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PRESERVATION, COMMON SENSE, ORDINARY COMMUNITIES AND PANCAKES
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Almost 33 years ago, I moved to Richmond, Virginia, to begin a new job. It turned out to be a very important move for me: It literally changed my life.

Before moving to Richmond, I had spent my whole life in West Texas. That's a wonderful part of the country, but what I found in Richmond was a revelation to me: I had always been a history buff, and in Richmond I found myself for the first time confronted with tangible elements of the history that up to then had existed for me only in books.

I went one day to St. John's Church and stood in a pew and thought, "This is where Patrick Henry made his 'give me liberty or give me death speech'." Right here in this very place. Right in this building. The fact that I could be there, could see and walk in and touch these places where the past had happened, impressed me enormously. I decided to learn more about old buildings and this thing called historic preservation.

That's why we love a place: because it gives us something – even though sometimes we can't put a name on what it gives us – and because we feel a part of it, connected to it in ways that are deep and strong and enormously satisfying. And when you love a place like that, it's a place worth preserving.

Now that I've said the "p-word," I have to confess that it makes me a little uneasy sometimes. The word "preservation" has become freighted with so much baggage that I'm afraid we've forgotten it describes an activity that all of us engage in every day – and for some very simple reasons. Let me give you some examples:

When I lived in Charleston, I had a neighbor who was a real Charleston Lady. In the dining room of her 18th-century house, setting on a fine 18th-century sideboard, is a fine 18th-century silver tea service. She's very proud of it. She shows it off to her guests, even pours tea out of it on very special occasions. That lady has held on to that silver tea service – she has preserved it, in other words – because it is good to look at. She knows that it represents a sense of style and craftsmanship that is difficult to duplicate nowadays. She preserves it because it is beautiful.

In something of the same sense, my grandparents in Texas drove a Model T Ford well into the 1940s. One of my strongest childhood memories is of being driven around town in that car, which even then was old enough to attract considerable attention. Now, my grandparents didn't keep on driving that Model T because it was beautiful. No, they held on to it – they preserved it – simply because it did for them what they wanted a car to do: It took them where they needed to go with a minimum of fuss and bother. They preserved that car because it worked.

Finally, at my mother's house, up on a shelf in the closet of what used to be my sister's room, there is a scrapbook that my sister kept during part of her high-school years. On one of the pages of that scrapbook is a corsage that she wore to some

dance or party or other. My sister has held on to that corsage – she has preserved it – not because it's beautiful (it isn't) and not because it works (it isn't good for anything, really). No, she has preserved it because it is a tangible link with a part of her own past. She knows that as long as she preserves that flower, she has a connection with something that she doesn't want to forget. .

When you strip away all the rhetoric, that's all preservation is: just having the common sense to hold on to something – specifically, in this case, to old buildings and neighborhoods – because they're beautiful, because they work, and because they link us with a past that we need to remember.

That's what we preservationists are all about. It's our job. It's a big job, a tough job – tough enough that sometimes we allow ourselves to be lured into the easy game of “follow the preservation leader.”

Forty years ago, preservation in the South was embodied in the antebellum house museum. Those houses--there seemed to be hundreds of them--were so much alike in appearance and interpretation that they became a preservation cliché. Maybe you remember them. They were ringed with tall white columns. Even when they were hundreds of miles from the coast, even when they stood atop a vein of superlative clay, the guides always solemnly assured us that all the bricks had been brought over as ballast in the holds of ships from England. The elaborate plaster- and woodwork inside had been hand-carved by skilled craftsmen especially imported from Italy or France. In the garden was a hole where the faithful servants (in those days they were usually called “servants” since “slaves” was considered tacky) had buried the family silver at the approach of the Yankees. In the hallway was a dark stain where somebody had bled to death after a duel. And on the banister was a nick made by the sabre of someone who, in a fit of high spirits, rode his horse up the stairs.

In place of that old preservation cliché, we created a new one a few decades ago: the festival marketplace. The first of these, Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco and Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, were intriguing enough, but then the whole country took them to its collective bosom. It became possible to travel from coast to coast, shopping and drinking designer coffee nowhere else but in festival marketplaces that used to be textile mills, railroad stations and tobacco warehouses.

Over in Birmingham a few years ago, there was a proposal to turn an old steel-mill blast furnace into a festival marketplace. It didn't happen, thank God, but I know exactly how it would have looked. There would have been fountains and perky little kiosks and hanging baskets of geraniums everywhere, and ficus trees with lots of tiny twinkly little lights in them. In the gritty, smoky places where men used to sweat and swear and make pig iron, there would have been a Gap and a Benetton's, a card shop and a Victoria's Secret and a bed-and-bath shop and a gourmet cookie store. It probably would have been very successful, but any sense of the blast furnace as a special, evocative historic place would have been lost in the making of just another festival marketplace pretty much like every other festival marketplace.

