A Passion to Preserve

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Born in 1944, Dwight Young grew up and went to college in Lubbock, Texas. With a degree in English literature and American history, he taught English for two years overseas, then returned to the United States. He lives in Washington, D.C., where he works for the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

I’VE ALWAYS BEEN A HISTORY BUFF. My grandmother was a great saver of family photographs, and I enjoyed looking at them with her. I often asked my grandparents to tell me about their own lives, what they remembered and what they had experienced. My grandmother told me the same stories over and over, but I still delighted in hearing them.

The part of Texas where I grew up was relatively new and raw. Lubbock wasn’t even founded until around the turn of the last century, so it seemed very new to me. I liked the idea that there were places that had a much longer recorded history. When I came back from overseas, living in Richmond, Virginia, was a real watershed experience, my first intimation of the connection between history and place. It was the first time I’d ever lived anywhere where I was surrounded by tangible connections with events that I’d read about in history books. The state capitol in Richmond, the church where Patrick Henry delivered his “Give me liberty or give me death” speech, Civil War battlefields—being able to visit and physically touch those places was a life-changing revelation.

One morning I drove out to the battlefield at Beaver Dam Creek, the site of fierce fighting during the Seven Days Campaign that raged around Richmond in the summer of 1862. I stood there with a guidebook in my hand, and I could see it. Right here, next to this mound where I was standing, were the Union trenches. And over there was the hillside where the Confederates had charged out of the woods, running down the slope to the creek, firing their rifles and yelling in the summer heat. I could see it all; it was real.

Another day I went to Saint Paul’s Church downtown and, after a few minutes of searching, found the pew I was looking for. I sat in it and thought: This is where Jefferson Davis was sitting on a Sunday morning in 1865 when someone crept in and told him that Petersburg, Virginia, had fallen and Richmond was doomed. Right in this building, here on this very spot. The fact that I could see and walk through these places, could touch the nicks and grooves where history had bumped against them, impressed me enormously. I’m convinced that this is one of the most important reasons why we choose
to preserve old buildings and neighborhoods: These places permit us to have tactile encounters with the past. History stops being just an idea, a scrap of story, or a page in a book and is transformed into a thing with solidity and texture, something you can connect with, something you can touch—a brick wall, an iron railing, a pane of glass, a grassy trench, a church pew.

For a time in my youth I loved the idea of becoming an architect, but I had a very rarefied idea of what architects did. After finding out that they had to do much more than sit around and sketch buildings that somebody else then translated into bricks and mortar, and that it involved a working knowledge of things like engineering and mathematics, I quickly determined that it was not the career for me. I became a building watcher rather than a building designer. Then one day in east Tennessee, where I was working as a hospital administrator, I read in the newspaper that a team from the University of Virginia was coming to the county I lived in to do a survey of historic architecture. I was astonished. I had no idea anyone did that for a living, and I thought it sounded wonderful. So I got a master’s degree in architectural history at the University of Virginia.

As soon as I got my degree, I was hired as director of the city preservation agency in Mobile, Alabama. After a year there I was hired in 1977 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to open their southern regional office in Charleston, South Carolina. I’ve been with the Trust ever since, in a variety of jobs. Currently I’m sort of the utility writer at the Trust, and I love it. I write speeches for the president, newspaper and magazine articles, press releases, and brochure copy and that sort of thing, in addition to my column in Preservation magazine, “The Back Page.”

I think I’m genetically predisposed to be a collector, though I’m not even sure anymore that I’m really a collector. I think I’m just an accumulator. I love secondhand books and antiques of the past century, from the turn of the century through the 1940s. I collect all kinds of stuff, especially pottery, but my current passion is ocean-liner memorabilia. I delight in finding artifacts from the great liners of the twenties, thirties, forties, and even fifties, particularly paper: menus, letterheads, passenger lists, that sort of thing. One of the two big ocean-liner memorabilia shows of the year is taking place in Maryland this weekend, and I’m already getting shaky and slobbery at the thought.

