A Passion to Preserve

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Allan Gurganus

Born in 1947 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, writer Allan Gurganus lives near Chapel Hill. His novella, *Preservation News*, gives a portrait of Tad Worth, founder of the Society for the Salvation of Historic North Carolina Architecture, in the words of Worth’s friend and right-hand collaborator, Mary Ellen Broadfield. Occasioned by Tad Worth’s death from AIDS at the age of forty-three, the profile says that Worth was involved in saving “over fifty-seven homes and public edifices.” He would drive around North Carolina in his pickup, looking for old buildings to rescue, and then spent “his own inheritance saving houses he then practically gave away to others, homes he never really lived in except to work on them.”

MY FIRST IDEA FOR WRITING *Preservation News* came from hearing about a tragedy in Washington, D.C. Many staff members at the National Trust for Historic Preservation were dying of AIDS. One after another, it seemed a whole chain of the coming young men in the field went down to the disease in its early years. I thought, what an amazing subject. To me it recalled the Civil War, those boy generals who perished young on horseback. I’ve always seen the quest to save properties as something heroic and noble, in the ways we were once told wars were necessary. It seemed to me I had fallen into an immense and beautiful contradiction: young men’s exits and old houses’ resurrections. It was a subject destined to be ignored, ruled out of bounds by the persistent homophobia of our culture.

There’s some magical relation between gay men and restoration. You can always tell an urban neighborhood in transition by that harbinger of change, the corner Art Deco shop opened by two gentleman friends. This store must have lots of padlocks to keep people from breaking in. Of course, there’s no money in there; there’s nothing but stylish Bakelite! But such shops always indicate a neighborhood being recalled to life. Just as miners once took canaries down into the mines, knowing that if the songbirds died of the gas then everybody had a few minutes to get the hell out. It seems Art Deco pottery must be the early warning-sign of incoming life. Gay pioneers rush in where wise men only tread with armed guards. Selling 1930s gewgaws and reupholstered furniture, the pioneering couple wanders in—aware of the architectural possibilities, sniffing out incoming prosperity, and willing in some extremely brave way to put their own lives on the line, to live out an aesthetic vision, to fight militantly for a sense of beauty. That seems to be one thing gay men were lavishly given when the breeding instinct was taken away.
Old houses forever fascinated me. In my earliest memory I’m on the porch of one. I drew them a lot. I started out to be a painter. The first story I ever wrote, the first I ever really showed anybody, concerned an old lady in a deteriorated mansion. I’m sure she was heavily influenced by our eighth-grade reading of Miss Havisham. But I’m forever interested in where my characters live, what their interior setting looks like. It seems a defining, clarifying frame for every character.

I furnished my childhood room as a kind of James Bond Oriental fantasy. There was a long, low, slatted wooden bench, a mounted Buddha’s head set on its far end. Over it, off center, scroll paintings. I was a very advanced little stylish person for eight; I believed myself to be Cole Porter. I was doing all this very much alone. I got my look out of junk shops or from the back of Momma’s Woman’s Day or through catalogs. I’m touched to remember these first attempts. Of course, your taste changes and enlarges and complicates. But a deep love of artifice and tall true tales, those were all there from the start.

I have a collection of about 450 masks. I also gather Federal mirrors; I find these—the more liver-spotted the better—extremely beautiful. Also Central and South American religious carvings, life-size saints. And paintings. Whatever. Somebody asked, “What do you collect?” and I said, “What have you got?” Two of something is a pair, three is a collection. I’ve tried to beat some of my dozens of objects into submission; I’ve made many shelves in this house so that the quorum clutter is a little less terrifying for strangers.

Like all southerners my father’s tribe came stuffed with compulsive genealogists. My paternal grandmother especially seemed to know a great deal. She could tell the same forty stories over and over again, sometimes with a new detail thrown in, so they’d be worth listening to. It was our finest liturgy. So, I grew up with that sense of self-regard, with stories that included the black people who’d forever worked for our family. It was not just us but the whole supporting staff, the years of pets and livestock, the war, the weather—it all went into our personal family history, History itself did.

I always kept my great-great-grandfolks’ photographs in sight. As a kid, I labeled all the pictures. I’m very grateful for that now that both my parents are dead. All the information I know is written on the backs of things. We have drawings and photographs from the early nineteenth century, family images, books written by family members. All those things seem very important, charged. I have my great-great-grandfather’s crystal inkwell, one I still use. Magic powers, I swear.

