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HISTORIC DISTRICTS: GHOSTS AND INTRUDERS

Ever since pioneering days, North Americans have readily embraced the new, but there is ample evidence that the present generation looks with increasing favor on that which is old.

No longer is preservation thought of in the United States as a matter of saving old castles in Europe. The largesse which was once sent to repair a Rheims or a Versailles is now more likely to be devoted to the "historic house" museum at home.

In 1895 there were twenty of these in the whole country, whereas today there are probably nearer a thousand. State activities in preserving historic houses and sites have mushroomed, the Nationl Park Service has developed and administered hundreds of historic shrines since 1935, and we have had our own National Trust for Historic Preservation since 1949. It was the National Trust which showed us that preserving a house here, and a site there, was not the whole answer to the problem.

The popularity of historic preservation in the United States has grown especially rapidly since World War II. The sudden appearance of a multitude of local organizations such as the one I represent (above) is a sure indication that the public is alarmed. Devoted usually to the recording and preservation of buildings of architectural and historic merit, and of many periods, these private societies are born of the realization that architecture is an important mirror of its own time, that it needs protection in order to withstand the onslaughts of "progress", and that there are specific measures available to communities and individuals which can ensure its survival. Frequently whole streets and neighborhoods of interesting buildings demand preservation. What method can here be used to prevent demolition and decay?

Each nation develops methods of preservation best suited to its customs and institutions. Although many public and private devices from public acquisition to restrictive covenants are used in the United States, one method increasingly applied is *historic district preservation*, and it is with some aspects of its operation that I am concerned in this paper.

"Historic district architectural controls" according to the authority Albert B. Wolfe, " aim at preserving appearance without change in ownership or use; *where the setting is important as well as the buildings* (my italics), or the relationship to each other of a sufficient number of historic buildings creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts".

We should bear in mind, therefore, first, that historic district legislation deals largely with *exterior appearance*, regardless of the uses going on inside the buildings, and second, that the district will usually contain buildings and structures which are *not* of historic or architectural significance, although the district are usually chosen on the basis of having a majority of buildings constructed in the period or periods of architecture it is desired to preserve. Otherwise, the courts might not consider it "in the public interest" to prevent demolition of buildings in areas of weak historicism.

Generally speaking, the historic district in the larger cities... Boston, Charleston, Washington... is an attempt "to keep alive the village within the city", as Harry E. White described it in the Columbia Law Review. Where historic preservation operates on a city-wide basis [1], as in Philadelphia, with its official municipal Historical Commission, means other than the historic district method may be in operation. In smaller communities like Nantucket, Mass., Bethlehem, Pennsylvania or Wethersfield. Connecticut, the principle is the same, with perhaps on eye to tourism and the preservation of quaintness. Wethersfield, for instance, stresses the fact that it is "an early Connecticut River community in continual growth from the year 1634". Bethlehem was a center of the Moravian religious sect and Nantucket a home of the whaling industry on the Eastern seaboard. All are fairly similar in operation. The District boundaries are drawn and described, a Historic District Commission is established, and the Commission issues a "certificate of appropriateness" upon submission of plans involving change in exterior architectural features. Sign control is also usually exercised by the Commission.

There are now over fifty of these districts in about half of the states. Nine states have enacted historic district enabling legislation, while many cities and towns have special ordinances without state authorization.

All of these Historic Districts imply a consideration of the setting as well as the individual buildings. The motive in obtaining the District may be purely esthetic or it may be to prevent a run-down part of the town from getting worse. It may be to preserve the architecture of a specific period or *all periods*. But in every case the district involves controls over more than one building. Let us look at some examples to see wherein may lie the secrets of success.

A fairly typical example of the Historic District can be found in Wethersfield, Connecticut. The town was settled in 1634 and was the most flourishing port on the Connecticut River for two hundred years. In the Webb House, George Washington stayed four days with Colonel Joseph Webb, and with Count de Rochambeau and Governor Trumbull planned the Battel of Yorktown. This house and the two on either side of it are owned and have been restored by the Connecticut Society of Colonial Dames, and all date from the mid-eighteenth century. The town has many other old houses, a broad main street leading down to a cove of the river, and a green. The Buttolph-Williams house is a "shrine" and the whole town is rich in domestic architecture, dating from the 17th century.

Two typical problems are to be found in Wethersfield. One is commercial. Althougt the aim of this particular Historic District, quite recently founded, is to show "a continuity of growth from the year 1634" the intent did not include a mediocre shopping block built tight up against the Stevens House about forty years ago. The plan is to eliminate this block through the powers of urban renewal, demolishing it with the help of federal and state funds, and building a new shopping center considerably to the rear of these historic houses. Thus

one nuisance (visual) will be eliminated from the setting. To eliminate overhead wiring, it is necessary for the town to pass a local ordinance prohibiting it, as the towns of Waterbury and Torrington in Connecticut have already done in certain parts of their downtown areas.

