Preservation Is Not Just About the Past
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Good evening. I am delighted to be here, and to say a few words about the state of historic preservation right now. I suspect that almost everyone in this room is a veteran of some preservation battle or another, and that many of you recall the age when historic preservation was something radical, something almost suspect – unless, that is, you were talking about house-museums, those places where bored schoolchildren are shepherded through and emerge with a sense that the past must have been really dull to have created places like that. In the house museum, preservation kept to its place – safe, unthreatening, limited mainly to little old ladies who specialized in boring schoolchildren. It was easier to justify saving a building for what might have happened in it than for anything about its architecture, or any symbolic value it might have had in a community, which is why, when you moved away from the safe realm of house museums, preservation was not such a sure thing in those days. It was a widely accepted view that it interfered with progress. It was the enemy of economic development. Everyone knew that historic preservation was motivated mainly by sentimentality, and that the world ran on more important things than that.

Well, a lot has happened in the last thirty or forty years, which is how long it's been, I think, since that view prevailed. The preservation movement has grown up, and no one dismisses it as mere sentimentality to care about saving key parts of the built landscape we have inherited. Forty-four years ago we tore down Pennsylvania Station in New York City, perhaps the greatest single act of urban vandalism in New York's history. Two years ago – forty-two years after that event, in other words – we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, which was created in direct response to the unnecessary and awful loss of Pennsylvania Station. In its first forty years, the landmarks commission declared 1,120 buildings as individual landmarks, 104 important public spaces as interior landmarks, 9 parks as scenic landmarks, and 83 groupings, some of them extending over many blocks, as historic districts, protecting roughly 23,000 buildings all over the city.

Pennsylvania Station's counterpart, Grand Central, has not only been saved, it has been meticulously restored, and today looks better than it ever has. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has counterparts in cities and states all across the country, and of course there are all kinds of active state organizations like Utah Preservation, too, doing incredibly good and creative work.

And all of that is just local. If we look at the nation as a whole, the picture also looks pretty strong – preservation, after all, has become widespread. Almost no one any more questions the value of historic preservation, or its underlying premises. In New York, even the real-estate industry long ago gave up the fight against it, and that is saying something, since the real-estate industry in New York rarely gives up anything. They may challenge the landmarks commission on specific issues, but they are no longer challenging its right to exist.

But that very acceptance, in a strange way, is part of the problem. Preservation is now part of the established order of things, which means that it is part of the establishment, and that, in turn, means that it comes under question not from the forces of power, but from the opposite end – from the young, from the avant-garde, from those who grew up in a world in which historic preservation was natural, and who feel, unlike most of us in this room, not that preservation is a great battle that they are proud of winning, but that it is a force of stasis – even, in some ways, a conservative force. The great challenge right now, strangely enough, is in figuring out how to keep preservation closer to the cutting edge, and to help those who grew up entirely in the age of preservation – those who were born after the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission was formed in 1965, or even after the Grand Central case was won in the nineteen-seventies – to understand that the last thing this movement ought to be thought of as is conservative.

I recognize that there is a kind of paradox in what I am saying, because obviously the very point of historic preservation is to conserve, so it has to be conservative in one sense. Of course this is true. Historic preservation aims to keep certain physical things that we have come to value and that other forces in society would be inclined to destroy. Keeping is conserving, and so in one sense of the word, conserving is conservative. But preservation, in the early years, was also daring, and radical, and willing to go against the grain, knowing that it represented long-term benefits for our cities and towns that people who thought only in the short term didn't understand.

In the early years of preservation – let's say the Pennsylvania Station years, from the 1960's and into the 1970's – preservationists were willing to go against established business interests, and often did, which meant that no one saw them as conservative, since the business community pretty much had a lock on that adjective. If you opposed business interests, then you were presumably radical, which is just

what preservationists were often thought to be – that is, when they weren't being denounced as communist and socialist and against the all-American value of undiminished property rights. And we all know this happened even though, as we've said, preservationists were really conservative in the best sense of that word, since they were trying to bring what we might call the true values of conservatism to the forefront – not the creation of short-term profits, but the maintenance of long-term value for the society as a whole by recognizing the benefits of preserving certain precious resources for all to share.