My first memory is of sitting on my grandmother’s porch when I was eighteen months old, in the lap of some adult rocking a rocking chair. I sat looking out at the sidewalk before the house, watching my three-year-old
cousin ride her red tricycle up and down in the beautiful sunlight. I remember thinking, gosh, that looks like so much fun, but it’ll probably be much too complicated for me to ever figure out. But the larger part of the memory is missing, the way it is from dreams. I mean: the is-ness of the rocking chair, the assumption of a lap to sit in, and the immense mayoral presence behind me of this big Victorian house. I felt, literally in my first memory, that the house was both my protector and my sponsor. Almost as if I were resting safe in the lap of a lion, staring out at the world, defended and defined.

In hindsight, of course, that place wasn’t quite the castle I’d believed. It proved a perfectly adequate, gingerbreaded, middle-class Victorian house from the 1880s. But for me starting out, it seemed the emblem of everything that was secure and steadfast and historically continuous in the world. This home that I live in now, at the age of fifty-two, is a self-conscious replica of that first house. I’d done a long, roundabout search for a place to renovate and redefine. This time I’d be both the kid on the porch and my own grandparent, the sponsoring organization. Those of us who are obsessed with restoration often have some one homeplace in mind. It’s one we’re seeking to restore, either a great and lost house, or some architectural standing in the community that we didn’t quite have, a family that we somehow aspire to. But that’s a kind of restoration, too, if only the restoration of a fantasy.

Tad Worth is a flawed person with a large preservative vision. His greatest gift is how he enlists other people’s talents. He surrounds himself with gifted folks who maybe don’t quite understand how gifted they really are, not till they come into contact with Tad. It’s like Christ calling the apostles. Some happened to be tax collectors, others fishermen, but each could claim a larger capacity than he even knew—till such gifts engaged communally, then spiritually. A huge sense of collective mission can be articulated by a single articulate, impassioned person. “Salvation” can mean saving both an edifice and the soul of the person who does such saving.

Mary Ellen Broadfield describes the basic root word of “religion” as meaning “to regather” or “to bind up again.” There is something potent about taking a beautiful, broken, preexisting form and making it once more whole. Just as a lot of gay people I know are endlessly adopting broken-legged cats and hurt birds, we seem to have a tendency to identify with those down-at-the-heels, the bypassed, the formerly beautiful. We are the kindest of strangers! I’ve just described Tennessee Williams’s work in a nutshell. To see the heroism of aesthetic face-saving, the rigged and foredoomed struggle. We also have the theatrical skills and color sense, the wickedly perfect taste plus what my mother used to hideously call “the people skills” to do exactly that rebinding, that regrouping, that refining.
A sense of texture, a gloriing in color, a knowledge of art history and therefore of design, all these rank among the millions of powerful gifts we bring, replenishible, to the culture. Just as there are postage stamps that celebrate the contributions of black Americans and Jewish Americans to the vitality of American culture, I look forward to the day when the charity and scope of gay Americans are similarly acknowledged, celebrated. Our culture is endlessly, determinedly marginalizing us.

One reason the country has seemed so dispirited and coarse and shoddy and lurid and out of control these last fifteen years: 150,000 boys who were designers and visual arbiters, editors and writers, got ripped asunder by AIDS. They really formed a kind of refining filter for the nation. That's why we all now feel a rising level of shoddiness and sewage in our culture; it was once held back by these guys. Men who would stay late at the office to see a project through, for no reason better than they wanted it to look beautiful, they expected things to be fair, they didn't want the newspaper’s questions to sound cheap and mean and tacky. I am convinced that everybody in the culture, straight or gay, sensitive or boorish, nonetheless feels this sea change. The reason for it has not yet been sufficiently articulated. A postage stamp is needed!

Crucial that the narration in Preservation News should be a straight woman's vision of a gay man. We get her take on his great contribution. Gay men and straight women get on well: both groups are interested in men, of course. We’re also both given the tasks of prettifying up, setting the table, making the meal and centerpieces, the house-and-home skills—tasks that straight guys are often not all that interested in and therefore are all too willing to delegate. But it’s fascinating to see how powerful these talents can become, and how people who are put into subsidiary, secondary positions of power can wield their power in such ways that it changes local commerce. Such folks can let the local government recall that this is a historical town, one nobody ever noticed being especially historical before. The aesthetic role can radically alter the landscape. And has. Daily does.

