

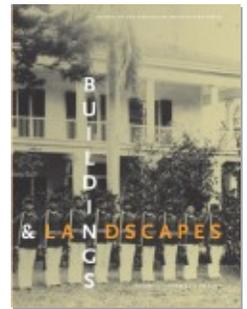


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*Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's
Landmarks (review)*

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geography, commonalities between them led to distinct patterns of settlement within each geographic region. At the southern end of the Appalachians, the courthouse towns of Alabama were the social and cultural centers of each county. They were geographically centered in their respective counties and were equally spaced within a day's carriage ride, so that judges could easily negotiate the circuit of courts within their jurisdiction. The river, wagon, and railroad towns in Alabama were the urban centers in an agrarian landscape and were sited where topography allowed a meeting of farm products and transportation networks. In West Virginia and Kentucky, where the land is deeply dissected by rivers, the steep, narrow valleys constricted development of both railroads and towns in remote locations adjacent to bituminous coal seams. The figure-ground drawings of these towns appear as constellations spreading in seemingly random directions as they follow stream courses and small valleys. By contrast, the anthracite coal towns of central Pennsylvania formed with long, tight, rectangular grids, sandwiched between parallel ridges of the Appalachians and constrained on their ends by the adjacent coal mines, located within walking distance of the miners' homes. The coastal towns of Maine formed in response to the conditions of their harbors with streets radiating from the center or running perpendicular to the shoreline. They are the only towns in this study that formed without conspicuous grids of streets.

Understanding this relationship between geography, culture, and town form is at the center of Williams's argument that concise urban form is a fundamentally more sustainable means of settlement than today's sprawling suburban development. By this he means both ecological sustainability and cultural sustainability in reference to the towns' role as repositories of social interaction and cultural memory. As appealing as this argument is to one who also has a fondness for the Appalachian region and to small towns in general, it is problematic in ways that Williams

himself acknowledges. Most of these towns prospered in their day due to very exploitative relationships with the land that were fundamentally unsustainable. Consequently many of them no longer have viable economies and are dying, unless like the towns in Maine, they have managed to draw upon their physical charms to become tourist destinations. For all their visual appeal and concise urban form, they seem to be the antithesis of ecological sustainability. Without an economic base, they also seem to be culturally unsustainable, although as "cisterns of culture" (219) they do indeed carry a legacy of the lives of those who toiled in the mines, on the sea, and in the fields of the Appalachian region.

At various points in the text, Williams references the Civil War and especially the battle at Gettysburg where soldiers from Camden, Alabama and Camden, Maine fought each other at Little Round Top. This historical coincidence gives Williams a nice narrative thread, but it also points to another potential level of interpretation that lies unmined beneath the surface of his analysis. Williams notes that many of these towns commemorated their Civil War dead with a statue of a soldier with downturned eyes, often in a park or at a critical junction in the town's plan. In a figure-ground drawing, elements like Civil War statues often are rendered invisible, relegated to the "ground," which is depicted merely as blank paper. One wonders what other representations of cultural memory, what other social and cultural stories are told in these towns' urban form but are also muted by the particular maps collected and made for this atlas. Williams' histories of these towns and the historical images he includes tantalize with their narrative content, yet little of that is actually readable in the maps. For all of their clarity, the maps seem to silence much of the civic detail of these towns, detail that perhaps is as much a cistern of culture as are the town plans themselves. How these towns represent their particular history and geography within their civic structure might prove to be more informative, more translatable to other settle-

ments, and more culturally sustainable than their street plans. It makes one yearn for more information and more thorough interpretation of their form.

But that of course would mean a different book. Atlases usually cast their nets wide rather than deep, and *E 40°* follows in that tradition. By including as many examples as he does, Williams establishes a framework for comparison within each region and all along the Appalachian Mountains. In doing so, he brings little-known towns out of the shadows of the mountains and into the light of wider geographic and cultural discourse. Hopefully others will follow in his footsteps and pursue in more depth the issues that he introduces in this broad, interpretive atlas.

Anthony C. Wood

Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks

New York: Routledge, 2008.

394 pages, black and white illustrations, photos.

ISBN 0-415-95284-0, \$40.00 HB

Review by Jennifer Baughn

Let's face it: legal history is not exactly an action genre. So it was with some trepidation that I approached *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks*. I was pleasantly surprised on all counts, however. First, unlike any legal history I've ever seen, it is a beautiful book: peppered with archival photos on hefty paper stock and with a layout and font meant to please the reader's eye. Second, it comes alive with the stories of hardy individuals and organizations who struggled to save the neighborhoods and buildings they loved, leading up to the 1965 passage of the New York Landmarks Law.

