A Passion to Preserve

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SEATTLE IS HOME to one of the largest concentrations of gay men in North America, so it’s no surprise that the city has achieved an outstanding record in architectural preservation and urban conservation in recent decades. Larry Kreisman has played a large role in this accomplishment. A native of New York City, Kreisman completed a master’s degree in architecture in Seattle. Working in the city’s urban conservation division introduced Kreisman to architectural preservation. He did research for the city landmarks program and produced his first book, *Apartments by Anhalt*, about the work of a designer-developer who arrived in Seattle in the 1920s and built apartment buildings unlike anything the city had known before. By the age of thirty, Kreisman knew that he wanted to work in preservation.

“As I grow older, I become more convinced that I was born out of time—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. I probably would have been much happier if I had been born in the late nineteenth century and had grown up in a world of Beaux Arts designs, with a lot of character from ornament and decoration and grand spaces. I have always maintained a romantic, sometimes nostalgic view of the world—a conviction that things were more beautiful, more expressive, and better crafted back then. It has become one of the great pleasures of life to surround myself with furniture and decorative arts that evoke the ambiance of an earlier place and time.”

Through the 1980s and 1990s, Kreisman produced more books about historic architecture. They included *Art Deco Seattle* and *West Queen Anne School: Renaissance of a Landmark*, which chronicled the life, decline, and rebirth of a building that the school district planned to demolish and that was transformed into residential units in the early 1980s. *The Bloedel Reserve* documented a private estate on Bainbridge Island. *The Stimson Legacy* examined the architectural projects built by one family, from the Midwest to the West. *Made to Last: Historic Preservation in Seattle and King County* was published in 1999, the second edition of Kreisman’s 1985 book, *Historic Preservation in Seattle*.
Living in Seattle’s Ravenna district with his partner, Wayne Dodge, Kreisman is program director at Historic Seattle. He helped found the tour program of the Seattle Architectural Foundation and directed it for twelve years. He writes design features for the *Seattle Times* and is involved with the International Coalition of Art Deco Societies. During his six years as historian with the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board, Kreisman exerted his most direct influence on his adopted city’s architectural integrity.

“I do not negate progress, new buildings, and the need to accommodate new growth and activities. But it has been my job to constantly remind city agencies and private developers that for every step forward, it is not necessary that something valuable be lost. To conserve means to be moderate and prudent, to keep from being damaged or wasted. It connotes a respect for the past and a cautious approach to accepting the new or the different. To be conservative prevents the loss of the character-defining built features that make Seattle unique.

“In my writing and teaching and the architectural tours I’ve developed, I try to make residents of this city more aware of their built environment and help them learn to think visually. I want people to have a grasp of architecture and design, what buildings are like, why they stand up, why they look the way they do. And that it’s important to retain them so that we have a collective history, a collective memory. I want them to go away from their tour with a sense of pride in their city and an appreciation of the value of these things, so that they can spread the word.”

A world away from the Emerald City, Cliff Schlothauer fosters civic pride in his New Mexico hometown. Like many of his kind, Schlothauer’s love of old things started early: By the age of seven he was scavenging for “antiques” in an old dump on the farm where his family lived. “There were bits of fine porcelain, which I assume came from the main house, and broken Mexican pottery from the Hispanic laborers, and many other things. My father let me keep my collection in the maid’s quarters.”

Schlothauer grew up in Las Cruces, New Mexico, just north of the Mexico border. He now lives with his mate, Ron Donaghe, in a 1913 Craftsman-style adobe house in the city’s Alameda Depot district. “Being a small, poor town, Las Cruces didn’t have much to begin with, so what has survived is very precious,” Schlothauer says. “We have lost so much, but there are still structures to save. When I purchased this house in 1991, it was the blight of the neighborhood. In the years Ron and I have lived here, it has become the best-looking house on the block. With all we have done to renovate it, we’ve helped to raise property values on our street. If I were to come into a great amount of money, I would renovate more houses in this neighborhood and
entice more historically minded homeowners to move here. Because of my interest in this district, my brother and his wife have purchased a home next door and are in the process of renovating it. They have three children and so are adding another generation to the district.”

