A Passion to Preserve
Fellows, Will

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Fellows, Will.
A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/8516.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8516

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=184864
After scrutinizing the lives of scores of preservation-minded gay men, past and present, I’ve identified what impress me as the most prominent elements of a rather consistent pattern: gender atypicality, domophilia, romanticism, aestheticism, and connection- and continuity-mindedness. These traits are related to one another in complex ways. For one thing, gender atypicality seems to comprise the others to a large degree. I present them as a simple list, in no particular order, because in doing otherwise I would only be pretending to comprehend their intricate relationships.

**Gender Atypicality**

The profile of the boy who is not like other boys emerges in one after another of these men’s stories: He is unusually sensitive, gentle, well-mannered, mature, attracted to reading and other quiet activities, to music and art, to homey things and homemaking activities. This uncommon boy is more inclined to seek “connection” than competition or conquest and is especially drawn to connections with his mother, grandmothers, aunts, and other females. Many of these boys spend much time with their grandmothers in particular, from whom they learn about the family’s history and absorb the family stories.

When novelist Glenway Wescott wrote *The Grandmothers*, he created Alwyn Tower in his own queer image. Alwyn, the novel’s central consciousness, is an unusually sensitive and inquisitive young man who shares with his beloved grandmother an extravagant love of the past. As a small boy he admires his grandmother’s keepsakes and asks her to tell him about them. He wants to know about the lives of the people who appear in the family album of daguerreotypes and faded photographs, the women and men whose passions and exertions have produced his own life.¹

Like Alwyn Tower and his grandmother, gay boys and their grandmothers often develop bonds of unusual intensity. It’s probably this constitutional affinity that accounts for the longstanding alliance of “little old ladies and temperamental men” in historic preservation.² Dan Marriott,
with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, says, “There’s a joke at the Trust, that it’s staffed by lots of gay men and divorced women, which, if you look closely, is not far from the truth.”

Robert Hopcke and Laura Rafaty get even closer to the truth in their book, which examines the remarkable friendships that develop between straight women and gay men. They point to the marked confluence of gay men and straight women in the worlds of theater, fashion, decor, and the arts. “We know we are generalizing, and there are scads of exceptions, but what we have heard about these friendships and know from our own experience is that the (now somewhat politically incorrect) identification of homosexuality with femininity may not necessarily be a gross error. . . . Gay men and straight women are friends because, on some very fundamental level, they share a deep knowledge of each other, a connection that really can be described by no other term than ‘soul mate.’”

During his 1950s childhood, an architectural historian enjoyed a soul-mate bond with his mother: “I was the daughter she always wanted. I could never pound a nail straight or fix a car or whatever else was considered the ultimate masculine thing, but I enjoyed learning to sew and making doll clothes and all of those kinds of things. And I inherited my mother’s passion for antiques and interiors and historic buildings. I really believe that I’ve done as well as I have in preservation because of my being gay: It takes a fairy to make an old building ‘pretty’ again. There’s a sensitivity and a value system that a lot of us have, to move into a neighborhood and work to revive and preserve it. So many of us gravitate to preservation; it’s about one step above (or maybe below!) a hairdresser or a florist.”

Doing genealogical research in North Dakota, Minneapolis resident Dallas Drake found that even “out in the middle of nowhere” gay men and straight women are allied in preservation-minded endeavors. “One man I met lives on the edge of a tiny town that’s practically not there anymore,” Drake says. “He would hardly let me leave; he was so happy that somebody had stopped by. He has a gayish lisp, has lived there all his life—single, in his fifties, lives with his mother, takes care of her. Has a piano off in the side room that he plays from time to time. Has connections with all the little old ladies in the area. Whenever people get together for anything historical, he’s in the middle of it.”

Domophilia

“From my earliest memories I was always fascinated with houses and what happened inside them,” says Ken Miller. One after another, these gay men express their love of houses with a past, from modest cottages to grand palaces and castles. The neologism “domophilia” suggests this exceptional love
of houses and things homey, this deep domesticity, which often emerges in childhood.

Studies of children’s play have shown that when a girl designs an environment it is usually that of a house interior, with people and animals placed statically inside. Boys’ designs are more likely to focus on things happening outside their enclosures or buildings, which tend to be taller and more elaborate than girls’ structures, with people and animals moving around. Consid-
ering how many gay boys are drawn to playing house, it’s easy to imagine what these studies would have found had they distinguished the gay boys from the straights. Similarly, it’s been said that the propensity to “enclose space” is basic to femininity, while the innate inclination to “displace space” is characteristic of masculinity.

