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=184876
Myrick Howard

The Society for the Salvation of Historic North Carolina Architecture in Allan Gurganus’s novella *Preservation News* is a take-off on the real-life organization known as Preservation North Carolina (PNC). Myrick Howard has been director of the group since 1978, when he was twenty-five. He and his partner, Brinkley Sugg, live in the Cameron Park neighborhood of Raleigh.

Its creative use of a revolving fund has made PNC a pioneer in saving endangered historic properties. The group secures an option to purchase a building over a given period, ranging from several months to several years. This shields the property from destruction while PNC lists it in its quarterly magazine as “available for restoration” and makes other efforts to find a preservation-minded buyer. When that happens, PNC facilitates the transfer of the property and consults with the new owner in rehabilitating the structure. Hundreds of historic properties in North Carolina have been handled through the revolving fund.

When a textile company closed its mill at Edenton, on the Albemarle Sound, PNC took on a task more daunting than brokering individual buildings. It was determined to create a new life for the old forty-four-acre mill village, which includes the mill building and fifty-seven houses.

I FEEL STRONGLY that the gay community has made great contributions to our cities and towns as pioneers in revitalizing downtown neighborhoods and districts, contributions that should someday be recognized by the straight community and by gays themselves. I wish *The Advocate* would do a series on the contributions of gays to modern society, rather than yet another interview with yet another cute, gay-friendly movie star. No doubt I would be outvoted on that one. The contributions of gays may be obvious to some of us, but lots of folks, including many gays, don’t get it. And there’s a real hesitation to even talk about it. Back in 1987 or so, I wrote a chapter on local preservation for a book called *The American Mosaic*. When the editor deleted my paragraph about the role of gays in revitalization, I gave him a choice: leave the paragraph or dump the whole chapter. One of the first reviews of the book referred to that contested paragraph as an example of how the book was breaking new ground.

When I had dinner with leaders of the National Trust for Historic Preservation recently, they ticked off a list of preservationists who they felt were good prospects for the Trust’s upcoming capital campaign. I pointed out to
them that their list was 100 percent gay. They had no idea! For a number of years I’ve advocated to my colleagues in North Carolina and to the National Trust that the preservation community needs to recognize the role of gays in preservation. And to solicit their financial support, especially in planned giving. Two incomes, generally no heirs, often a passion for historic buildings: any fundraiser should perk up his or her ears at that combination. A substantial percentage of PNC’s planned-giving Heritage Club is gay. With good planned giving gays have a special chance to influence the futures of their communities in a way that families with children don’t.

I grew up in Lakewood, a working-class neighborhood in Durham, in a substantial bungalow built by my grandfather in 1916. During that period I saw urban renewal tear down the buildings where I went to grade school, where the barbershop was, where my father bought his car. There was an area with fine mansions, the homes of major Durham industrialists. Those houses were particularly striking to me, and they were torn down when I was ten or twelve years old. I have vague memories of my father and me standing behind the Benjamin Duke mansion as it was being demolished, and of my grandmother saying what a shame it was. Ben Duke’s house was on a beautifully landscaped four-acre site that an insurance company wiped out to put up an office building. On the site of another house they built a motel that has since been torn down, and in another case the demolition made way for nothing. Racial issues were coming to the fore in numerous ways during that period, and much urban renewal in Durham as well as all across the country was racially motivated.

Recently, when my mother moved out of her house into a retirement facility, I brought home with me the boxes of family photographs going back two or three generations. It was kind of weird to go through them and see how many of them were labeled in my own handwriting. I have some vague recollections of sitting down with my mother and going through them when I was a teenager. And I stripped and refinished several family pieces of furniture when I was in high school, a Victorian oak bed and dresser and some chairs, things that had been painted in the 1920s.

At Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, I took walks all around College Hill, up this street and down that one. I didn’t know what I was looking at, but I was fascinated by the wide variety of structures and styles on the Hill, one of the earliest historic districts of its kind in the country. What the heck do you do with a degree in history? I went on for planning and law degrees. I really enjoyed my courses in urban design and historic preservation, and I had a strong environmental interest. I had a real aversion to the throwaway nature of our society, particularly then, in the mid-seventies, and that has remained very strong. Preservation North Carolina has a
bumper sticker that’s been real popular: “Historic Preservation: The Ultimate Recycling.”

I grew up with stability and continuity and a strong sense of place. A big part of my decision to stay in North Carolina rather than go to work with the National Trust in Washington, D.C., was a North Carolina thing: I feel a real connection to this state. And preservation is fundamentally local. The closer you are to being local, the more you’re really doing preservation. In this job my familiarity with the places and people of North Carolina is almost more important than my knowledge of historic preservation.

I view preservation extremely broadly. It’s not just about saving one building here and one building there. It is really about the fabric of our lives—the places where we live now, where we grew up, where we’re going to be in the future. I believe North Carolina’s history is important to its people, and that the built environment should be preserved for variety, for continuity, and for education. We need to do more to teach children how to look at the buildings around them so there will be a strong interest in preservation. I’m concerned with how North Carolina looks, and preservation is one way to shape that look.

If you have any regard for history and the development of our communities, if the physical fabric is not there, the memory is gone. It’s like tearing up the photograph of somebody. Unless the person is eminently famous, the next generation will never know about him or her: the connection is gone. I consider the buildings like the photo album. Without that photo album, stuff just slips out of one’s consciousness. You go two or three generations, and they’re completely forgotten.