So much of the ocean-liner stuff is so beautifully designed, and there’s a wonderful quality to the artwork in the menus and the letterheads. Also, I love the pieces that passengers have scribbled notes on or passed around the dining table and had everybody sign their names to. There are collectors of paper ephemera who demand that the items they acquire be pristine, but I’m always delighted by things that have been written on. The names don’t
mean anything to me, but 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.

I’m also intrigued by these things because they represent a world that is absolutely vanished. There were fleets of these ships crossing the ocean and now they’re gone. I regret having missed out on ocean-liner travel: I came along too late and was born too poor. But I have drawers and boxes full of things that link me to that world, a world that’s as fully and finally vanished as the eighteenth century.

I’ve sometimes wondered if it’s dishonest to call myself a preservationist, since I have never done rehabilitation work on an old building, but I’ve decided it’s not. I’m perfectly content and justified in urging other people to do that work while realizing that it’s not part of my nature at all. I have a low tolerance for plaster dust and that sort of thing. I have friends who glory in it, who enjoy the rehabilitation process so much that as soon as they finish a house they want to sell it and move on, do the same thing all over again. I find that wonderfully inspiring and totally appalling. Fortunately for our architectural heritage, there are lots of people who are not only willing but eager to do that.

My first job with the National Trust was fabulous. It gave me an excuse to live in Charleston, which is one of the great cities in the country, and it legitimized what I would otherwise have done for fun—traveling around the South looking at old buildings and talking to people who were trying to find ways to save them. It seemed inevitable that in every southern town I’d go to, the people who were showing me around would take me to the home of a gay man in the community. He was typically the florist or undertaker or something like that, and his house was frequently the most lavishly decorated or it had the longest historical pedigree. My hosts would want me to see it because it had been so beautifully restored, it was so well cared for, and all that sort of thing. I got the sense that the South was populated with an enormous number of gay men living quiet, largely closeted lives in these wonderful old houses. Such a person might have a reputation in the community as being artistic or cultured, strange, different, but he was tolerated and maybe even thought of affectionately as the town queer, for lack of a more genteel term. Everybody knew he was “that way,” but that didn’t matter as long as he didn’t bother people. And anyway, hadn’t he done a wonderful thing with the old Jones house. He’d made it beautiful.

All of this was going on before I really recognized my own gayness. I was married and had children and was living a pretty “straight” life (with great big quotation marks, because I knew what was going on in my head, though it wasn’t going on anywhere else). I looked on these preservationist
men that I was meeting pretty much as their neighbors did: as rather endearing curiosities. My feelings of kinship with them came later, when I acknowledged that I was gay and realized that these men were my brothers, all over the country.

It isn’t exactly news, though we’ve sometimes treated it as if it were a secret best left undiscussed, that gays have traditionally been in the vanguard of efforts to revitalize historic neighborhoods. In city after city the first sign that a shabby block might be on the brink of rebirth has been the appearance of new residents driving cars with pink-triangle or rainbow-flag bumper stickers, emblems of gay pride. And if you go on many historic-district house tours, chances are you’re no longer surprised to find that the beautiful Victorian row house you’ve been admiring was restored by a male couple. Could it be that gay men have an intrinsic preference for older neighborhoods, just as they have a gift for biting wit, an ear for show tunes, and a knack for knockout window treatments?

I don’t go out much on weekends, but whenever I do there’s almost always a moment when a gay man says or does something that strikes me as thoroughly witty or delightful or outrageous, and I’m immediately seized by the thought, God, the world is so lucky to have gay people in it! What a gray, dull, cotton-wool place it would be if we weren’t here. Many people still aren’t ready to recognize that we’re wonderful, but I think more and more people are recognizing that having us around is a good thing. Not only for the general level of wit and humor but also in more tangible ways, like neighborhoods made into more beautiful and livable places.

Saving old buildings and neighborhoods is something we do because we need to. I love old buildings just because they are so good to look at. I’m fascinated by the materials and the intricacy of detail and the workmanship and all the things that make them different from the buildings that were put up before them and the ones that have been put up since. But beyond that visual delight, I believe there is a fundamental need in the human psyche for some assurance of permanence and continuity. Saving old buildings and neighborhoods is an enormously effective way to make that continuity manifest in the places where we live.