“Living in this part of Las Cruces, I feel a sense of permanence and stability,” Schlothauer says. “It gives me feelings of happiness and comfort to know that my father grew up playing in the park down the street where I now see children playing and neighbors walking. We enjoy a wonderful feeling of community that the rest of the city does not have. I shudder when Ron and I drive through some of the newer, wealthier sections of the city and am thankful for where we live—for our mature trees, the patina of age, our not-so-perfect sidewalks, and the many other irregularities. Our district has endured time and turmoil and is still here, mostly intact.”

Thanks to Robert Frost and Ralph Bolton, the Witter Bynner House in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is still standing. With the idea of opening a bed-and-breakfast inn, the couple bought the place in 1996. A well-known poet in the early twentieth century, Witter Bynner (1881–1968) first visited Santa Fe in 1921. He bought a three-room adobe house on the edge of town, built in the mid-1800s. Through the next several decades he added on, creating a rambling villa of thirty rooms in Spanish-Pueblo Revival style. Bynner acquired adjacent lots and landscaped extensively.

“The house was basically sound but needed immediate attention,” Bolton says. “There were cracks in the top of the adobe walls, and if rain kept penetrating those cracks, it wouldn’t take long for the house to collapse into a pile of mud. The bank agreed to lend us the money to buy the property only if we took an extra two-hundred-and-some thousand dollars to do the immediate restoration, which we gladly did. We replastered the outside with three coats, reroofed and rewired, and replaced rotting viga ends and inappropriate windows installed post-Bynner. We’ve also restored the gardens and walkways, which were famous in Bynner’s time, and rebuilt the adobe wall that surrounds the property.”

While Bolton and Frost operate the Inn of the Turquoise Bear, they continue to restore the place, guided by their ongoing research. “We were fortunate enough to locate a gentleman who knew Bynner and who helped us document what the house looked like before,” Bolton says. “He showed up one day with about thirty invaluable photos, mostly of the interior. People who knew Bynner have been giving back things that belong in this house. An ancient Chinese vase is back on the mantel exactly where it is in the photos from the time when Bynner was here. The gentleman who gave us the photos brought the vase to us one day. ‘It belongs in this house,’ he said.
We know where the furniture that Bynner had is stored away, and we’re trying to get the owner to either donate it or sell it to us. We’ve obtained some vintage photos of Bynner by Ansel Adams. A painting of Bynner by Henriette Wyeth went to a museum in Roswell, New Mexico. We would like to commission someone to make a copy to hang back where it once hung. We haven’t located Henriette’s portrait of Bynner’s lover, Robert Hunt, which hung in Bynner’s study. Witter Bynner was himself a preservationist, much involved in setting up Santa Fe’s preservation ordinance. He deserves better than to fade completely into obscurity.”

Domophilia is a key trait among preservation-minded gays—the love of houses and things homey, a deep domesticity. Just as Larry Kreisman, Cliff Schlothauer, Robert Frost, and Ralph Bolton are dedicated domophiles, so too are the individuals in the profiles that follow. Jay Yost, ever enchanted by old houses, describes undertaking the massive job of rehabilitating his childhood favorite in his Nebraska hometown. Forever fascinated with old houses and what happened inside them, Ken Miller reflects on his career in interior restoration in Colorado, which includes the revival of his own Queen Anne house in Denver over a twenty-year period. Growing up in Missoula, Montana, Gilbert Millikan admired the Queen Anne house where his surviving partner, David Richards, now lives. The couple resurrected that house and several others in the neighborhood since 1975. Comfortably settled in a 1907 house with his partner, Charles Fuchs, Seattle resident Richard Jost believes “most gay men have a strong streak of the romantic in them and can live it out vicariously by being associated with these fine old homes.”