Sometimes the connections are purely personal, and sometimes they have real social dimensions. The places where the sit-ins took place during the early Civil Rights movement, for example. If those places were gone, our connection to those events would be very different from when you can see the lunch counter and the stools. And if you want to talk about something that happened 150 years ago, it’s even more important that the place remain and that there be some tangible connection.

The biggest part of PNC’s operation is trying to find buyers for endangered and usually pretty pathetic historic houses. Pathetic in the sense of poorly maintained. We refer to our organization as an animal shelter for buildings. We deal with the poor dogs that nobody else will love—houses, churches, school buildings. The thing we’re into right now is mills and mill villages, which is hugely beyond what we’ve been accustomed to dealing with.

Glencoe, in Alamance County, is our second mill village. The mill closed in 1954, so it’s been basically a ghost town my entire life. Fascinating place. About 65 of the 101 acres we bought is raw land along the Haw River. Just a
beautiful site, rolling hills going down to the river. There’s the dam, the lake behind the dam, the rapids, and the mill race. The city parks and recreation board wants the city to buy the land along the river for a park, and we’ll sell the thirty-five mill houses and mill separately for private redevelopment, under covenant. Glencoe will be a restored mill village, almost a museum village, with condos and the mill and a park. People can look back fifty years from now and think, what a wonderful place. I’m just tickled that we’re headed in that direction.

Right now our organization owns about a million square feet of mill buildings and about seventy-five houses. We’re running some fairly serious risks by doing this, but my intuition, which I rely on real heavily, is saying we’re doing the right thing and it’s going to work just fine. We’ll look back on it five years from now and say, gosh, that was easy. Yeah, right! The first mill village we did, the one down in Edenton, it’s kind of funny how the local folks are now saying it was a dumb natural. The hell you say. I remember when the board was sweating bullets about the thing. Nothing dumb natural about it. It was a hell of a lot of work, but it has worked out fabulously well.

Through the years at Preservation North Carolina we’ve had quite a few situations where I or someone else would go into an old house and not feel good about the place. I mean have an unsettling reaction that has nothing to do with the house’s architecture or condition. There have been situations where a couple of different folks have gone into the same house and had similar reactions along those lines. I think there is something to be said for some sort of connections in these houses that go way beyond just the wood and the bricks. Spiritual connections.

I’ve lived in the Procter house since I bought it in 1979. It was built in 1911, a nice two-story late–Queen Anne house, lived in by the Procter family from about 1921 until Mrs. Procter’s death in the mid-seventies. When I bought it, about two years after Mrs. Procter died, the downstairs bedroom ceiling had been lowered below the tops of the windows with an acoustical tile ceiling and the room was peach with a peach shag carpet. Period piece. I bought the house with the notion of doing pretty much a total renovation.

One night I was reading in bed, in the peach bedroom, and the door to the front hall opened—just affirmatively opened—right beside the bed. I had a very strong feeling of some presence coming into the room. It was an eerie but calming sort of presence, with a sense of “Things are fine.” Then it left, but the door stayed open. I pretty quickly assumed it was Mrs. Procter, who had died two or three years earlier. That experience made me want to learn more about who lived here, what type of people they were. Mrs. Procter apparently was very involved in the movement to get Mother’s Day
designated as a holiday. From everything I’ve heard about her she was a very nice, warm person, but a pretty determined lady.

One day, a woman I had known for many years said to me, “You live in the Procter house, don’t you?” I said yeah. She said she had lived there for a few months, right after Mrs. Procter died, and that she had had a weird experience there after Mrs. Procter’s death. I asked her to tell me about it. “Well,” she said, “I was in one of the downstairs rooms . . .” “Let me guess,” I said. “The peach room with the peach shag carpet.” “Yeah,” she said, “it sure was. The door opened and Mrs. Procter came in. She told me everything was fine, then left.” “That’s so weird,” I said. “The same thing happened to me.”

I’ve had a small handful of experiences with what one might consider ghosts or other-world spirits. PNC had an office in a house in Raleigh, the Caveness House, which we had bought to keep it from being torn down. One night I was having dinner with someone on my staff and with a board member who is fascinated with this sort of thing. The board member asked if I had seen or heard or felt any ghosts in the Caveness House. The only thing that had happened, I told him, was that a number of times I had been working upstairs, late afternoon, early evening, and I would have sworn that someone came in through the dining room door. Just the sense of hearing a door open and shut and somebody coming in downstairs. When I would go down and look, the door would be locked. It had happened a number of times, and I hadn’t given it a whole lot of thought. That’s the only thing I’ve had happen, I said. My staff person looked absolutely ashen. “My God,” he said, “I’ve had the same thing happen!” It turns out that several of us had heard that dining room door open and shut, a door onto the side porch, always in that 5:45, 6:30 time period. We decided it must be Dr. Caveness coming home from work.

I’ve heard all sorts of ghost stories. Several of the houses that we’ve worked with have been pretty well known in the community to have spirits. We worked with a house in Goldsboro where there had been a number of incidents. Nothing harmful, but a strong sense that Miss Gertrude Weil was still around. Often the spirit is of someone who’s pretty intense. A couple of houses that we’ve had some association with, where murder or something like that has taken place, have had some sort of unsettling spirit. But in most cases it’s pretty benign. Some folks will kid around and say that if a building they work on doesn’t have a ghost, they’re disappointed. 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.