Domophilia is prominent in two gay men who have been key players in the preservation of Willa Cather’s hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska, during the past fifty years. When each of them was asked, separately, to identify passages from Cather’s writings that had particular meaning for them, each cited the same scene in the novel *Shadows on the Rock*: Cécile, a twelve-year-old girl, has just made a brief visit to a family in the countryside near Quebec City. Coming back to the simple, tidy home she shares with her widowed father in the seventeenth-century colonial outpost, she is relieved to have returned from the primitive conditions of rural life.

She put on her apron and made a survey of the supplies in the cellar and kitchen. As she began handling her own things again, it all seemed a little different,—as if she had grown at least two years older in the two nights she had been away. She did not feel like a little girl, doing what she had been taught to do. She was accustomed to think that she did all these things so carefully to please her father, and to carry out her mother’s wishes. Now she realized that she did them for herself, quite as much. . . . These coppers, big and little, these brooms and clouts and brushes, were tools; and with them one made, not shoes or cabinet-work, but life itself. One made a climate within a climate; one made the days,—the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life.

Suddenly her father came into the kitchen. “Cécile, why did you not call me to make the fire? And do you need a fire so early?”

“I must have hot water, Papa. It is no trouble to make a fire.” She wiped her hands and threw her arms about him. “Oh, Father, I think our house is so beautiful!”
Neil Miller discovered the prevalence of this kind of tradition-cherishing domophilia as he traveled around the country in the 1980s, interviewing gay men for his book, *In Search of Gay America*. “By the end of my travels,” he writes, “I was convinced that running a B and B is the dream of half the gay men in the United States.” And why wouldn’t running an old-house bed-and-breakfast be alluring to many gays? It is grounded in things homely; it demands an array of talents that revolve around decorating, domesticity, hospitality, care giving. It often has elements of theater: period set design and hostly performance for an intimate and ever-changing audience of appreciative guests. Plus, in many cases it is the only thing that makes financially feasible the restoration of captivating, commodious old houses otherwise destined for “rooming-house-and-decay” syndrome and eventual destruction.

**Romanticism**

This is romanticism with a small *r*, by which I mean the exceptionally imaginative and emotional ways in which many gay men relate to the past, to old buildings and places, and to the lives and possessions of their previous occupants. “Preservation is really about loving particular places and the history that’s connected to them,” says Gerry Takano. “I’m sort of a romantic, so I love working with people who have passionate, rooted connections with historic buildings. If it doesn’t affect you in your heart, there’s no real connection.”

Gay writer Richard McCann touches on this impassioned sensibility when he writes, “Because beauty’s source was longing, it was infused with romantic sorrow; because beauty was defined as ‘feminine’ and therefore as ‘other,’ it became hopelessly confused with my mother: . . . Mother, who lifted cut-glass vases and antique clocks from her obsessively dusted curio shelves to ask, ‘If this could talk, what story would it tell?’”

His quintessentially queer romanticism shaped August Derleth’s description of his hometown’s “atmosphere of time past” in *Atmosphere of Houses*: “There are many houses, and their combined atmospheres make up the atmosphere of my town. There are so many tranquil, peaceful houses, and their quiet helps subdue the atmosphere of houses that cry aloud in tragedy.” Derleth recalled the house of his grandmother, “whose gentle eyes regarded me in much the same manner as I imagine the house itself looked upon me. There was suffering in her eyes, and there was suffering in the walls of the house, but there was peace in both, the tranquil peace that follows in the wake of suffering. They brooded together, the house and my grandmother, and had silent communication with each other.”

As in Derleth’s musings this romanticism encourages the inclination to see old houses as persons or at least as having personalities. Jim Williams
What These Gay Men’s Lives Reveal

described an eighteenth-century South Carolina plantation house as “more a person than a house. One I revived, loved and adored, but never knew well enough to be at home with.” It’s been suggested that gay men’s attraction to old houses may sometimes be related to finding “stage sets” on which to project their romantic fantasies of the past or in which to live them out. Indeed, the ranks of domophiles and drama queens overlap substantially, as evidenced by the many gays who are active in the preservation of historic theaters. Artists Peter MacGough and David MacDermott, partners in life and work, exemplify this bent toward historical fantasy, spurning modern amenities while “time-traveling” among three period-style homes: 1920s, 1880s, and eighteenth-century.