The second problem is presented by the new highway known as Interstate 91 which cuts off a view of the river and water meadows from part of the District. The highway was planned before the District and is on an embankment for most of its lenght at this point, since the meadows are subject to periodic flooding. In the light of its effect (visual) on the town, another route would have been preferable. In some states like Arizona the relationship of new public works to archaeological sites is strictly regulated [2]. Here, where the higway does not actually disturb a site, the location is no less disastrous, since a town which wishes to amphasize its relationship to the river is now partially cut off from it.

In heavily built-up cities one can expect the environmental problems to be intensified. The Historic District boundaries in Providence were carefully drawn to avoid two educational institutions, which were large property owners on The Hill, where the first settlement took form in 1636 under Roger Williams. This in large part accounts for the irregular boundaries, which in two places exclude frontage on Benefit Street, the spine on which the District is formed. It is to be assumed that the university and college concerned did not wish to be forced to keep historic buildings which might be willed to them or which might stand in the path of expansion. This is borne out by the fact that one institution had to be prevented from pulling down a house by a famous 19th century architect, after expensive litigation, and that the same institution did pull down two good brick houses on the part of Benefit Street not covered by the District, in spite of telegrams and protests from all over the country.

The other institution is putting up buildings which in size and incompatibility are providing incongruous notes in the setting. A bulky new library is one such intruder. This institution is so powerful in the city that in order to get it to agree to *any* Historic district it had to be exempted from all restrictions. It thus got an exemption from the height restriction for several new buildings. Because of its powerful pressure, according to the past-president of the Preservation Society, the Historic District became *a list of buildings* rather than *an area.* The problem here thus becomes one of town planning.

In spite of the conditions noted above, the Providence Preservation Society has been most successful in making the District a reflection of life on The Hill from the old shipping days to the present century. They do not reject new building, but have been most active in restoration and remodeling work. About fifty pre-1840 houses have already been bought for restoration, and a major inroad has been made into the blighted conditions which obtained previously.

An interesting small historic district in what has become a residential suburb, formerly a country town on the shores of Long Island Sound, is to be found in Fairfield, Connecticut. Among the criteria used in establishing the District was "consideration of the area *as a whole* to provide appropriate setting". Generally speaking, the district consists of a Green and houses along the Old Post Road, and the district was proposed with a depth of two hundred feet on either side of this road. The Town Green, together with the Old Burying Ground, the Sun Tavern, and the Burr-Warner House [3], is a place of great historical importance and has associations with the Revolutionary War.

Here the drawing of the boundary was critical, since the Town Plan and Zoning Commission wishes to exclude four properties at the top of the map where it proposes to expand the existing commercial activities, bring in a new road to service new shops to be built behind the Historic District. These properties would then be subject to possible demolition. Since it seems desirable that any new stores and shops so close to the Historic District should be subject to similar controls over appearance, sign control, and so on, the action of the Historic District Commission in including these houses in the District as a "Gateway" to the Old Post Road is much to be commended.

A more compact, and highly successful, Historic District is the Stockade Area of Schenectady, New York. Founded by the Dutch, this area is isolated from the rest of the modern industrial city by a railroad, the main street and the Mohawk River. It is the pioneering Historic District in New York State under the Bard Act of 1956 and has a flourishing Stockade Association with its own newspaper, "The Stockade Spy". Typical of the architecture is the Abraham Yates House, circa 1700, with its brick gable end in the Dutch style, but houses up through the Victorian period have also carefully been preserved. The whole area forms an interesting museum of architecture, yet the houses are lived in by anyone who likes the protection and unique atmosphere the District affords.

In spite of the fact there is now no trace of the stockade, which was destroyed by the French and Indians in 1690, the outlines of the District are clear. This indicates, perhaps, that where they exist, natural boundaries like rivers and creeks, or even wide and busy thoroughfares, make better criteria for choosing boundaries than property lines or uniform distances back from a street.

The problem of bordering uses is well brought out in the small town of Guilford, Connecticut settled in 1639 and rich in 17th century architecture. The possible historic district centers around the Town Green, but beyond this is a large meadow on one side and a marshy area with a river on the other. A few years ago these would have been considered safe from development, but even marshes can support marinas, and they can be dredged of filled much more easily than formerly. With or without a historic district, both these open spaces should be protected, and various devices are possible. As a distinct asset to the town the meadow could best be protected by outright purchase; new federal laws give financial assistance to towns acquiring open space, through a program of the Urban Renewal Administration. Failing that, a scenic easement might be obtained from the owner, who is a farmer. In the case of marshes, which are breeding grounds for birds, fish and shellfish, a national efforts is underway to save them. In Massachusetts a new law has passed its first legal test; this forbids the removal, filling or dredging of any bank, flat, meadow, marsh or swamp bordering on coastal waters if such action would be detrimental to marine life. The National Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy have been active in saving these areas; in fact, the former has just acquired about 130 acres of tidal land above the town of Guilford, pointing the way to further conservation efforts by the citizens themselves.

If bordering and intruding uses are so important to the setting of Historic

Districts, is there any other action that can be taken to offset their influence? I will conclude with two widely differing Districts, both of which have adopted farsighted town planning measures. Without some vision in the matter of planning and zoning I believe that few preservation attempts can survive the outside pressures that modern society exerts, be it a new skyscraper spoiling the historic view of the Bay of Naples or a subdivision of "ranch houses" destroying the ambience of the little village of Guilford.

