A Passion to Preserve

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A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.


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Ken Lustbader

Ken Lustbader was born in 1961 and grew up in a suburban tract house in Valley Stream, Long Island. From 1994 to 2002 he worked at the New York Landmarks Conservancy, a private nonprofit preservation organization based in New York City. As director of the Sacred Sites Program, Lustbader was “the church person,” providing technical and financial assistance to religious properties throughout the state. He now works as a preservation consultant.

As a child I had a great interest in buildings and architecture, sketching floor plans of three-bedroom suburban houses and building Lego and balsa models of houses on Saturday afternoons. I was fascinated by our relatives’ incredible old homes in Brooklyn and was unaware of any similar buildings in my neighborhood. The old main street in Valley Stream was dramatically altered in the 1950s when they built a shopping mall right behind where we lived. I was intrigued by photographs that contrasted the old and the new. At the orthodontist’s office I discovered a children’s book about a family that finds a run-down old house and renovates it. The illustration at the end of the book is a view from above, showing the house all cleaned up and the roof patched. I went through that book over and over.

At Vassar College I took courses in art history, architectural history, and drafting. But I never really thought that I would be an architect or do anything in that regard. After finishing a bachelor’s in economics, I worked in my family’s retail shoe business, in which I had worked since high school. We were very busy through the 1980s, opening stores in downtown shopping districts in New York City and New Jersey.

Working on the nineteenth-century buildings in which we were opening stores, I sometimes found myself exploring the upper floors that had been sealed off years before, when the staircase was ripped out to open up more retail space on the first floor. It was fascinating to climb through a small access hatch into a second-floor space that was like a time capsule, with the old store fixtures and counters and cabinetry and signage stashed away. I would stand there trying to imagine the original configuration of the space, how it had been used, and who had been there before. This detective work was far more emotionally compelling for me than was installing our store’s new nylon carpet and cheap paneling. Nor did I get aesthetic satisfaction from ripping out the old storefront and putting up our giant twenty-by-ten-foot sign, which covered the second-floor windows.
After seven years of this work I couldn't see myself in the retail business for the rest of my life. I had friends in preservation who had gone to Columbia University, and I had a hunch that maybe I could do it. When I was thirty-one, I had a meal with a friend—we've called it my epiphany dinner—at which I made the decision to apply to Columbia's master's in historic preservation program.

I started at Columbia thinking I would become a building conservator, but I had a professor who was very enlightening: Historic preservation is not about bricks and mortar, he said. It's a radical profession that can convey social history. He stressed how the documentation of buildings had to expand beyond the architectural mode of placing values on structures. We discussed the presentation of African American history and the development of Chinatown in New York, where the buildings were not built by the Chinese, but are layered and have Chinese-style lettering and so forth.

I was perturbed to find that the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission's designation report for Greenwich Village didn't say anything about gays and lesbians, just “bohemians.” Although I understood that it had been written in 1969, I got a bee in my bonnet: With all these walking tours of the Village, whose history are they really presenting, and what are they omitting out of ignorance? I did my thesis on the issues of how to use the built environment to convey the history of gay people, people who were covert because of police suppression and societal pressure but who clearly had their meeting places. George Chauncey had written his doctoral thesis on gay life in New York (the basis of his book, *Gay New York*), so I was able to get a lot of information from him about the locations of bars and restaurants and other meeting spots before World War II.

This was in 1992 and 1993, just before the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, so there was a great deal of interest in the topic. No one had really written about preservation and gay history before. After my thesis was completed, I helped a group called REPOhistory, who were putting up signs in the Village marking such places as the site of the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 and the site where, in 1966, activists pushed the limits of the state law that made it illegal for bartenders to serve openly gay customers. The REPOhistory signs could stay up for only six months because of city rules, but it was an affirmation of the ability to convey gay and lesbian history through the built environment. I also worked with the Organization of Lesbian and Gay Architects and Designers (OLGAD) to produce a map of sites of significance to gay and lesbian history and did my own walking tours for OLGAD, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, and the Municipal Art Society. We also started working on getting Stonewall listed in the National Register. It's now a National Historic Landmark.
I’m the keeper of my family’s history. When my parents moved recently, I took possession of all the family photographs. My grandparents came from Poland and Austria around 1910. That’s as far back as I know. I have a few late-nineteenth-century images of my great-grandparents, but when I asked my relatives about them, they couldn’t tell me anything. There’s no sense of historical continuity in my family, and my parents and brother don’t understand my historical interests.

I’m Jewish and grew up in a very Jewish community. Though my upbringing was very secular, I have developed great affection for old synagogues and churches. Many of them are so magnificent and monumental. But the part of the job that I like the most is 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. We get calls from people throughout the state, wanting to save a house of worship that’s been abandoned. But most of our work is with small, active congregations who want to know how to maintain their heavily used buildings and don’t have the know-how or funding.

“You think I’m just dealing with buildings,” I joke with my lover, a psychotherapist. “I deal with people’s personalities all day, just like you do. I’m a social worker for people and their buildings.” There’s so much psychodrama connected with buildings, especially religious buildings, people’s sacred spaces. I think of my role in preservation as an educator and facilitator. I build relationships with people and teach them how to appreciate something old, how to look at it differently, and how to take care of it.

You find a lot of gay men in preservation, just as you do in social work. Perhaps so many of us are drawn to preservation because it’s much more fluid and intuitive and emotional than pure architecture. In preservation there’s a level of connection to buildings and neighborhoods that’s more visceral and connected to understanding people. Preservation is about community, context, and who was there before. There are so many of these cultural and associational histories. After decades of preservation based on architectural significance, people are recognizing the complexity of these issues and pushing the boundaries of preservation. I deal with synagogues, for example, that are not very significant architecturally but that have associational histories of incredible value. Similarly, my boss wrote a letter of support for getting the site of the Stonewall Rebellion into the National Register.

There has been talk at the Landmarks Preservation Commission that their new designation reports will include relevant gay and lesbian history. There’s even been discussion about going back and rewriting the Greenwich Village designation so that it expands on “bohemians” to specifically cite gays
and lesbians. (I find it rather ironic that gay men, a group whose history has been so undocumented, play such a major role in preserving American architectural and social histories.) My dream is to make a documentary on the gay history of Greenwich Village from the perspective of the built environment. One of my professors at Columbia once asked if I thought the Village has been so well preserved because so many gay men have lived there for so long. Though I can’t answer that with certainty, I do know that I’m on the board of my Greenwich Village co-op because I want to have a say in how things are running and how my neighborhood is looking. And many of my fellow board members are also gay.