Chester Liebs points accusingly at a photograph of Washington, D.C.’s Greyhound bus depot, c. 1940, where the streamlined, curvy walls have been covered over with blocky concrete and thus “modernized.”

“This building embodied all the speed and excitement of a new kind of transportation, and now it looks like the Confederate ironclad *Merrimack*, floating down New York Avenue,” fumes Liebs.

He is director of the Historic Preservation Program at the University of Vermont. He also is a founder of the American Society For Industrial Archaeology and the American Society For Commercial Archaeology. And he is angered by all sorts of insults to America’s “built environment.” But it is not just the Mount Vernons and Gettysburgs that fire his crusades—it’s also the Lindholm Diner in Rutland, Vermont, “a rare streamlined diner designed by the Judkins Company, custom coach builders.” The diner, sighs Liebs, “has now been encased in vertical board siding and, of course, the ubiquitous mansard roof (p. 65).”

Is the diner pretty? Or, esthetically, is it junk? “Pretty, ugly—that’s beside the point,” says Liebs. “The important thing is that it is information.”

Chester Liebs is something new: just as traditional historians read documents, he “reads” buildings. Early in his career, he was strolling down a New England dirt road with an archaeologist, who pointed at a leaf-strewn meadow and said: “What do you see?” “Leaves,” said Liebs. “No!” said the archaeologist. “See how the leaves have blown into the depressions left by building foundations, outlining them—you’re looking at an abandoned village.”

The idea suddenly came to the young preservationist that the “built environment”—houses, factories, stores, highways, railroads—could be read like a book. It would be a new way to study history, above-ground archaeology. And the edifices we built could give us information about our culture unrecorded in our documents and annals.

Today buildings talk to Chester Liebs. The color and pattern in the slate roof of an old brick house, long-since converted to apartments, says “Spanish-American War era.” The style of an added-on porch tells him exactly when the neighborhood began to decline. “What year were these shops built—look at the cornices!” he tells the graduate students who trail him like disciples following a swami, studying neighborhoods and old buildings across the country. “Why was this street widened in 1893? Why was major construction going on then?”

By Richard Wolkomir

**Old McDonalds have a friend: his name is Liebs**

*His game is seeking out architectural ‘gems’ of this century—drive-ins, supermarkets, gas stations—and saving them for the future*

On Boston’s Museum Wharf, a 44-foot milk bottle of the 1930s now sells yogurt. Liebs applauds its reuse.
Columns, windowsills, dingy 1840s brick shops clustered along a river, shunned by newer houses beyond the railroad tracks, a Texaco station’s shape, renovations to a supermarket, c. 1955, the design of traffic lights—all these details tell Chester Liebs what has happened in a town. He is a kind of architectural Sherlock Holmes.

“Look at this,” he says, flashing onto a screen a slide of a paint chip taken from a Renaissance building in Italy. “You can see that for centuries the air was clean, then in the top layers the pollution smudges get thicker and blacker—just in a paint chip you can see a cross section of time.”

Time obsesses him. “Ticktock, ticktock, each day an era looks slightly different,” he says. “You buy glasses with a new shape, you get a smaller car, you decide to expose the beams in your living room. We need to develop what the European countries have, a sense of ourselves, to preserve from the past enough to give us the context, because without those roots you can easily run away from yourself.”

In his war against the defacers of diners, the levelers of classic Gulf stations, the despoilers of 1830s tanners, the troops are his graduate students, full of fervor. But Liebs also schedules important classes for the evenings, so that civilians can sign up—high school teachers, lawyers, real estate agents, architects, builders, government officials, masons, carpenters—hundreds have been given the new religion. He also organizes summer institutes that attract more people from around the country.

“We’ve had people from as far off as Wyoming and California, even England, taking these courses—they have to have an effect,” he says.
Recently, some of Liebs’ graduate students were circling over St. Albans, Vermont, in a Cessna, shooting aerial photographs. They feared that the city’s efforts to revitalize the downtown area might result in the loss of many of the remaining 19th-century public buildings as well as architecturally significant residential and commercial structures. Focusing their attention on the economic and planning issues facing St. Albans, rather than targeting a few individual buildings for preservation, they concluded that the city had sufficient economic potential, but suffered from “a severe case of poor self-image.”

Armed with photos of land-use patterns, economic analyses and inventories of historic buildings, the preservation fighters struck. St. Albans awoke one morning to find that an exhibit of the town’s physical evolution was occupying a downtown shop window. High school students were treated to walking tours, firing their enthusiasm for the city’s history as an early turnpike town, then a railroad center. Barrages of articles went off to the newspapers. Then the students unveiled their secret weapon: a scale model of St. Albans with removable buildings. This could instantly show citizens how any of the proposed changes to downtown would look.