The already-mentioned Moravian settlement of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, now a modern steel town, has planned a series of compatible uses to surround and penetrate the site of the early village, where restoration work is going on. An urban renewal program will remove most of the blight in the area and provide funds for clearance of the site where the first tanneries, potteries, grist mills and other pre-Revolutionary once stood. A new park will be made, a new campus provided for the Moravian College and a new civic center built which will act as a gateway to the old town from the south. These proposals were largely worked out by the city with the aid of the planning and landscape consultants Clarke and Rapuano, of New York. With the exception of the civic center, which is to cost $ 11 million and will be slow in starting, the projects are all under way, and provide an insurance for the Historic District which would otherwise be lacking, since it embraces most of the downtown section of the city.

After Charleston and the Vieux Carré district of New Orleans, the most important big-city District is probably Beacon Hill in Boston. Nestling under Charles Bulfinch's state-house with its golden dome, it consists of distinguished brick town houses, churches, Louisburg Square, a few clubs and some commercial building. It is a remarkably compatible whole, even though its success has called for two additions since the original enabling legislation was passed in 1955. Like College Hill in Providence, the District provides downtown living accommodations for Boston's urban-loving civic leaders, and this, in a nation of suburbanites, is no mean object for a preservation movement.

Realizing that even its active Beacon Hill Association and Board of Architectural Control could not prevent new buildings overcrowding their sites or require them to put in adequate parking, the residents have approved new zoning regulations, to come into operation this year, which will ensure a stricter control of uses under a floor area ratio system of 2. This results in a low density compared with much of Boston, requires off-street parking, and generally will make it difficult for builders to crowd the District with apartment houses. Further, the new regulations have a licensing provision for educational buildings which are making use of old buildings for their dormitories. The classes for these are "Allowed", "Forbidden" and "Conditional" which means that they will come under controls seldom applied to educational uses. (It should be pointed out that colleges and secretarial schools in residential districts can cause very serious problems of traffic, parking and policing).

In conclusion, it appears that in spite of the limitations inherent in a concept of preservation which provides for district boundaries, the popularity of Historic Districts will increase. The limitations are usually balanced off with the benefits achieved, and enough experience has been acquired to suggest that this method, or variations of it, can be broadened to apply to whole urban and suburban communities. After all, the notion of contiguity of structure has in recent years been modified by the new mobility of persons. Discontinuous districts now in existence point the way, and it may well be the next step to acquire linkages between them, through planning or other means.

[1] In a few cities like Charleston. S.C. and Santa Fe, N.M., the historic district covers the whole city. In others, there may be more than one district. An example is Suffield, Conn. which has two discontinuous districts administered by the same commission.
[2] The Massachusetts legislature in 1948 forbade any taking by eminent domain of property owned, preserved and maintained by any historical organization, as property of historical interest, except after special authority from the legislature.
[3] Built in 1790, originally a two and a half story Colonial house with a wide center hall. The roof was raised and the pillars added in 1840

Christopher Tunnard

CENTRES HISTORIQUES: FANTÔMES ET INTRUS.
RÉSUMÉ.

Thème: *District historique et Législation dans neuf des Etats-Unis d'Amérique, tandis que de nombreuses cités et villes sont soumises à des ordonnances spéciales.*

En pratique, ces districts englobent rarement l'entière communauté, ce qui suscite des problèmes de définition là où le contrôle cesse d'opérer. On propose d'analyser quelques-unes des conditions qui se présentent aux limites des districts historiques et, dans quelques cas, les mesures habituellement prises en considération pour la préservation des lieux.

Exposition: *Certains types de districts historiques demanderont des modifications de délimitations de terrain, des contrôles et des encouragements. Cependant certains problèmes communs peuvent, en gros, être classés comme suit:*

— Districts historiques contrôlant une plus vaste superficie que la section ayant besoin d'être protégée. Exemples: Les villes de Wethersfield et de Fairfield.

— districts historiques avec limites de protection naturelles. Exemple: Schenectady-New-York.

— Districts historiques utilisés comme dispositifs de protection résidentiels. Exemples: La Back Bay et Beacon Hill à Boston, et Providence, Rhode Island.

— Délinéation scènique et préservation historique: Le rôle des constructions annexes dans le traçage des limites naturelles des districts historiques. Exemple: Guilford, Conn.

— Les « Cités » (ou blocs de constructions) comme protection d'une aire. Exemple: 91st. Street, New-York.

— La protection historique et le renouvellement des lieux. Exemple: Providence R.I.

Futurs travaux: *Examen du « Gateway » concept de régions-type dont le centre doit être protégé. Liaison entre les districts par des axes linéaires comme dispositif garantissant la continuité. Contrôle du développement institutionnel à l'intérieur du district. Degré et autres réglements pour contrôler l'échelle des limites. Etablissement de «retraits de façades» pour les nouvelles constructions afin de maintenir les lignes des corniches de certaines périodes historiques. Besoin d'établissement d'un aspect à travers le caractère architectural et de préservation du plan de la ville.*