A Passion to Preserve
Fellows, Will

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Fellows, Will.
A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.
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Gerry Takano

Gerry Takano worked for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the organization’s western office in San Francisco from 1996 to 2000. Since then he has returned to private practice as an architect and planner. Living in San Francisco with his partner, Michael Stick, Takano is involved with Friends of 1800 Market and the National Japanese American Historical Society. Friends of 1800 Market supports the preservation of the San Francisco’s architectural heritage, especially buildings and sites important to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender history and culture.

A LOT OF GAY MEN REALLY DO have a sense of good design, a good aesthetic sense. Whether or not it’s politically correct, I believe that stereotype is the truth. There are major differences between gay men and straight men, very different ways of living in and viewing the world. Seeing the potential of old buildings to be attractive, gay men are not afraid to go into marginal areas and fix them up. I have found that this gay sensibility is very much out there, in every community.

I was born in 1948 and grew up in Honolulu’s Nuuanu Valley. Most of the houses were New England–style, wood construction, built in the early part of the twentieth century by the descendants of missionary families. My family is very working-class Japanese American, and we moved in there after many of those families began relocating to suburban neighborhoods. So I was around older buildings as a child, but I was also intrigued by urban renewal’s radical transformation of old Honolulu. The city was being heavily developed in the 1960s, so a lot of historic buildings were being demolished, and nobody seemed to care. Because Hawaii had recently become a state, people just assumed that the new “mainland” growth was better, which was typical throughout the country. And in an isolated place like Hawaii, we were thirsty for change: new ideas, new things, new buildings, new developments.

In the early 1970s I attended Syracuse University to study architecture. It was a period of intense preference for modernism and fashionable antihistoricism. It wasn’t until I was living in Boston’s South End that I really developed an appreciation for historic buildings. That’s where my connection to preservation began to click. The South End had a reputation as a seedy, dangerous place with many derelict old buildings, but the area’s promise was slowly being realized by those who chose to live in the inner city, especially gay men drawn by the outstanding vernacular architecture. After acknowledging and accepting my gay reality, I broke off plans to marry a woman.
and moved into a brick 1860s townhouse flat on Appleton Street. I was near the gay bars of choice at the time and just up the street from a market run by a tough, burly gay man.

While working in the planning department of a large engineering office, I studied the impact that major development projects were having on old buildings and neighborhoods. Doing an urban design study of downtown Leominster, Massachusetts, really got me excited about historic buildings, their undiscovered qualities, and untapped potential. Many people in Leominster couldn’t see any merit in what they had and thought I was totally off.

Gradually I began meeting a lot of people in preservation. One gay man who was very much involved in Providence, Rhode Island, really influenced me to see the potential of neglected industrial and residential areas of urban centers. I’ve never been that interested in opulent mansions; I’ve always focused more on the undiscovered vernacular sorts of buildings.

I was in New England for six years and was very happy there, but there was a recession and work dried up, so I went back to Hawaii at the end of the 1970s. I got a job with a state agency in charge of redeveloping several hundred acres in the industrial part of Honolulu. There was a strong emphasis on consolidating parcels of land for new buildings and complexes, so I tried my best to identify and document some of the more important historic structures that were threatened by this development. It was frustrating because people had very little sympathy for a lot of those old buildings.

I joined the Historic Hawaii Foundation, became a board member, but even there I was frustrated by the indifference to buildings and places that represented working-class Hawaiian life. These kinds of cultural resources were rapidly being destroyed by post-statehood development. Hawaii was just not a preservation-friendly environment at the time. Like the continental United States it was evolving into a generic environment of sprawling new development.

After my urban redevelopment work with the state of Hawaii, it was difficult to adjust to designing resort architecture in the private sector. Preferred designs often ignored the existing fabric, the cultural and social layers, and the historic resources themselves. Our international work especially troubled me because our clients preferred designs of American prototypes, totally disregarding their own rich cultures and what was originally there. In Java, Indonesia, for example, a client requested that we build an equestrian center, boutique hotel, and single-family residential subdivision on the site of three hamlets, rice paddies, and clove and cinnamon groves.

I promote historic preservation that represents the broader spectrum of America’s history. We’re doing a great job of preserving significant symbols for mainstream, majority America, but a lot of work needs to be done to
make sure that other groups are represented. Other fragments of our complex American story need to be told, interpreted, and linked. The perception is that preservation is elitist and reactionary, but that doesn’t need to be the case. Even though it’s been heavily Eurocentric in this country, preservation is really a universal field. It was another gay preservationist in Hawaii who helped me to understand and be confident in my own direction: a queer, working-class, Japanese American Buddhist from Hawaii, I am as much a preservationist as anybody else. I want to be around more people whose vision of preservation is inclusive. My greatest satisfaction comes from working with grassroots groups, currently in the Bay Area.

Other people can do the legalese and public policy aspects of preservation much better than I can. My background is design, the visual part of the world and its relationship with the complex and fascinating dynamics of culture, society, and time. Preservation is really about loving particular places and the history that’s connected to them. It’s about transformation, revitalization, and change in our existing order. And it’s about bringing community back, which includes the physical places of community, the built environment. I’m sort of a romantic, so I love working with people who have passionate, rooted connections with historic buildings. If it doesn’t affect you in your heart, there’s no real connection.