INTRODUCTION

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On a blustery January 26, 1985, in New York City, professional historic preservationists from all over the continent ascended the great flight of steps past the statue of Alma Mater and through the grand portico to assemble beneath the rotunda of Columbia University's Low Memorial Library. Most everyone had expected a good turnout but was surprised to see the long rows of seats ranged before the podium filled to overflowing. In the moments before the gathering officially convened, many renewed old friendships although a good number would meet for the first time. Excitement electrified the air as still more people filtered through the doors and melded into the recesses of the cavernous chamber.

Certainly the name of the symposium about to get under way--Historic Preservation: Forging a Discipline--was not in itself sufficiently magnetic to draw so many people together and with such intensity. Scores of conferences in recent years have been entitled Historic Preservation colon this or that. Perhaps the word "discipline" provided the rallying point, yet if one had asked each member of the group to call out his or her undergraduate major, a Babel of subjects would have issued forth. Art History. Linguistics. Theater Design. English. Environmental Studies. Archeology. Geography. Social History. Architecture.

What everyone in the hall did share was a commitment to the conservation of the planet's architectural and landscape heritage and the fact that their professional lives had been shaped by a dynamic and visionary mentor, James Marston Fitch, founder and director (from 1965 to 1977) of Columbia's pioneering Historic Preservation graduate program. A man of great intellect, powers of observation, and verbal persuasion, Fitch's instincts always exhibited great prescience. In the post-World War II years, he was one of the leading reformers and critics to see value in the broad sweep of the nation's architectural legacy, including but not limited to, as was then the fashion, buildings considered to be certifiably modern. By the early '60s, when the economic, social, and cultural cost of publicly sponsored urban renewal and its attendant erasure of whole chapters of the nation's built memory came under severe scrutiny, Fitch, as always, was at the forefront.

He instinctively surveyed the existing disciplines which had been shaping our towns and cities--the architect as designer, the developer as dealmaker, the planner as arranger, the historian as record keeper, commentator, and critic, and the public too often as powerless observer--and noticed a missing force in the game of urban form-giving. He reasoned that another player was needed to buttress the citizen-amateurs who had long struggled to retain the physical heritage of their communities, a new type of professional with an allegiance to the preservation and interpretation of that which had been built regardless of current design fads or the momentary whimsy of the marketplace. To this end, like Noah, he gathered talented students into a conceptual ark which he christened "the synoptic overview," and then sent them out into the world to become, as he would later call them, "curatorial managers of the built world."

And far out they did, all over the continent and beyond to farther destinations on the globe. They served in government at all levels, founded nonprofit agencies, established their own professional practices, and taught at universities. They conserved and interpreted historic structures, districts, and landscapes of every variety from log cabins to skyscrapers, train stations to gas stations, factories, ranches, mines, ships, mills, lighthouses, parks, formal gardens, farms, country villages, great estates, workers' cottages, bridges, tunnels--and the list goes on.

They developed standards and policies for the conservation of all aspects of the built world from the microscopic realm of the cross section of a paint chip to the interpretation of the historic structures and landscapes of entire nations. Now twenty years after the founding of the Historic Preservation Program, Fitch's protégés, along with scores of alumni guided by subsequent program directors but still strongly influenced by the master in absentia, had returned to Morningside Heights. These living products of Fitch's work fell silent as the proceedings began.

The symposium started with a history of the Columbia Historic Preservation Program by Kate Ottavino, followed by papers chronicling Fitch and his accomplishments, his writings, and his humanity, by Theodore Prudon (presented by Wesley Haynes) and Selma Rattner respectively. The
remainder of the day was taken up by a second fitting tribute to the mentor: a demonstration of how his former students have added intellectually to the precepts set out by their teacher-in-common. This took the form of a series of highly thoughtful and provocative papers. As the day wore on and the sunlight streaming through the lunettes of the huge rotunda gradually dimmed, the audience sat spellbound by a powerful collective experience, a first opportunity for professionally trained historic preservationists to hear their peers thoughtfully comment on the intellectual underpinnings of their fledgling, yet already extremely influential, field.

A major theme that ran through several of the ensuing talks involved the shattering of the commonly held perception that preservationists are simply concerned with the physical well-being of inanimate objects. Instead, as Wayne De La Roche so aptly suggested, the field is responsible for something far more compelling, the trusteeship of "the delicate treasury of memories housed within our landmarks." In a similar vein, William Higgins reminded us that "every building is a memory theater," and that "buildings are manmade armatures that shelter and order an unlimited amount of experience," while Gordon Loader and Clifford Zink urged the field as well as the Columbia program to expand its focus beyond "repair technologies" to the task of developing "agreement about the ongoing philosophical issues of preservation and their application." Adele Chatfield-Taylor eloquently redefined preservation as more than a "mechanical overhauling of second-hand buildings." It is "an art form," a "pioneering, heroically revolutionary, and completely avant-garde activity," which is supported "not because [people] want to get rich but because they want to get anchored."

The other papers delved into the areas of education and communication. With an eye toward what preservationists can learn from related fields, Carol Clark urged that the work of environmentalists be carefully studied, especially "the real-estate strategies practiced by pragmatic land conservation experts." Michael Tomlan commented on the challenges being faced by the next generation of preservation educators, along with the status of the recognition of historic preservation as a discipline at American universities. On the latter issue he observed that "perhaps preservation at the graduate level," especially those programs housed in architecture or environmental design schools which generally "have the worst rapport of any element of the university," has "evolved to the point where it should search for a more favorable, multi-disciplinary home." Kathryn Hatch examined the status of preservation education in primary and secondary schools. Here she sees the potential for multiple benefits--enabling teachers to vivify their teaching by incorporating everyday surroundings into their lessons while building a new constituency, for "over the course of their professional careers," each teacher "can be expected to introduce a population the size of a small city to the process of actively seeking... information and meaning from historic environments." Frank Sanchis explored still another critical educational issue, namely, developing better communications between disciplines, as he pondered the crucial relationship between preservationists and architects. He observed that since preservationists have often not been schooled in the reading and interpretation of architectural drawings, they have difficulty communicating with architects, while it is hard for architects, due to their training, "to come to terms with the essence of historic preservation...its concern with context, with groups of buildings and districts, as much as with individual buildings...because design is, by and large, an individual building process."

Nevertheless, he does see "signs of a strong, positive relationship between architects and preservationists developing."

With the close of the day, the thoughts which had resonated so optimistically through the rotunda resided only as memories in the minds of the participants, and as magnetic particles on the taped transcripts. Now with the publication of Historic Preservation: Forging a Discipline, anyone may now revisit the memory theater that was the Low Library on that special winter day to explore the ideas and concerns of an emerging field--a field that has already helped bequeath a rich, varied, and informative, visible legacy to the citizens of the approaching millennium.