The historic preservation movement is said to have begun with people who walked among ruins. Though at first it may seem to be at odds with the impulse to preserve, a romantic fascination with decay, even destruction, is closely related to an enchantment with restoration. Indeed, without a period of neglect, decline, and perhaps the threat of destruction, the thrilling work of redemption is not possible. As a teenager Lloyd Sensat was mesmerized by Ghosts along the Mississippi, a book of elegant, moody photographs showing abandoned plantation houses in states of ruin. Tyler Cassity was captivated—spoken to, even—by the romantic ruins of a sixty-two-acre cemetery in Hollywood, California, the resting place of Rudolph Valentino. He bought the century-old graveyard and revived it as Hollywood Forever Cemetery.

Aestheticism

Artistic once served as a code word for gay and rightly so. One after another these gay men describe the emergence in childhood of their artistic eye and aptitude, their extraordinary visual understanding of the world, their design-mindedness. As children and adolescents many of them drew elevations and floor plans of houses, real and imagined; built model houses, villages, cities; designed, decorated, and furnished interiors (usually starting with their own bedrooms); designed theater sets; restored and refinished furniture. As a child Randy Plaisance sat on the floor in his suburban New Orleans bedroom, drawing floor plans for hours. “How I even knew what floor plans were,” he says, “I don’t know.”

“I was never rich, but I’ve always had a good eye,” says a stained-glass artist who restored and furnished his Victorian house to the look of 1889. “Even as a child growing up in a nondescript farmhouse, I had an eye for the more interesting and attractive buildings,” says Allen Young. Another gay male’s nascent aestheticism led him to attempt his first visit to an antique shop when he was about eight years old. Having just read an article on the difference between French and German bisque porcelain, he wanted to see
some. So he went to a local antique shop, knocked on the door, and asked the owner if she had any. She shut the door in his face. “It must have seemed odd,” he says, “having a child ask such a question.”

“Gay men are very sensitive to beauty,” says a gay old-house dweller. “It’s perhaps a hackneyed stereotype, but I believe in it—I simply know it. It’s an aesthetic capacity, an appreciation of beauty in old things, the grace of a lovely, older house with elegant details. And when gay men are interested in something, they give it their all, tremendous amounts of creative energy and physical energy. Not many straight people would do for this house what we did for it.” The critic Camille Paglia concurs: “What seems irrefutable from my studies is that male homosexuality is intricately intertwined with art.”

Like gay men in other notably gay design fields—interior, floral, landscape, fashion, stage—gay preservationists are driven by their artistic sensibilities. In restoring a degraded structure to its rightful form, the restorer’s design-mindedness exalts historical correctness, valuing tradition and continuity over innovation and change. “It’s quite a thrill to get a place that’s really been altered and get it back to what it was, . . . the way it was meant to be,” says domophile Robert Barker.

That gays have been at this game of rescue and redemption for a long time is suggested by one gentleman’s description of neighborhood revitalization in New York’s Greenwich Village in the second decade of the twentieth century: “After the boardinghouse period that the swell mansions of other days pass through, when at last they are utterly run down and too drear and dirty even for lodging houses, the taste of the artist converts them into something so desirable that the tide of values in the whole neighborhood is often set running in the opposite direction to that in which it has been setting for a generation or two.”

Houses and entire neighborhoods transformed by the artist’s taste: Considering the abundance of artists who are gay, it’s not surprising that places where artists have congregated have also been notable gathering places for gays. And so it’s no surprise that many of these places have been sites of pioneering architectural preservation: the New Orleans French Quarter, Provincetown, Key West, San Francisco, Monterey, Carmel, Santa Fe, Greenwich Village, Beacon Hill, Georgetown, Charleston, and many more places, large and small, with less familiar names. Gay men have long been attracted to distinctive, romantic old buildings, landscapes, and neighborhoods. They have often begun by just dwelling in those places, drawing, painting, and photographing them, and they have typically taken the lead in restoring them. “We are trying to preserve the best of the past,” says Richard Jost, “just because there is something beautiful about good design itself.”
Preservation-minded gays have a penchant for meticulous attention to design detail. Art Deco aficionado Larry Kreisman laments the low caliber of contemporary design, craftsmanship, and materials: “As I grow older, I become more convinced that I was born out of time,” he says, “that all my sensibilities set me on the stage of life a century ago and it was only a quirky accident that brought me into the world in 1947.” While on a house tour in Savannah, a Georgia preservationist remarked with a hint of scorn, “It seems like new buildings that are built to look like old buildings never have quite the right pitch to the roof. Those little details.” Chicago preservationist and Louis Sullivan devotee Richard Nickel remarked, “People say rightly of me that I’m too fussy, but if you’re not analytic over everything, then soon enough you’re a slob and anything goes.” Believing that “all existence is rehearsal for a final performance of perfection,” Georgia’s Jim Williams was clearly of the same fastidious breed.