City business leaders sent up a white flag. They voted to set up a committee that would assure careful management of the city’s architectural resources in any revitalization efforts—a position in line with Chester Liebs’ dictum: “Historic preservation must be related to a city’s economic needs.”

Liebs allows himself a satisfied smile: another skirmish won in the war to save America from America. There have been other victories. Organizations like the Society for Commercial Archaeology have helped to foster a national climate that encourages preservation of important architectural artifacts, including some of those from our more recent past: a 1930s Shell station shaped like a shell in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Milwaukee’s 1930s Clinton Street filling station; Fowles’ News Store and Soda Shop in Newburyport, Massachusetts; Harold’s Army and Navy Store, c. 1930, with a Carrara glass front, in Corning, New York, and so on.

On April 20, 1977, tourists on Boston’s waterfront stared as a tug steamed into the harbor, pushing a barge. Riding imperially on the barge was a threestory-high wooden milk bottle (p. 63).

The 44-foot-high, 15,000-pound structure was built in the early 1930s by Arthur Gagner and was purchased later in the decade by the Sankey family. Located on Route 44, near Taunton, Massachusetts, it served as a dairy bar until 1967, but then—boarded up—the bottle began to deteriorate. In 1976, with the help of H. P. Hood, Inc., a leading New England dairy products company, the building was restored and transported to Museum Wharf where the Boston Children’s Museum and the Museum of Transportation became the proud new owners. Now it stands outside the museums, spiffed up and selling frozen yogurt.

Saving the Sankey milk bottle, says Chester Liebs, was “probably one of the most significant preservation efforts affecting a 20th-century historic American roadside building.”
Is he kidding? Liebs bangs his forehead on his desk in mock exasperation. He has heard that question a million times. And he hates it.

“Our society is ruled by the quest for economic gain, and to understand it we have to study the effects of industry, of marketing, because you simply cannot understand the American experience in terms of what is pretty or ugly.

“I don't want to be Mr. Commercial Archaeology, because I do a lot more than that,” he adds. “But the popular architecture of today—the diners, the gas stations, the fast-food emporiums—all have roots deep in the past.”

At least as far back in the past as the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, he argues, there were powerful economic forces at work. During the 19th century we developed a manufacturing system that eventually outstripped the demand for basic products, then had to create a demand for new products to keep the machines turning. We became a very self-conscious society, studying ourselves to sell to ourselves, master manipulators of images.

Most of all, says Liebs, there was the automobile. Highways became the lines of force along which commerce and communities grew. We began to organize our lives around the automobile, as the designs of our shopping centers and the shapes of our towns all testify. Now, oil pumps are running dry and the great automobile age is slowing, changing. And with much of the architectural effluvia of the auto age—the burger palaces, the drive-in movies, the strips—still in place, this is the time to study the phenomenon.

Liebs crisscrosses the country, speaking, teaching courses, lecturing, preaching his gospel of preservation.

“I'm not the champion of saving every roadside artifact, any more than I think that every artifact of any era should be saved,” he says, “but, somehow, you must leave enough information around from every era so that each generation has a long-term backdrop for understanding itself.”

As late as the 1960s, he points out, Victorian buildings were razed without a tear being shed and Victorian furniture rated only a snicker. Now everybody loves Victoriana. And Liebs believes the fast-food restaurants and highway signs of today will become admired objects, too, once the auto age starves to death on high-priced fuel. But the highway strips—the architecture of ephemerality—could vanish in a twinkling, leaving a gap in the physical record.

“At the present rate of removal, by the year 2000 we might be the proud possessors of an environment replete with vestiges of the Victorian and earlier eras, but with almost no remaining movie palaces or exuberant bits of mimetic architecture, like cheese stores in the shape of cheese wheels,” Liebs predicts.

He notes that, in historical museums across the nation, children are reverently paraded past Model T Fords, kerosene lamps, crank-up phonographs, “Grandma's” artifacts. “Ironically, the grandmothers of a sizable portion of living Americans drove streamlined automobiles, riveted B-29s and P-38s in World War II, and were awestruck by the age of the future promised at the 1939 New York World's Fair,” he says.

His own preoccupation with the passing of time and the past began in childhood, a legacy from his father, the president of a printing company. The elder Liebs had a keen eye for his surroundings in the New York City metropolitan area. And he made sure his son became an observer, too.
"Even when I was very young he made me aware of Roosevelt Field on Long Island, where Lindbergh took off, and of the great estates on the North Shore, which had been subdivided. I became highly aware of the terrible pace of change, how 19th-century America was being converted very, very rapidly, because everywhere you went there was construction, things being torn down."