Over the course of twelve chapters and an epilogue, Anthony Wood debunks the popular myth that New Yorkers discovered

preservation when the demolition crews began deconstructing Pennsylvania Station in October 1963. Wood traces the evolution of thought that began with the City Beautiful movement in the early twentieth century and led through many dead ends and false starts to the eventual passage of the Landmarks Law.

The author, a longtime preservationist and teacher—and formerly on the staff of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission—takes pains to limit his scope to the legal battles leading to the Landmarks Law, stating that the book “does not attempt to be a history of New York’s preservation movement” (xviii). In fact, however, this telling of the sixty-year history that led up to the passage of the law reveals much about the emergence of the preservation movement, using New York City as a microcosm of the rest of the nation. Employing vast archival material, including not only the records of several important civic organizations but also oral histories he conducted himself with early leaders in the fight for preservation, Wood gives us more than the History of the Law, or the History of the Movement: he tells us a History of the People, and that’s the kind of history preservationists need but so often don’t write. Military men study the lives and strategies of military leaders in history; politicians read biographies of statesmen of old; yet preservationists—including me—tend to read and write about architecture, urban planning, and builders. Of course, we need those books, but neglecting the stories of other preservationists leads to an amnesia that weakens the field, forcing us to reinvent tactics each time we face a preservation issue.

One of the preservationists whose story Wood tells is Albert Bard. Bard pops up in almost every chapter of the book, his ninety-six-year life dedicated to preserving the beauty and history of New York City. Wood’s detailed character study of Bard gives preservation organizations today a ready-made list of qualities to look for in job applicants: he was smart, personable, persistent, and

willing to work behind the scenes and give others the credit; he took a long-term view of every issue; tended a network of contacts; and understood the value and necessity of public relations while also being forceful enough to go to the courts if necessary. Most important of all, he was passionate about New York City and its architecture. Bard became interested in the government regulation of beauty during the City Beautiful Movement. His interest in preservation went hand-in-hand with his concern with aesthetics: public beauty, including great architecture, should be preserved. Two sticky constitutional issues stood in the way: first, could the government deny demolition permits without giving compensation to the owner? Second, if the denial of a permit was considered a “taking,” how could fair compensation be established? (109). After decades of struggling with these questions, his Bard Act, passed by the state legislature in 1956, became the enabling legislation for New York’s Landmark Law.

Another story that weaves through *Preserving New York* is the sometimes tempestuous relationship between the “aesthetics” and the “historians.” This relationship—which seems to have developed not only in New York but around the country in the early decades of the twentieth century—was most tangibly expressed in New York by the Municipal Art Society and the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society. Wood notes that the two groups had similar but subtly divergent interests and pursued their goals in different ways that still persist today: those interested primarily in aesthetics sought to create new regulatory structures in government to control beauty, while those for whom history was most important tended to create individual sites of memory, usually house museums that they administered themselves. The tension between the descendants of these two groups is expressed today in the combination of historic significance and architectural significance in the National Register of Historic Places. Those of us who work with the National Register know that it is much easier

to convince the public of the worthiness of a “pretty” building than it is of a vernacular place that is associated with an important event or historical trend.

The early idea to create and publicize lists of historic or architecturally important buildings to promote their preservation also works its way through the book, beginning with the work of architectural historian Talbot Hamlin in 1941, and culminating with the first *New York Landmarks* in 1963. This list-making impulse, of course, has found its most formal incarnation in the National Register, sometimes scorned as “merely honorary” and lacking teeth. But Wood shows that this simple tool played a pivotal role in generating public interest and educating large numbers of early neighborhood leaders about the importance of their architectural heritage. Knowing this history, perhaps preservationists today would do well to focus their energies on bolstering the influence and prestige of the National Register.

Wood’s two chapters telling the story of the neighborhoods that became early advocates for preservation, the Village and Brooklyn Heights, combined with his thoughtful epilogue, raise significant questions for preservationists to consider. Noting that “many preservation activists perceive that New York City is again facing a true landmark crisis” (375), Wood asks whether the existing preservation law structure is enough to deal with predicted population growth and the return of the Robert Moses–like “master builder” (376). He bemoans the caution and “timidity” that has continued to characterize the Landmarks Commission even after the Landmarks Law has been strongly upheld in court. And he notes that “sites of cultural and historical significance” (that is, not “pretty buildings”) have been the most heavily affected by this reticence (377). Most significantly, Wood asks the question that perhaps many of us have been thinking but have been too afraid to ask: “Has the almost singular focus on the use of the law . . . led preservationists to rely too heavily on it at the cost of developing alterna-

tive preservation tools? . . . [Has it] limited horizons, frozen creativity, and arrested creative development?” (383). Preservationists cannot afford to ignore the implications of these questions. Too often our most promising young preservationists, instead of advocating openly for preservation to the public, are muzzled by their government employers. We must adapt our methods as the world changes around us.