Recently I've begun to think that aquariums are the festival marketplaces of the new millennium. They're cropping up everywhere. But not too many of them get installed in historic buildings, so I'm not sure what the current preservation cliché is. Whatever it is, you can bet it'll be opening soon in a neighborhood near you.

It doesn't have to be that way. There's more than enough for us to do without all rushing to do the same thing. I'm here to urge that we diversify our efforts so as to avoid the pitfalls of preservation cliches.

I'm also here to urge that we diversify our vision so as to recognize the importance of the "ordinary" as worthy of our best preservation efforts.

For much of our history as a movement, we've recognized a sort of preservation Valhalla of communities where the historic resources were rich, the preservation ethic was strong and successful, and the results were glorious. These places – Charleston, Boston, New Orleans, Williamsburg – they really knew what preservation was all about. They were places with real History; we thought of them as very special.

Our own communities didn't seem so special somehow. They were newer, less historic, more familiar and therefore more readily expendable. We talked about the wonders and beauties of Natchez and Nantucket while driving through the endless commercial sprawl of our own home towns--past the miles of plastic signs, overhead wires, acres of asphalt parking lots and fast-food restaurants with limitless variations on the mansard roof. And if we noticed all this ugliness at all, chances are we acknowledged it just long enough to say something like, "This place has certainly changed. I hardly recognize it anymore." We never even noticed what an ominous ring that statement has: "I hardly recognize it anymore."

When I was working as director of the Trust's Southern Regional Office, I spent a lot of time on the road, visiting communities, talking about preservation and the programs of the National Trust, offering whatever help and encouragement I could to local preservation groups. As time passed, I began to realize that on field trip after field trip, in community after community, the same two events kept happening again and again. I came to dread them like the plague.

One of them was the After-Dark Driving Tour. This usually occurred when my plane was late, but my hosts were determined to give me a driving tour of local landmarks – despite the fact that it was too dark to see anything. I can't tell you how many evenings I spent sitting in a car parked at the curb, staring into pitch-blackness, listening to the driver say something like, "Now over there is our most important historic house, perfectly wonderful, nothing like it anywhere else, draws people from miles around, and I just wish it wasn't so dark so you could see it."

More to the point, the other thing I came to dread was a statement. Knowing that I lived in Charleston, altogether too many of my local hosts would introduce themselves and their community with a statement that went something like this: "Oh my, you come from Charleston! Well of course, our poor little town doesn't have anything really historic to save – like Charleston...." I got used to hearing that statement, but I never got comfortable with the fact that it was an apology. When it comes to history, the only thing a community should ever apologize for is failing to appreciate the worth and validity of its own history.

Sometimes we think of history as a physical attribute like naturally curly hair: Some of us have it and some of us don't, and those who don't have it usually wish they did, and those who have it don't always know what to do with it. I think that's a bad analogy. History isn't like naturally curly hair. It's more like something much more fundamental. It's more like a heart – and every community has one.

Has anyone here ever heard of Lariat, Texas? Or Plainview, or Lubbock? Those are the towns where I grew up. The fact is, most of us come from or live in places that most people have never heard of. Most of us come from ordinary places – and those places are eminently worth saving.

I live now in a city of monuments. You can hardly turn a corner in Washington without bumping into a statue of a general on horseback or a politician striking a pose. Ordinary communities are monuments of a kind, too. Consider the main street or the older residential neighborhoods in your hometown. Maybe no great battles were ever fought there--except for the hard-fought struggle to make a living out of dirt or rock or water. Maybe no deathless oratory was ever uttered there – only the jokes and curses and front-porch conversation of men and women and children making a life for themselves. Maybe no great empires were won or lost there – except in the gradual putting down of roots, the pushing back of the frontier, the flexing of industrial muscle that heralded the birth and coming of age of a nation. Seen in those terms, “monument” doesn’t seem too far-fetched a label for an ordinary town.

When I was putting this speech together, I was worried that I might not be able to include a quote from the 19th-century artist and critic John Ruskin. You’ll be happy to know that my fears were groundless, and here it is:

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three, the only trustworthy one is the last.