A moment ago, I was saying that preservation has begun to be part of the establishment: it is increasingly operating not outside the corridors of power but within them, and while that is in one sense a triumph worth celebrating, it is not without risks of its own. In every silver lining there is a cloud, you might say, and today preservation faces the challenge of maintaining the passion and the energy and even the sense of radicalism that so completely defined it in the early years.

The National Trust now has several hundred thousand members, and owns or manages 21 key historic properties, but I have to say that is not the most important thing to say about it. What really matters about the Trust – and I am using it as an example not only because it is the largest national preservation organization, but because it's the one I know best – what really matters isn't the membership total, although that certainly underscores the success of the preservation movement in general that I've been talking about. More significant, in my view, is the way in which the National Trust has worked to redefine preservation, and keep it at the cutting edge. This has happened in a couple of ways. First, the National Trust has established under Dick Moe's impressive leadership a key role for itself in community preservation, in the saving of Main Streets and old downtowns. It was one of the first and most important responders after Hurricane Katrina, since the Trust recognized that, once the urgent necessities of human life were accounted for, the physical form of communities came second, and that the Trust could play a critical role in preserving them.

This is as important an evidence of preservation's evolution as any – the recognition that it is part of the deep fabric of human community, that preservation is not simply a matter of the luxury of saving individual artifacts, valued, even beloved, as these artifacts may often be. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of the evolution of historic preservation from a process of protecting and restoring single artifacts to a process of community preservation. It is absolutely essential, and it is the real story of preservation in our time: how it has gone beyond the single building, admired but disconnected from the larger community fabric, to the community fabric itself. I can't say how grateful I am to Dick Moe for his remarkable leadership here, since Dick's decision to steer the National Trust in this direction,

while not in any way, shape or form diminishing its commitment to individual historic sites, has been a critical example for preservation organizations all around the country.

If you save a historic building and let the community fabric around it deteriorate – well, then you have a historic artifact sitting in the midst of decay, which can actually have the effect, paradoxically, of diminishing rather than enhancing the importance of preservation, since it can suggest that preservation is totally disconnected from contemporary life, completely unrelated to the things that matter. If the life of the community is all out on the new, wide street at the edge of town, where the strip malls and the Wal-Mart and the K-Mart and the drive-in places are, and the one distinguished mid-nineteenth-century mansion left in the center of town has been preserved but everything else around Main Street has been allowed to go into decay, this sends the message that preservation is connected entirely to an obsolete past, that it has little to do with the life we live now. Of course it's better to have preserved this lovely house than not, but we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that saving it is going to have much real impact on the community unless other things are done. The point is that you have to address more than the special artifact, you have to look at the whole.

And that may often mean looking at wholes in which none of the parts are all that important on their own. If I have learned anything in thirty-five years of studying cities and writing about them, it is that the street means more than the building, and that you can make a great street out of so-so buildings if they are put together well and relate to each other well and make a tight urban fabric, and if you have enough great streets you have one of the most important ingredients of a great city. Conversely, if you have a few great buildings that are utterly disconnected from each other and from the street, you have – well, you have a few great buildings. Period. You do not have a street, and you do not have a city. My point is not to argue against architecture – obviously, if I wanted to do that, I should be in another line of work. It is to keep in mind that architecture alone can't make a city, and that preservation of single, individual and discrete works of architecture alone can't maintain the cities and the communities we cherish. We need to do more, we need to look at the ensembles of B+ buildings and remember that a whole lot of B and even C buildings can often mean more to a community than one or two A buildings.