Many gays are strongly attracted to restoring broken, neglected things to states of wholeness. Whether it’s a mangled silver teapot in the hands of Bob Page at Replacements, Ltd., or a ramshackle house in the care of Myrick Howard at Preservation North Carolina, these men demonstrate a singular ability to envision a thing as it once was, as it could be once again. Gay men’s aesthetic and redemptive sensibilities often drive them to restore that broken-down thing, even when it’s such a wreck that others would never consider rehabilitation worth the trouble or even possible. Randolph Delahanty reports approvingly that “the love for old domestic architecture in San Francisco is so deeply ingrained that truly heroic and very expensive rescue operations have been conducted on many buildings it would have been more economical to tear down.”

“There were so many possibilities,” artist Roy Little says in recalling his first look at the fleabag Victorian house that he and his lover bought and revived in San Francisco. A run-down thirteen-room Victorian in Vermont inspired similar reactions in writer Mark Doty and his partner: “Driving by on the way to show us something else, the realtor had said, ‘Oh, you don’t want to look at that, that needs to be torn down.’” But the two were eager to explore the place, “full of visions of possibility.” An Indiana B and B host is another to whom visions of possibility come readily: “People see pictures of how the place looked before we restored it, and so many of them think I’m this great visionary,” he says. “To me, there’s no vision to it; it’s right there in front of you. You look at the building, it’s obvious what it was, and what it was it can be again. I don’t know how anyone could not see it.”

“I’ve always liked to take something that is ready to be destroyed, decadent almost, and prove that it can have another life by restoring it,” said Liberace, the flamboyant pianist and performer. “That is a very special thrill
for me.” To keep that thrill of redemption going, many gay preservationists have devoted years to doing one restoration after another. Over a period of thirty years Jim Williams restored more than fifty houses. Robert Barker rehabilitated his first house when he was eighteen and did a dozen more over the years. Their daunting labors were inspired not by visions of financial gain (though that sometimes accrued) but by the deeply satisfying process of taking a place that had been greatly diminished and putting it back the way it was originally, the way it was meant to be. “I’d get a house done, and then I’d see another house and think, God, I’d love to do that one!” says Barker. “The only way I could afford to do it was to sell one and move into the next.”

For some of these men the attraction to rehabilitating neglected things emerged in childhood. Ken Lustbader recalls being captivated by a children’s book about a family that fixes up an abandoned house. Jack Richards says, “It was wonderful to listen to my grandfather as he worked over an old piece of furniture. As he rubbed it with a special kind of oil he would say, ‘This wood is coming alive again because I’m putting my energy into it.’” Growing up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Doug Bauder was fascinated to learn the history of his hometown’s eighteenth-century Moravian buildings. When a preservation group was formed, he became a dues-paying member at age ten. “I would bike a mile or so from our house to view the buildings and dream of the time when they would be restored to their former glory.”

Connection- and Continuity-Mindedness
This singular sensibility is reflected in E. M. Forster’s imperative, “Only connect.” As a connection to the past is central to the definition of culture, so is a concern with connection and continuity vital to culture keeping. “There are many ways to connect with the past,” says John Anders, “and that connection, that continuity, is what keeps our spirit alive.” In trying to account for his inscrutable childhood longing for old things, James Nocito says, “There was some kind of connection I was making when I was in the presence of something old, something with an accumulation of history or wisdom inherent in it. I’m not quite clear on what that connection was, but I really did seek it out.” Like Forster these men cherish tradition, family, community, a feeling for place, a sense of flowing history. They are enchanted not by the modern but by “something older, something slightly mysterious yet powerful,” as Nicols Fox describes it.

“We live in a kind of cultural continuum, like a chain,” said James Van Trump. “We need a constant going back and forth from the present to the past. We have to have the past from which to move on.” From a young age, these uncommon males have been exceptionally concerned with matters of
connection and continuity: Who are we? Where have we come from? Who has gone before us and what were their lives like? From childhood they have been unusually attracted to old things and old people, grandparents and others. “I’ve always been interested in older people and their ideas, in ‘oldish’ things and restoring them,” says Jack Richards. “Growing up, I felt more at home in the company of older people than with people my own age or even my parents’ age,” says Russell Bush. “Traveling somewhere on a bus once, I remember how much I enjoyed sitting next to an old lady, chatting with someone that old.” They are the ones to whom old family things have been passed down, especially those items considered sentimentally or historically significant but unwanted by others. Richard Jost recalls from his youth the day of his grandmother’s funeral, when his grandfather gave him two family pieces of furniture from the attic, telling Richard that he was the only one who would appreciate them.

