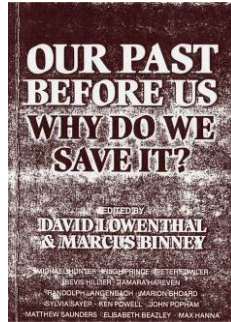


**FROM The Book:**



## **OUR PAST BEFORE US: HOW DO WE SAVE IT?**

EDITED BY David Lowenthal and Marcus Binney  
1981

---

### **CHAPTER 6**

## **Living Places, Work Places and Historical Identity**

TAMARA K. HAREVEN and RANDOLPH LANGENBACH

*The action of time makes man's works into natural objects... In making them natural objects also time gives to man's lifeless productions the chief quality of everything belonging to Nature – life.*

Vernon Lee, 'In Praise of Old Houses' (1902)

In 1975, a member of the wrecking crew working on the demolition of the massive, once famous, but now faded housing project in Leeds, Quarry Hill Flats, noticed among the people watching that one couple had tears in their eyes. Turning to them he asked, 'How can you cry over something like this?' Their response was, 'We had lots of good times here' (a story related by Alison Ravetz, July 1978). Historians and conservationists in Britain have ignored the demise of Quarry Hill Flats. The housing project was generally unloved by the larger community and unwanted by the city. It was quite simply not old enough to be considered a preservation issue. But some of the people who had lived there experienced a deep sense of loss when the structures with which they had identified a major part of their lives were ruthlessly and unceremoniously swept out from beneath them.

Similarly, in New England, former residents of Boston's West End who had been uprooted from their communities returned annually to the empty lots where their houses once stood. The blessing of the home, a ceremony which they carried out

once a year, brought them back from the suburban housing project where urban renewal had relocated them to what they considered their real home.

The West End residents' attachment was not just to an individual home. Most of them had lived there in tenement flats. Their identification with their individual residences was reinforced by the kinship and friendship networks that permeated entire streets. Their attachment to the physical structures drew its strength from their identification with the texture of the entire neighbourhood, an identification inseparable from the physical setting.

What invests buildings with life? How do they emerge into the consciousness of people as entities possessing an intangible worth beyond their usefulness or the value of their brick and stone? Is there a basic difference between what they mean to the 'informed' architectural expert or conservationist, and what they mean to the people whose lives are interwoven with them?

The environment of historic industrial cities and towns in the United States and Great Britain provides an unusual setting for examining the social issues involved in the conservation of the built environment. Many of these cities have recently been experiencing economic and physical change at a rate never before encountered since their origins.

These urban industrial environments also stand at another point of transition: the symbolic meaning which the nineteenth-century industrial building conveys is changing, and buildings and sites suddenly are regarded as 'antique' instead of simply 'old'. We are currently living at a unique historical moment, with remarkable but highly transient opportunities to reflect on the meaning of the historic work and living places within these communities before they either disappear or become subject to formal preservation efforts. Memories of the active use of these buildings during their prime are fading, but still accessible for a limited time in a generation now dying out.

Shifting American attitudes towards the remains of the nation's industrial heritage are most dramatically marked by the transformation of deteriorated and neglected industrial Lowell, Massachusetts, into a new National Park, just a decade after the demolition of the mills in Lowell's sister city, Manchester, N.H., under a government financed urban renewal project. Ironically, Manchester's complex of mills and workers' housing had been better preserved than had any complex in Lowell. Lowell, the oldest of the planned industrial cities in New England, is certainly worthy of preservation. The fact that Lowell was declared a National Park shortly after the massive demolition of the mills and company housing in Manchester underscores the reversal.

Britain's industrial heritage is experiencing a somewhat different fate. The preservation of surviving artifacts from the early period of the Industrial Revolution

has attracted widespread interest and support. However, much of the industrial landscape and cityscape in Britain, as in the United States, dates from the late nineteenth century. To many people this industrial landscape seems too recent and too ubiquitous to warrant being preserved.