This seems like an awfully good lead-in to some thoughts about the current revitalization plan that has been proposed for Salt Lake City, the enormous project that has been named City Creek Center, even though from what I gather it doesn't actually include City Creek, but a facsimile of it. That is not a good start, since one of the greatest problems prosperous cities face these days is the tendency to blur the idea of a city with the idea of a theme park, making the city a

lively and attractive entertainment and shopping venue, but altogether removed from the life of the streets. Generally I am much more comfortable with projects that do not attempt to redevelop huge swaths of a downtown in one fell swoop, under common ownership, but with the incremental growth of a city building by building, preserving the mix and the heterogeneity and diversity that are so important to urban fabric.

That said, of course I have to admit that Rockefeller Center in New York breaks all these rules and we are the better for it. I think that at this stage – and I understand that the plans are still evolving – City Creek has been getting better, most importantly because it has become more oriented to the street, and less inward-looking. It does, after all, replace urban malls that did entirely the wrong thing, taking people off streets and turning their back on the city, disingenuously pretending to be revitalizing it when they were really sucking the energy out of the city like a vacuum cleaner. Anyway, we've learned at least something from that generation of urban redevelopment projects, and I think City Creek, by focusing more on the street, shows it. And because it breaks the large blocks of Salt Lake City – overly large, I might say; this is one real drawback to your urban grid here, that it was designed without pedestrians in mind – anyway, by breaking up the blocks into a somewhat smaller grid, it can improve the texture of downtown.

And this project will bring more people to live downtown as well as to work and shop downtown, and that is critical. The American cities that work best are almost invariably cities with significant downtown residential populations, cities in which everybody above the poverty level does not choose to live in the suburbs. I know that downtown residency has been on the upswing in Salt Lake City for quite a number of years, and it is good that one of the goals of this project is to keep that number going up still more.

A concern, obviously, beyond the ones I've mentioned is the one most directly relevant to this talk, which is historic preservation. I'm concerned that more buildings are not going to be saved, and I was struck by the statement, I think by an official of the Church, in one of the things I read that said that the older buildings were just not in good enough shape and would have had to be restored, but maybe they would try to save a façade or two. I can't stand those situations where a façade is preserved only to be plunked onto the front of an older building so its developers can congratulate themselves on how wonderfully they have saved the old, while actually robbing the old building of all its integrity and, indeed, of any real meaning whatsoever.

And it seems odd to balk at the cost and the difficulty of restoring one or two or three older buildings when you are prepared to spend several billion dollars putting up new ones. I think the real issue was that these buildings were simply in the way. It's unfortunate,

because this could have been an opportunity to integrate new and old in a way that has the potential to enliven the cityscape, and give it a kind of depth and resonance that it needs. The great architecture critic Lewis Mumford once said, “In a city, time becomes visible,” and that says it all. In the city, we see the layers of time through the generations of building, and their visibility, their presence together, is one of the things that gives the city its meaning.

For if historic preservation is to achieve its greatest potential, it really needs to be seen not as a vehicle to bring us back to another time, but as one that enriches the experience of our own time. Perhaps the most important thing to say about preservation when it is really working as it should is that it uses the past not to make us nostalgic, but to make us feel that we live in a better present, a present that has a broad reach and a great, sweeping arc, and that is not narrowly defined, but broadly defined by its connections to other eras, and its ability to embrace them in a larger, cumulative whole. Successful preservation makes time a continuum, not a series of disjointed, disconnected eras. Preservation whose only reason for being is to look back wistfully has a nasty way of playing the present off against the past, at least implicitly. However much you may believe that the past was truly better – and I do not believe that it was, even though it often produced better architecture – I don’t think that looking backward is a useful premise on which to live your life.

Another way to say all of this, of course, is to say that we value buildings as living presences and not as museums. Of course the great buildings of the past are artifacts – but their role as artifacts is only a small fraction of their meaning, and in some ways it may actually be the least interesting part of this meaning that old buildings have. Once it was all there was to preservation – looking back because, well, we found the past comforting, and old buildings helped to bring us there. I do not like the notion of using preservation to escape the present, as I said, but it is important to remember how much that may have motivated preservationists once.