An ordinary community is an important entry in that book of the nation’s art that Ruskin talks about. An ordinary town – an assemblage of front yards and storefronts and signboards and brick pavements, a low-rise skyline of church steeples and chimneys and factory smokestacks – can be very good to look at. And what makes it particularly engaging is the fact that it is largely unconscious art, the sort of art Horatio Greenough was talking about over a hundred years ago when he said that the most beautiful things ever produced in America were the clipper ship and the trotting wagon.

The brick and wood and flowerbeds of an ordinary community like your hometown have great power to convey a sense of the people who are responsible for their being there. You can see evidence of the human presence, the human touch, in the stonework of a garden wall, the careful matching of grain in a wood-paneled parlor, the arrangement of windows and porches on an old house. Things like these are potent reminders that there’s a huge group of people out there – like me and some of you, I suspect – whose interest in preservation is grounded first and foremost in a simple love for old buildings and the way they look.

Seen in those terms, “outdoor art gallery” is a pretty good label for an ordinary community too.

However we label them, places like these ordinary towns are good things to have around. It’s right to love them. It’s right – and essential – that we work hard to save them.

But it isn't easy, and I'm sure there have been times when every one of you has asked, "Why bother?" Fortunately, I don't have to come up with an original answer to that question. It's been answered often and eloquently.

Perhaps because I grew up in a part of the country with more than its share of dust storms, I've always felt a special affection for John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. One of the most moving passages in the book comes when the women of the Joad family sit in their house, poring over their meager possessions. The family is leaving the next morning in search of a better life in California, and the women have to decide which of their belongings can be taken with them and which must be left behind. Here's how the passage goes:

The women sat among doomed things, turning them over and looking past them and back. "This book, my father had it. He liked a book. *Pilgrim's Progress*. Used to read it. Got his name in it, right here. Why, here's his pipe – it still smells rank. And this picture – an angel. I looked at it before the first three children were born. Didn't seem to do much good. Think we could get this china dog in? Aunt Sadie brought it from the St. Louis fair. See – it says right on it. No, I guess we can't take that. Here's a letter my brother wrote the day before he died. Here's an old-time hat. And these feathers – I never got to use them. No, there isn't room.... But how can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past?"

It's important to note that those women aren't members of any historical society or preservation organization. They're just ordinary people facing the loss of their own heritage – and realizing how much they need it.

A sense of history can grow by being shared, but it can also be lost. A community can fall victim to amnesia. It can lose the memory of what it was, and thereby lose touch with what it is, what it wants to be. That loss of community memory happens most frequently and most dramatically in the destruction of familiar landmarks that are tangible manifestations of who we were, what we believed, where we were headed.

When we preserve those landmarks, we strengthen a partnership that makes for orderly growth in the life and appearance of our communities: the perpetual partnership among the past, the present and the future. I think that's the message in a profound statement made more than a century ago by – guess who? – my old pal John Ruskin. He was writing about architecture, but his words apply to preservation too:

When we build, let us think that we build for ever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for; and let us think... that a time is to come when men will say, "See! This our fathers did for us."

Just as we learn about our fathers and mothers--who they were, what they believed, how they lived--from the buildings they left for us, our children will learn about us in the same way. They'll learn about us from what we build and what we have the

common sense to hang on to.

This may be the longest I've ever talked without showing slides. If I had brought them, one of the slides I would've shown you is a picture I took years ago on some small-town Main Street here in the South. It shows the upper floors of a nineteenth-century commercial building. Half of the facade is enlivened by an elaborate cornice, ranks of regularly spaced windows and handsome brickwork. On the other half, everything – brickwork, windows, cornice – is hidden behind an ugly skin of corrugated aluminum panels.

What makes the picture intriguing is that I can't remember whether it was taken as that metal slipcover was being installed or as it was being dismantled. In other words, I can't remember whether this is a picture of bad news or good news.

That's the way it is when you work in preservation: Sometimes you can't tell whether you're winning or losing. When I get that feeling, I've come to rely on a sort of mantra to get me over the rough spots, and in closing I offer it for your edification as well.

It comes from one of my favorite television programs of all time, "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman." Whenever poor Mary found herself in an apparently inescapable dilemma (which was almost every day), she'd smile that sort of semi-deranged smile and say, "Everything will be all right, and then we'll all go to the House of Pancakes."

I like the sound of that.

There's a preservation group somewhere in Georgia that has adopted as its motto a phrase from ancient Athens: "To transmit this city not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us." I suspect that if you here in South Carolina were to ask yourselves, "Are we doing that?" you could answer, "Yes, we are!"

That, it seems to me, is cause for celebration. I'll meet you all later at the House of Pancakes.