The change in attitude described for the United States is, however, also becoming more evident in Britain. Interest based on personal associations, such as that expressed by the couple at Quarry Hill, is converging with concerns based on history and architecture and with general commitment to these industrial landscapes as essential elements in the nation's identity. The surviving physical environment of nineteenth-century Pennine industrial towns today adds the personal memories of everyday life, which has since changed dramatically, to an abstract and generalized textbook knowledge of history. A woman from a mill town in Cheshire wrote in response to the SAVE-sponsored 'Satanic Mills' exhibition shown at the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1979:

*I thought I was the only person in the world who loved old mills. We could see 25 or so factory chimneys from the school window. One mill was particularly beautiful ... equal (in my opinion) to the Chateaux of the Loire, complete with tower and wrought-iron ornamentation... I used to pass the weaving shed on the Stack Mills on the way to school. The flagstones were hot and vibrating. Children would take their mothers chips, black peas, steak and kidney puddings in at dinner time. There was a crèche at Ashton Bros. a long time ago to cater for women who worked the machinery... my mother-in-law started work in the paper mill at 11 years old - 6 o'clock start, bread and dripping for breakfast at 8, soup at 12, bread at 4, finish at 6. And no talking allowed.*

The personal experience has become part of the folklore of the community. That in turn is now beginning to be transformed and legitimized into history - a history that is slowly being accepted as important by a larger society. The letter reveals the significance of memories of everyday life - a way of life people struggled through but accepted despite its overwhelming difficulties, but which has since been swept away, except for the *buildings* which survive as silent witnesses. These buildings provide the continuity elicited in this recall. The hope this woman expressed that the mill with the tower 'is still there' should not be misconstrued as a wish to return to the old days of the work at eleven years of age and the breakfast of bread and dripping. Rather, it is a wish that the memory of life she had known should not be unhinged from reality through the destruction of the principal elements of its setting.

People's identification with buildings is partly shaped by earlier stages in their life-cycle that the building symbolizes. Ernest Anderson, a former mill worker in the Amoskeag Mills, then seventy-five years old, related for our book Amoskeag (1978, p. 147): *'Sometimes I take a walk through the millyard. A lot of it is torn down today; but as I look up, I can see those mills, how they flourished at one time, and I don't feel as old as I am.'*

We are saddened by the sight of an individual suffering amnesia. But we are often less concerned or aware when an entire community is subjected to what amounts to social amnesia as a result of massive clearance or alteration of the physical setting. The demolition of dwellings and factory buildings wipes out a significant chapter of the history of a place. Even if it does not erase them from local memory it tends to reduce or eliminate the recall of that memory, rendering less meaningful the communication of that heritage to a new generation. Such destruction deprives people of tangible manifestations of their identity.

The more locally restricted is such identification, the greater the deprivation. Demolition of an industrial working or living environment most severely affects the working class, especially its elderly members. Contrary to the commonly-held belief that it is these groups which have the most to gain by replacement of old or outmoded houses and workplaces, they are the most likely to suffer displacement as a result of demolition. A West Yorkshireman quoted in Marie Hartley and Joan Ingilby, *Life and Transition in West Yorkshire* (1976, p. 91), expressed the impact which slum clearance had on him. *'When t'old square went summot else went wi' it that all t' posh tahn centres in t' world can't fetch back.'*

The condemnation and clearance of physical structures can be read as a condemnation of the way of life that had been lived there. In his *Loss and Change* (1974, p. 55), Peter Marris pinpoints the issue most poignantly:

They would like more space, better drains, repairs - but to achieve this only at the cost of destroying the neighbourhood itself seems to them an inconceivable distortion of what is important. If the physical setting has one meaning to the planning authority, it has another to the residents. The corner shops, the shabby streets, the yards and lots... are invested with all kinds of intimate associations. They identify with the neighbourhood: it is part of them, and to hear it condemned as a slum is a condemnation of themselves too.