There are benefits that go with the jeopardy of being childless and legally unable to marry. Such seeming lacks often enrich the larger community. They don’t just show up in our tendency, as somebody said, not to propagate but to decorate. We step so easily into the role of rememberer, storyteller, saver of tribal lore. And when we move into a great house—a house with a great history, meaning a long one—our being movie queens, legend buffs, mythomaniacs helps us understand that we haven’t bought just the bricks and mortar. We’ve assured our short mortal term in the house’s stewardship. What comes free with a historic home is its history, the story of the people who’ve been there before.
Part of the genius of preservation is that it lets one see one’s own place in history’s larger parade. Nobody who’s buying a house built in 1757 thinks that he’s getting it all for himself and forever. If you understand history, you realize that you’re just “the current owner” as they call it in carpentry circles. You understand you’re preparing a place for the next person in line, and the next; you feel there is an element of accountability, a responsibility to preserve what’s beautiful, what’s so handsomely been there. So you shore up the leaky roofs; you make it acceptable unto the second and third generation. And there’s a narrative responsibility that goes with owning an old house, a need to ensure the record can be passed along.

My own place was built in 1900, which is new by the world’s standards. It rests next to a cemetery where one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence is buried. I know every single person who ever lived in my home, by name and repute and occupation. I hadn’t even got unpacked here when people started bringing me pictures of “Doc” Durham, the man who built it in 1900. So I’ve become the archivist-historian, at least of my own house. I feel extremely lucky. What’s touching is how the village where I live came to me with my own house’s stories. “We thought you should know . . .” That’s one of the best things about reclaiming an old property—along with the nightmare of plumbing and the endless rewiring and the battle with squirrels, you do get the stories and whatever weird found items you can lay your hands on. I found a child-sized hangman’s noose dangling in the basement, found a burned spot in the attic, which nobody knew what-all had happened. There was a horde of World War II soldierly toys hidden behind one brick. I found notes, bills, pieces of paper, and cryptic love letters. Bits of eighteenth-century ginger jars broken in the garden. These are the dream-stuffs that a novelist feeds on.

I had a little cottage in Chapel Hill, ten miles away. I couldn’t really afford a great house in Chapel Hill, so I wandered as far and as close as I could go, to the next town. Happily I got here just before this burg was discovered. The village is beautiful. It was originally the state capital in the 1750s, and it’s got a great layered mythological sense of itself. But it was sort of blessedly down at the heels, which makes it like Charleston and Savannah till recently: poverty plus gentility plus inertia is what really preserved those towns and this one. The rumor is John Rockefeller considered making this town his eighteenth-century town-museum. When the local farmers nobly turned him down, he went on to found Historic Williamsburg.

When I started looking for my own home in North Carolina, I first looked at Federal places. I found most were already on the National Register. That meant I could do very little to them except choose a proper citrus yellow for the foyer. Some were in such bad shape, I couldn’t afford to hire
the structural engineers required to fully save them. When this place opened up, a block away from a beautiful tripartite Italianate Federal house I’d had my eye on, it seemed perfect, because it’s not on the Register. I haven’t changed the exterior footprint of the house, but I’ve had far more license to make the interior mine, by using William Morris paper and by literally painting the Elgin Marbles on the walls. I probably couldn’t have risked that if I owned a house with a longer history, a finer pedigree.

My two favorite moments in American architecture: 1810 to 1820 and 1910 to 1920. The family-oriented domestic architecture that arrived, a promise, just before the first war remains one of our great high points; it’s totally unpretentious, it’s foursquare and commodious; it assumes five or six children, at least. Everything is extremely well built in heart pine. Plus it’s right on the cusp of late Victorian cottage architecture, with daring Arts and Crafts coming in. Such houses strike me as extremely beautiful, with all sorts of serendipitous details like my porch’s Moorish arches. I feel very, very lucky, rocking out there, the squire, reading and writing, being left alone by neighbors and the squirrels.

Part of my joy in this house: I throw a big Halloween celebration every year. Trick-or-treaters swarm into the front three rooms; we have sinister-comic tableaux vivants going. It’s almost gotten out of hand, the numbers of ghouls seeking a sugar high and a free thrill here. But the whole community gets engaged. It’s a tiny symptom of how the village reaches out to us, and how we, with our theatricality and crazy, try-anything gameness, give so much energy back.

The ecology of beauty, of holding onto what is assuredly gorgeous in this world where everything seems to be endlessly improving itself out of existence, that contains its own kind of wisdom. Brave, just to say, “I accept janitorial duties for this small patch of ground.” I have an acre here. The house and its trees and their shadows soon dictate what the garden can and cannot be. You are really lining yourself up with certain inherent principles, with the often-inconvenient forces of good. I recall this sometimes when I’m at the coast: I see how sea birds at rest face into the wind so their feathers won’t be constantly ruffled. You somehow line yourself up with the ley lines, with whatever geometry and commerce made a place beautiful two hundred years before you ever found it. By honoring that, by bringing it back to a fuller order and life, you somehow discover your own. There is a moment when habitation becomes cohabitation. This house, yours in sickness and health, till death do you part.