With their early interest in family and community history, these gay males have been among those most likely to do research in those areas. Drawn to old photographs, many of them have collaborated with elders in identifying and labeling those images and recording stories connected with them. They have been earnest and meticulous keepers of photo albums, scrapbooks, and journals.22 Randy Pace tells of looking through old family pictures with his grandmother in New Mexico when he was in high school. He made sure names, places, and dates got written on the back of each photo and soon became engrossed in genealogical research. “I was so excited to find out who we were, where we came from and when, and what was going on in history then. I wanted to make sure there was some record of it.”

For these men the most meaningful preservation encompasses not just old buildings, objects, and documents, but their associations—the places, people, and events connected with them. Brian Bigler developed a strong sense of place as a Wisconsin farm boy, started buying farm-related antiques at auctions by the age of eleven, and operated his own museum as an adolescent enterprise. At twenty he founded the Mount Horeb Historical Society. “There’s so much being lost,” Bigler says. “There’s nothing I despise more than seeing history divided up, sold off, and moved across the country. I want to preserve things locally, where they belong, where they mean something.”

There is an attraction to saving old objects as tangible links with past lives, even if the names and details of those lives are unknown or only vaguely known: “The thing about antiques,” says Jim Raidl, “is that you buy them because you love them, and several people have loved them before you, and several people will love them beyond you.” Mark Doty loves his old silverplate pitcher for the beauty of it dents and abrasions—evidence of the vessel’s
years of use by unknown people in unknown places. A decorator quoted in *Old-House Interiors* favors an old mirror with its original mercury plating, now imperfect, because it brings one in touch with all the people who have gazed into it. In collecting elegantly designed ocean-liner memorabilia, Dwight Young prefers items of paper ephemera that bear the travelers’ markings: “I love the pieces that passengers have scribbled notes on or passed around the dining table and had everybody sign their names to. I love having that connection with a moment when somebody picked up a pen or a pencil and wrote his or her name on this piece of paper, which I’m now holding in my hand.” James Nocito, who collects wayward photos, has a similar preference: “The photographs that totally get me are the ones with the person’s handwriting on the back.”

For some of these men the sense of connection with those who have gone before has a decidedly supernatural dimension. “Voices from the past speak to me,” said Jim Williams. “Spirits of past events cling fast to their native locale, never leaving.” In some cases these lingering spirits are perceived as ghosts. Contemplating the numerous spirit presences in old buildings that he has experienced or heard about, Myrick Howard sees them as fastidious kindred spirits: “Frankly, I like the notion of having ghosts. I’d like to think that I’d stick around for a while and check on things periodically.”

While these men are attuned to voices from the past, contemporary community connections are of much greater significance for most of them. In his work with the Sacred Sites Program at the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Ken Lustbader fostered the preservation of many old synagogues and churches. He valued the wonderful architecture, but more important to Lustbader was “the connection that these buildings have to people—the people who worship there and care for the building, the people who are running the soup kitchens and day-care centers, being community anchors.” Similarly, Rick McKinniss and Gary Broulliard’s rehabilitation of wasted houses in Lafayette, Indiana, has been as much a community-cultivating enterprise as a historical-aesthetic venture. “Our houses aren’t big fancy Victorians,” Broulliard says. “Most of them were built as working-class duplexes.” Since 1977 the couple have been leaders in their neighborhood improvement coalition and have acquired and restored seven houses, all within a block of their own residence.

“I believe there is a fundamental need in the human psyche for some assurance of permanence and continuity,” says Dwight Young. “Saving old buildings and neighborhoods is an enormously effective way to make that continuity manifest in the places where we live.” Historical context, rootedness, stability, sense of place: these things really matter to these men. They are strongly attracted to established neighborhoods, places with richly
developed identity. “There can never be a suitable replacement for a living historic city,” said Jim Williams, who played a leading role in the rescue and resuscitation of old Savannah, Georgia. “It gives its inhabitants a sense of well-being and security that only an old section can create.”

Gender atypicality, domophilia, romanticism, aestheticism, connection- and continuity-mindedness: this litany, though not all-encompassing, is helpful in understanding the preservation-minded dynamics of gay men’s lives. Among culture-keeping gays, the passion to preserve is diverse in its manifestations. Perhaps this chapter’s overview can serve as a field guide to the life stories in the chapters that follow.
What These Gay Men's Lives Reveal