Beyond their links with individual identity, buildings perform an important role in the historical memory of a community. While abandoned mills may signal the decline of an industry, the same buildings, no matter what their current condition, may also symbolize past power and success. Planners, Politicians, and urban reformers often assume that people hate the buildings they once worked in because of their association with poor working conditions and exploitation. But those who make such claims about workers' feelings have seldom actually worked in such buildings themselves. It is the mistaken impression of middle-class civic leaders (many of whom are from regions other than the city in question) that since conditions were worse then than they are now, people must wish to forget the past and would prefer to see its manifestations erased.

The assumptions of social reformers and planners that the working-class past in these industrial settings must be eradicated because it symbolizes poverty, grimness, and exploitation, misses what the workers themselves feel about their world. Most of the former industrial workers whom we interviewed for the Amoskeag oral history project remembered the good and the bad as inseparable parts of their life's experience. They were willing, and at times eager, to recall the bitter times along with the good. Both were part of their entire life story and were deeply enmeshed with their sense of place. Memories of struggle with poverty, daily two-mile walks to the factory, unemployment and strikes, illness and death were all part of that story, and were intimately linked to the buildings. Beyond their individual experiences, buildings were so significant to people's memories because of their associations with other people, such as family members, friends, neighbours, and fellow workers, with whom they had shared these experiences.

While the outside world of reformers and planners condemned the buildings and the experiences of textile work, which they represented, the people who actually worked in those buildings saw them as inseparable parts of their lives. Those whom we found to hold negative attitudes had advanced into the middle class, and felt that association with these buildings conflicted with their efforts to escape from their parents' working-class background. As is often the case, however, the grandchildren of those who had worked in the mills have sometimes turned to appreciate and value the world of their grandparents, while the intervening generation rejects them. In this instance, the middle generation, which is currently at the centre of community power and influence, has deprived the older as well as the younger generation of the continuity in the presence of structures that conveyed an important association with the city's identification.

Our argument about the significant role that buildings play in the formation of identity is not contingent on the assumption that people spend their entire lives in the same neighbourhood. Both American and British societies have experienced extensive geographic mobility over the last two hundred years. Indeed, the question needs to be asked: if people are so mobile why does historic preservation make such a difference?

The attachment of people to individual buildings or to entire neighbourhoods is both real and symbolic. In Boston's West End, London's East End, or Leeds's Quarry Hill, the physical attachment of people to the neighbourhood was intertwined with kinship and neighbourhood and institutional ties, and destruction of the neighbourhood also fragmented the social community.

People become attached to certain buildings because of the association with past or present experience, which the buildings symbolize, even if that experience has not been a continuous part of their lives. An attachment formed initially with a certain building can be transferred to other buildings of the same type in other places. Thus, people who had identified with certain buildings in their residences or work-places in

one community would seek out similar types of buildings in another community. Whether or not they formed new attachments they would still live with the special memory of the original buildings and relate to them when the opportunity arose.

Identification with a building is not restricted to people living in its immediate environs. Its destruction can remove a symbol meaningful to people living there who happen to know it from past experience. What counts is the symbolic value of the building - the way of life and the sense of continuity that it represents. People identify with a genre of buildings not only because of their environmental quality but also because of the particular role they had filled. The survival of buildings and landmarks associated with a familiar way of life provides continuity of social as well as physical fibre. The more mobile a society, the greater the value of the continuity symbolized by these buildings.

Recently, Americans have begun to counteract feelings of rootlessness by embarking on the reconstruction of individual family genealogies and collective oral histories of communities. Buildings and familiar landscapes play a significant part in this need and search for identity. As Marris says in *Loss and Change* (p. 150):

Conservationists are often ridiculed for wanting to keep old buildings or familiar landmarks which are neither beautiful nor historically important. But the townscape ought to reflect our need for continuity, and the more rapidly society changes, the less readily should we abandon anything familiar which can still be made to serve a purpose. Even if a sweeping redesign would be more efficient, more practical, more beautiful, even if those who used it would come to prefer it, I think we should still consider whether such abrupt discontinuities are worth the stresses they set up. There is a virtue in rehabilitating familiar forms that neither economic logic nor conventional criteria of taste can fully take into account, and we should at least recognise this, before we decide what to destroy.