As a student in the early 1960s, he watched New York City's Pennsylvania Station being razed, stunned by the realization that "much information and value was being lost." He decided to make his career a study of history and the preservation of historical artifacts.

One of the first graduates of Columbia University's pioneer preservation program, he went on to serve as curator of history for the New York State Historic Trust. Then he was field historian for the Historic American Engineering Record and Vermont's supervisor of historic sites.

The preservation movement took off in 1966, with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act: "A kind of euphoria set in, as we did inventories of American architecture, not just historic shrines, but the whole bloody patrimony." Preservation took hold just then, he believes, because—with city after city losing its downtown—the country "felt the first terrifying tremors of future shock."

"Does our new interest in America's past mean the country is finally moving out of its adolescence and into maturity?"

"No," says Liebs. "The country has finally crossed the line into adolescence—we're having to make profound decisions and we're having trouble." And he adds: "We're not turning away from the future when we study the past, we're preparing for it."

Twentieth-century artifacts are only part of Liebs' concern. For instance, he participated in the excavation of Fort Orange, which was smack in the path of an Albany, New York, highway project. "We discovered that those earliest Dutch settlers, in that wilderness, actually lived fairly sophisticated lives, like people in a Vermeer painting," he says.

Today the program he started at the University of Vermont has become a national center for preservation studies, one of a handful in the country. An example of the University of Vermont's broad-scale outreach program is its new preservation laboratory, a resource for preservation projects anywhere.

The lab's young director, Philip Marshall, is currently studying slate: locating the original quarries, identifying the various types of slate, locating sources for similar slates today, finding skilled craftsmen who can work with slate. If an architect brings in a piece of roof slate, Marshall can tell him where to find a replacement, how much the new slates will cost, how much breakage to expect in laying a new roof. He also acts as a consultant for such projects as the restoration by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities of the Morse-Libby Mansion, an 1860s Italianate villa in Portland, Maine.

Marshall is typical of Chester Liebs students: he began as a geologist, studying geothermal structures in Iceland and Kenya. One day, watching workers restore a building, using unnecessarily harsh chemicals to clean the stones, he decided that a geologist would have much to offer in historic preservation work. Now a graduate of the University of Vermont graduate program, Marshall presides over an odd laboratory that has bricks instead of books on its shelves and an 1870s metal building cornice leaning against one wall.

Milwaukee gas station, attention-getter when built in 1930s, is pride of owner Harley Sprague.

Liebs calls Lambertsville, New Jersey, store "time capsule of post-World War II supermarketing."
Liebs students know how to preserve 200-year-old bricks; they know the economics and legalities of preservation projects, and how to "read" a street. They fan out through the country, spreading the religion. "For instance, one of our graduates, now working with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has helped an entire city in the Midwest rebuild its sense of identity and image," says Liebs proudly.

"We're getting away from the study of documents alone," he says. "We need other types of input to understand our development—oral tradition, the understanding of landscape, the social implications of architecture. All are parts of it."

So are pizza palaces and car washes: "The gasoline station provides us with essential clues when we are looking at the automobile's impact on the American landscape."

He picks up a magazine article and waves it in the air, scornfully. "Somebody says in here that the next thing you know the preservationists will be trying to save the first McDonald's stand," he scowls. "That is very ironic, because anybody with any sense of history or context would see that fast foods have had an enormous impact on American life, and that 100 years from now the first McDonald's is going to be a very important artifact—that's not a joke, it's just logical."

Hang around Chester Liebs and your eyesight sharpens. You begin to be struck by the difference between a New England-style diner and the more streamlined, flamboyant Jersey-style diner. You learn that early gas stations, built out in the suburbs, were designed to look like suburban houses, and learn that an unaltered 1950s supermarket can be rarer than a pristine Stanley Steamer.

Also, you learn why people may laugh at the concept of studying gas stations and highway intersections. "You know why?" he says. "Because in the 20th century people are scared witless of technology—and they're embarrassed, because the automobile controls them, embarrassed and frightened by the fact that now the closure of the Strait of Hormuz would jeopardize their entire life-style."

His own aim: "I try to give people a context for the decisions we've made, so we can understand American society, which means looking at the entire picture, the Plymouth Colony, certainly, but also the design of a supermarket," he says. "We have to understand why decisions were made, how they were made, how places grew, how people spent their money, what the politics of development were—it might help us in the future."

Hard as it is to believe, the 20th century—so sleek, so modern—is now a senior citizen, 80-plus years old. We already live in the past, says Chester Liebs. We may not like all the objects we have produced, but can we ignore them? Ralph Waldo Emerson said over a century ago in *The American Scholar*: "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low." Liebs has taken that as his text.