apart and put it back together again. And move the rest of the houses with it." "Poor things," said Alice. "Where to?" "To the Memorial Stadium, naturally," said the Red Queen, "and call it Babe Ruth Plaza." "Couldn't we just leave it?" asked Alice. "If you do," said the Queen, "you will have to take out the other houses and put up a sign, 'No Ball Playing Allowed.'" "Mightn't 'Ballplayers Welcome' be better?" said Alice.

Alas, it is not straight out of "Through the Looking Glass"; it is straight out of life. And if it sounds like parody, that is exactly what much of the preservation movement has become. It is game-playing. The game as it is played—by a strict set of rules—is to seal off historic buildings from the contemporary environment in a vacuum of assiduous make-believe.

The process ranges from babes in Babe-Ruth-land to the phenomenon of Williamsburg, where the art of scholarly self-delusion reaches the extravagantly ($79-million) sublime. It deals in "cut-off dates," which means ruthlessly destroying anything later than a certain arbitrarily selected year that interferes with the illusion desired, and "restoring back," a horrendous process of faking the chosen period by removing all subsequent accumulations of time and history. The final perversion is "reconstruction" or rebuilding things that no longer exist, and that, if you take the blinders off for a moment, merely means putting up brand new "old" buildings, which, no matter how carefully researched, are a contradiction in terms and values that shows how sick the whole thing has become.

"I say the moon is made of green cheese and this is the 18th century," the sponsors of these historical "enclaves" (a favorite euphemism) of the studiously unreal tell us. No matter how you slice it, it is still green cheese, and you can slice it many ways, from Strawberry Banke to Old Sacramento. The point is that the whole idea and purpose of preservation—saving the past because it is part of the living heritage of the present, so that the process of history enriches the city and the environment—has been lost.

The result is a cross between play-acting in the name of history (and the lesson being taught is curiously subversive if one still equates education with traditional values of truth, and, by extension, morality, or knowing what is true or false) and a museum of period arts. The inevitable conflict set up between the forms of the past and the uses of the present—a conflict denied overtly but carefully and often comically disguised to accommodate the tourist trade — is an abrasive anachronism. It all dead-ends in a head-on clash of new, old, and new-made-to-seem-old for which there is no solution except playing the game harder, increasing the make-believe and the confusions of real and reproduction, not for a living lie, but for something that is a dead lie, at best.

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The tragedy is that this concept has become so popular that it has almost totally aborted the proper approach to the conservation of our urban heritage. The purpose of preservation is not to "recreate" the past, a laughable impossibility filled with booby traps like the lady in saddle shoes, harlequin glasses and hoop skirt who shattered this observer's first schoolgirl visit to Williamsburg. (No, changing the shoes and glasses wouldn't fix up anything at all; you really couldn't restore the lady back.)

More shattering, on a much later visit, was the lack of information from guides as to what was authentic and what was not, since obviously no distinction was made between copies and genuine survivals in their own minds. Even the survivals have been so smoothed up that the line gets fuzzy. To them, it was all real. Actually, nothing is real except those buildings that have lasted a couple of centuries, gathering a significant patina of changing American culture (stripped, naturally) and the collections of furnishings that are curatorial triumphs, deliciously arranged to simulate someone's personal possessions by a well-researched extension of wishful-think.

It is all art and artifice and the finest green cheese. It is a beautifully hollow stage set shell, totally removed from the life-force of the society that gave it form and meaning. A little fudging for effect hardly matters. (Please don't write, oh super-patriots, to tell me that I am simultaneously sullying both Williamsburg and the American flag; I have your letters from the last time. It is not treason to look art and history in the eye. I value both beyond the call of tourism.)

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What preservation is really all about is the retention and active relationship of the buildings of the past to the community's functioning present. You don't erase history to get history; a city's character and quality are a product of continuity. You don't get any of it with "enclaves" in quarantine. What a cut-off date cuts off is any contact with the present at all. In urban terms preservation is the saving of the essence and style of other eras, through their architecture and urban forms, so that the meaning and flavor of those other times and tastes are incorporated into the mainstream of the city's life. The accumulation is called culture.

In New York, the sentiment for preservation is a relatively new thing. The city has never preserved anything. Its nature is to destroy, build and change. New Yorkers are not antiquarians and that is part of their pride and strength. To be successful in New York, preservation must strike a singular balance with this spirit; even the past must face the future.

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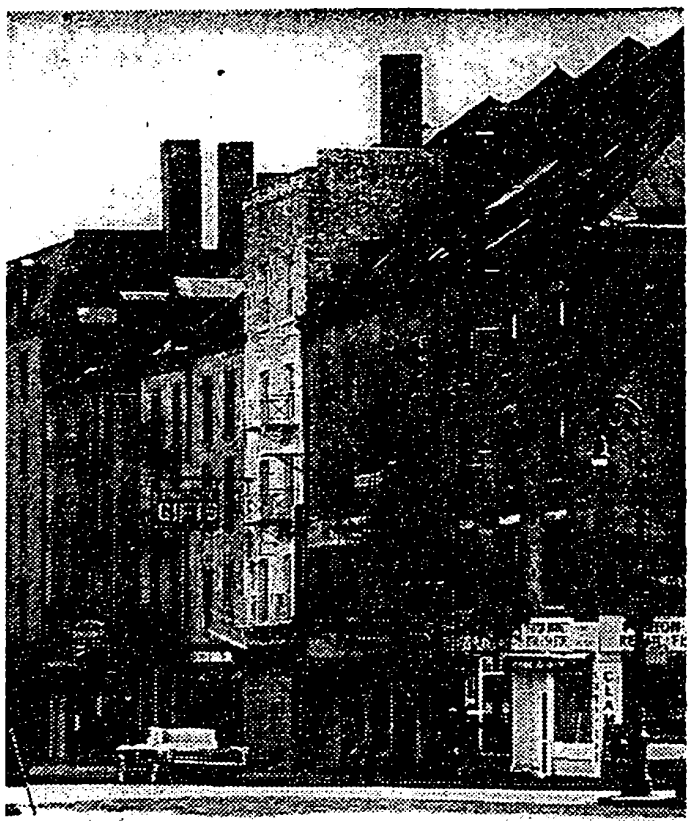
A case in point is the South Street Seaport project in lower Manhattan, centered on the early 19th-century Schermerhorn row on Fulton Street between South and Front Streets. This is the first really promising preservation venture that the city has undertaken in environmental terms. Credit is due to all connected with it for vision, courage and the desire to do the job right. But this very important undertaking is teetering on the brink of falling into the popular preservation bag.

As the thinking has gone, and it could, hopefully, change, a "representative" 19th-century date would be picked for the area. The date in New York is 1968, not 1851, and to pretend otherwise would be the first false step. The model shows the long-gone Fulton Street market reconstructed. Here we go, playing preservation parlor games, on the way to the standard picturesque baloney of gas lamps and horse-drawn cars. One little step leads to another. Next, Williamsburg - by - the - river, and we don't mean Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

It all hangs in the balance now. If it follows the established route of stage-set archeology firmly closed to the 20th century, it will go very, very wrong. With the best talent in the world, the most imaginative architects, the sophisticated sensibility to bridge old and new with creative, contemporary links to make a landmark for the future, why make false copies of the past? The challenge is to make the city's heritage a working part of the dynamic vitality and brutal beauty of this strange and wonderful town. And above all, to make it New York.



Jerry Davis

Old Fulton Street houses for Seaport Museum
About to fall into the popular preservation bag?