The past is not a constant. Every generation reinterprets its own history. Perceptions of the past and myths upheld by different generations have a significance that transcends whatever one might seek to define as 'objective historical reality.'

The artifacts of different periods thus gain in status and historical significance as attitudes change towards their historical period and style. In the United States, Victorian antiques have begun to take a respectable place next to early American, and in the 1980s Art Deco and Depression Era artifacts are coming into their own. This progressive recognition and acceptance of objects from more recent periods is not merely the result of the passing of time; it is also connected with the coming of age of generations whose tastes are less elitist and more accepting of the industrial heritage.

The increasing recognition of vernacular, especially industrial, buildings as a legitimate part of the historical heritage is part of this process. The growing historic

consciousness of the value of the work-place represents a recent departure from an elitist approach not only to buildings but to the industrial heritage in general. It parallels the rediscovery of social and labour history as the heritage of the common people.

Buildings derive absolute historical importance not alone from their creation in a particular period, or from their established aesthetic and stylistic value, but also from the social context in which they were used, the functions they fulfilled, and the historical experiences associated with them. This is precisely why the rediscovery of vernacular buildings is part of the rediscovery of a new past - a past which encompasses the lives of common people.

Historical consciousness has recently expanded in two directions. First, the scope of historical scholarship and interest has broadened to include groups that had previously been neglected, such as industrial workers, village labourers, slaves, immigrants, and migrants. Second, social historical endeavours have encompassed social experiences that were not previously recognized as legitimate aspects of historical scholarship, such as work and leisure, childhood, old age, and family life. This shift in historical consciousness has led not only from elites to common people, but from official, public history to a history of private lives and experiences; in short, from formal and institutional to a more existential history.

With these changes, the criteria for the historical values of buildings change too: buildings are 'historical' not only because they are associated with the lives of elites, or because they are public monuments. Buildings become important because of their association with the private work and family lives of large numbers of common people in the past.

This development is not entirely new. There has been for some time an interest in the dwellings, work-places, and artifacts of everyday life from the remote past. Medieval or Tudor villages, colonial or nineteenth-century American settlements, antebellum slave cottages, all have been elevated to historical status and turned into museums because they tell the story of everyday life in the past. The problem is how to accord such status to buildings that do not represent remote eras, but are within the experience of people alive today or their parents and grandparents. The significant task is not only to recognize the historical value of working and living areas, but also to acknowledge buildings from the more recent past as legitimately historical.

*The recovery of the life histories of common people in the past, as part of a larger effort to reconstruct a whole society and to make anonymous voices heard, has not been fully matched by the recognition of their places of residence and work as legitimate historical structures. There is currently a gap between the legitimation of the social and cultural history of common people, and the acceptance of*

*vernacular structures as historical monuments. Entire living and working environments of unusual historic and architectural quality are still being destroyed. For example, at the Sett Mill in Oldham, a remarkable surviving example of a small early-nineteenth-century mill village with two owners' houses, two facing rows of workers' houses and the mill, the houses have been unceremoniously removed as 'unfit' by the Borough. The settlement was all the more remarkable because the two brothers who owned it lived in houses attached to the ends of the rows of their workers' houses. Until quite recently one was still occupied by the 80-year-old Mrs Sett, who was evicted from her own house, along with the residents of the workers' houses (some of whom were former employees of the Sett Mill).*

Official recognition of outstanding sites, such as the transformation of the remnants of the Lowell mills in the U.S.A. into a National Park, and the establishment of the Quarry Bank Mill Museum in Styal, in Cheshire, UK, as a historical monument, are moves in a positive direction. But to establish genuine links between community identity and the built environment, we need to preserve not only the exceptional, symbolic specimen, but also local work-places and neighbourhoods. Ironically, artificial mill museums, using artifacts stripped from genuinely historic and intact mill villages, have been established in the United States in particular.