In the mid-twentieth century, citizens banded together in large numbers to fight for their heritage, for their neighborhoods, and for beauty in their daily lives. They won the right to have their views become part of the planning process. But like every law, the Landmarks Law requires political will and citizen participation to be effective. To think of that law or the national preservation act as a culmination of the story, a tidy final note, is a mistake. The story continues today, and if it seems that it is not turning out as planned, perhaps we have only to look at ourselves and the society we have helped create to find the reasons. Anthony Wood’s *Preserving New York* helps us realize again that preservation is about passionate people, not about laws—it should be required reading for all of us who care about preserving our history.

John Archer

Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690–2000

Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

496 pages, 118 black-and-white illustrations.

ISBN 978-0-8166-4304-2, \$27.50 PB

Review by Gabrielle M. Lanier

The American dream house has deep roots. John Archer’s book explores the historical origins of suburban domestic architecture to show how eighteenth- and nineteenth-

century ideologies are still at play today. In *Architecture and Suburbia*, the author builds on his previous book, *The Literature of British Domestic Architecture, 1715–1842*, but also aims to provide a starting point for future discussions about contentious present-day housing issues such as sprawl, neighborhoods, and gated communities.

The book covers four centuries. Part I focuses on eighteenth-century England and the genesis of the bourgeois dwelling. Part II examines nineteenth-century America, and Part III explores the dream house ideal, the suburban landscape, and the trope of the American Dream.

Archer traces the ideological origins of the American Dream to the early eighteenth century, when the single-family house on its own parcel of private property emerged in response to a new idea of selfhood advanced by John Locke. Embedded in this newly emerging vision were the notions of retirement, meaning a nonproductive landscape intended for the private pursuits of its owner, privacy, and pastoralism. Houses and their social function also changed. The dwelling became more than just a mirror or reflection of society; instead, it began to be viewed as an effective medium for constructing individuality. Thus a new type of dwelling in a new type of locale emerged: the bourgeois compact villa. These dwellings were typically two to three stories high with five windows extending across the façade, often with a pedimented portico framing the center group of windows. As the bourgeoisie began to favor such dwellings as instruments for establishing and expressing themselves, so, too, did architects begin to change the way in which they conceived of and marketed their work. As the eighteenth century wore on, “enclaves of bourgeois villas” such as Twickenham began to emerge around London and other English towns, just as they did outside some American towns such as Philadelphia and Boston (90). These early suburbs with their detached dwellings surrounded by private property emerged largely in opposition to the city, promising a purer and healthier

environment that encouraged bourgeois residents to engage in leisure pursuits.

Privacy also became increasingly important. One significant corollary to the developing notion of domestic privacy was the concept of retirement: the chance to develop one’s individuality through solitude, retreat, and isolation. Another was the idea of a dwelling surrounded by a pastoral landscape, one that was preferably detached from the world of the city but also disassociated from land that showed overt evidence of economic productivity. In domestic architecture, privacy began to be articulated by new means of circulation such as staircases and corridors, by limiting the functions of rooms within the dwelling, and by closing off and dedicating other rooms to more private functions. Instead of placing rooms in suites, architects began to arrange rooms as end destinations. They designed bourgeois dwellings to segregate servants and service areas away from public areas, codified room use, and separated the family into its own distinct zone. Archer maintains that while the seventeenth-century house merely provided a static reflection of its owner’s status, the eighteenth-century bourgeois villa had become something more: “an instrument by which the owner might articulate his identity” (170).

Part II shows how transformations in the English bourgeois dwelling set the stage for similar changes in America. The author focuses on upper- and mid-level suburbs to determine how suburbs evolved, grew integral to the American dream, and increasingly became associated with the bourgeois self-made individualist. While the political undertones of suburban home ownership are usually associated with the twentieth century, particularly the Levittown era, Archer notes that aspects of suburban existence began to be associated with patriotism as early as 1845. In the nineteenth century, entire tracts of land began to be laid out in multiple units, often accompanied by promotional rhetoric.

From the beginning, one primary attraction of suburbs was their existence in opposition