

Book Reviews

Past Meets Future: Saving America's Historic Environments, edited by Antoinette J. Lee. Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1992. 288 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, index. \$25.95 cloth.

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In 1991, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the National Park Service, the National Trust for Historic Preservation took the occasion of its annual meeting to reflect on the past and future of historic preservation in the United States. This elegant book, comprising essays from a number of distinguished scholars and practitioners in historic preservation, is the result. Although not without its drawbacks, the book provides both an excellent introduction to some of the important theoretical concerns now facing historic preservationists and an overview of ongoing policy and planning challenges.

The essays in this volume reveal that historic preservation has come a long way from its inception as a movement concerned with maintaining shrines to famous Americans, largely for their didactic patriotic values. Indeed, the book seems to emphasize how inclusive and pluralistic American preservation has become. Yet, for all that, there is a strong sense that preservation in the United States has a long way to go, both in conceptualizing whose history should be preserved and in defining precisely what strategies are to be involved in this more inclusive preservation movement. The book does not provide definitive answers, but it does pose the questions, and that is the essential first step.

The thirty-one essays presented here are divided into five sections. The section titles are unfortunately grandiose, leading the reader to think that perhaps the essays are merely accumulations of clichés and self-congratulation. Contained within the group "How Will Preservation Adapt to a Changing World?" for example, are powerful, insightful commentaries from a variety of professionals in preservation. Henry G. Cisneros, recognized as a preservation advocate during his tenure as mayor of San Antonio, challenges preservationists to respond to demographic changes that are inevitable parts of our near future. Kenneth B. Smith and Patricia H. Gay address ways that preservation

must be a part of urban revitalization efforts if it is to have any real significance.

Some concerns recur. Antoinette J. Lee's essay, "Multicultural Building Blocks," is the most cogent argument on multiculturalism and historic preservation, but many of the writers address the need for increased diversity in preservation. A number of writers, including Donovan D. Rypkema and Joseph L. Sax, take up legal and economic issues directly. Many of the essays explore, albeit tentatively, the intersections between theory and practice.

More important, perhaps, is the understanding—sometimes implicit but often explicit—that preservation has to be directly engaged with a number of public policy issues if it is to remain viable. Instead of being concerned with saving the isolated monumental mansion or an area of quaint charm, preservationists such as Christopher Duerksen and Pamela Plumb recognize that preservation is ultimately involved with issues such as growth management and local politics.

These are for the most part wise essays. Yet they may leave unsettled some readers whose background is in "academic" history. Where is the concern with change over time, with explaining events in a way intelligible to present audiences? Where is the complexity in the past, the multitude of causes and effects that make telling even the simplest narrative problematical? Perhaps more important, how do the concerns addressed in this book come into the conversations of scholars: how might a historian of nineteenth-century Iowa or Minnesota incorporate these insights into their work, and vice versa? I'm not sure they can. For all the growing self-reflection in historic preservation, for all of the calls for preservationists to embrace the full complexity of America's past and present culture, there are many in the field for whom history remains "the past," some "thing" to be studied and learned from, but integrated into contemporary society only through administrative and policy means that are continuously under review.

If it is true that preservation has not yet developed a mature theoretical sense of itself, then perhaps that condition simply reflects historic preservation's origins—and most of its present practice—not in the academy, but in the world of administration, real estate development, and public policy. For many in preservation, "how things get done" must usually take priority over "what does it all mean." Essays such as the ones in this book point, though, toward a more reflective preservation practice, one that seeks to develop a more dynamic sense of change and a complicated theoretical framework. They provide a strong foundation upon which to build an enriched conversation between the "public" and the "academic" branches of the discipline.

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