The challenge of conservation is to preserve the meaning of the way of life which buildings represent to those who have worked and lived in them, as well as the more abstract and formal qualities based on knowledge of architectural and technological history. Many times one has passed a registered national landmark with its bronze plaque and formal parking area, visited by parties of school-children and by tourists from abroad. The visitors to these monuments become informed by their visit, but rarely are they genuinely moved. Often what they find is a monument so sterilized as to be devoid of any real impression of its use over time, that is sterilized of the 'life' identified by Vernon Lee above. At Covent Garden, for example, the extent and quality of restoration has, to a degree, removed the visible effects of its use as a market. This wear and patina of age is what one associates with an historical market and it can be disorientating to find it so entirely removed when the market is turned into an uncharacteristically elegant shopping centre. This problem is more apparent in the United States, where sites with extensive reconstructions such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia often blur the line between real and fabricated history, distorting the context in which what is genuine can be appreciated and understood.

The problem for planners and preservationists dealing with such a timely and evocative subject as the nineteenth century industrial landscape is how to weld together in the preservation effort the two aspects of human association, the intimate, and that based on knowledge of art and history. Historical and architectural scholarship can give credibility to personal feelings and a sense of identification, while individual associations can give vitality to the historical interpretation. An example is the Gladstone Pottery Museum in Stoke-on-Trent, which has integrated



the presentation of folklore with preservation of obsolete industrial structures. The pottery craft continued in the museum buildings and the periodic ceremonial firing of surviving bottle kilns in the area, bring out surviving workers from the days of the hand fired kilns, and stimulate an exchange of knowledge and feeling, injecting vitality into the museum project.

Some critics, who condemn conservation as elitist, question whether working-class housing residents and factory employees have an aesthetic response to buildings. This implies that if they do not, there is little point in preserving them. We have found some people in all walks of life who do respond aesthetically and others who do not, but the virtues of conservation do not depend on an aesthetic response. This is not to deny the value of the scholar's definition of worth, based on comparative historical or architectural criteria. But conservation broadly considered must juxtapose general criteria of social history and architectural analysis with the meaning that buildings have for local rehabilitation in terms of personal experiences.

Preservation is in a sense a community act. It is as important as a process as in its results, contributing to the mutual education of people who see beauty and value in terms of architecture or of a building's place in the history of engineering, technology, or town planning, and those who know simply that the buildings and places are meaningful in terms of their own lives. Successful conservation can rarely result from the actions of either group alone. It is most effective when it reflects a coming together of people from both backgrounds. As a conservation effort becomes a real force in a community, the diversity of its roots within the community and the multiplicity of its goals for different people proves to be its most stimulating aspect. Conservation provides a chance to draw these diverse parts of a community together, using the physical fabric of the past as a matrix for people to achieve a greater understanding of each other.

#### FURTHER READING

Brolin, Brent C. *The Failure of Modern Architecture*. Cincinnati: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976. Modern architecture discussed in relation to history, Style, social conditions and user perception.

Hareven, Tamara K., and Langenbach, Randolph. *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. An oral history of former factory workers in Manchester, New Hampshire, which illustrates from the interviewees' own perceptions their strong identification with the physical setting of architectural environment.

Huxtable, Ada Louise. *Will They Ever Finish Bruckner Boulevard?* New York: Macmillan, 1963; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1972. A collection of Huxtable's *New York Times* architecture columns, sharply drawing the battle lines of specific preservation/redevelopment issues.

Marris, Peter. *Loss and Change*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Pantheon, 1974. A theoretical study of the sense of loss which accompanies personal and social change. People are stated to have a 'conservative impulse', a need to maintain continuity.

Ravetz, Alison. *Model Estate, Planned Housing at Quarry Hill, Leeds*. London: Croom Helm, 1974. A brilliant analysis of the abbreviated life of Quarry Hill flats and an account of their destruction.

Thompson, Michael. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. An incisive assessment of how things, including buildings, lose and gain value as they age. This book adds greatly to an understanding of the historical significance of conservation.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974.