Another thing that motivated them – and often may still motivate them in many circumstances – isn’t love for the old so much as fear of the new. That is the deep, hidden secret of preservation, its dark underside we might say, the extent to which people have often fought to save old buildings not so much because they loved them as because they hated what was proposed to replace them. Now, often enough one would have to agree with this reasoning, given how many awful strip malls and shopping centers and banal office towers and apartment blocks went up in the last half century in this country on sites where wonderful old buildings had been. Once again, Pennsylvania Station is the supreme example: we not only lost this great building, we got in exchange a horrendous box of an office tower, and a stupid drum of an arena, no great trade at all.

How different that was from the way things were, say, a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago. There was a sense, certainly in the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth, that if something valued were lost from the cityscape, something equally valued, perhaps even better, would replace it. If you will allow me to come back to New York one more time, for example, at Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue there was once a magnificent hotel, designed by Henry Hardenbergh, architect of the Plaza Hotel. It was the original Waldorf-Astoria, and it was torn down – but for the Empire State Building. At 62nd Street and Central Park West, the Century Theater, a distinguished Beaux-Arts building by Carrere and Hastings, architects of the New York Public Library, stood through the nineteen-twenties, and then was torn down – but it was replaced by the Century Apartments, now one of the city's art deco treasures. On upper Fifth Avenue, the Lenox Library was torn down, but what came in its stead was Henry Clay Frick's mansion, now the Frick Collection. The Vanderbilt mansion was demolished to make way for Bergdorf-Goodman department store. And blocks of undistinguished brownstones and commercial buildings went down to make room for Rockefeller Center. I think you get the point – that change did not necessarily mean decline, and that loss of familiar older buildings often brought with it the tradeoff of much better new ones.

And that is exactly what we lost in the last fifty years or so, as postwar modern architecture wreaked apart our cities and so often forced us to exchange beloved older buildings for disliked, intrusive and enormous new ones. No wonder people lost faith in the ability of architecture to improve cities, and no wonder the preservation movement grew up – we lost our belief that things were getting better, which meant we had to hang on to what we had, if only because hanging onto it became another way to stop contemporary development.

I think we have moved beyond that view now, or at least I hope we have. Architecture is certainly more sophisticated, and I would like to hope that we as a culture are less fearful of what will come. We have learned to do more than huge, anti-urban, blank concrete walls and banal glass boxes. I would like to hope that when we preserve now, we do it for a more positive reason than merely to prevent a feared new development – that we do it because of the genuine value in what we are seeking to preserve, and because we are committed to having old and new work together, not in opposition to one another.

That, I suppose, is as good a segue as any to the second point I want to make about the redefinition of preservation. Beyond the issue of the urgency of saving urban fabric and community fabric, I think the battles of preservation, increasingly, are going to be fought on the grounds of modern landmarks – those buildings that were constructed in some cases in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, but more often in

the very years I have just been talking about, the years after World War II, when architecture was not always, as we have been saying, such a positive force. Could it possibly be that a skyscraper put up in the nineteen-sixties on the site of a block of brownstones be itself worth saving? Not necessarily, and I don't mean to say the answer to my question is a simple "yes." But it isn't a simple "no" either. There is a fair amount to say on this subject, and we will have to face it in the coming years.

Modernism is now history. That's the real point. The great early houses of Le Corbusier are seventy-five-plus years old; the United Nations in New York is over fifty-five years old. The Seagram Building will be fifty next year, and Lever House in New York will be fifty-five this year. When Pennsylvania Station was demolished in 1963, it had stood for only fifty-two years – it was younger than either the United Nations or Lever House, two of New York's iconic modern buildings, are today. That's pretty chilling, frankly. We could go on and on with this game. Eero Saarinen's famous TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport is now forty-five. That's a year older than the Empire State Building was when New York established its Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965.

I say this to offer a bit of historical perspective – modernism is history, and has to be appreciated as such. We certainly see this in the recent additions to the National Trust's roster of historic sites. In 1986 the Trust acquired by bequest Philip Johnson's celebrated Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, built in 1949, which as you may know is not only one iconic building, but an extraordinary compound of more than a dozen buildings and structures that represent all of Philip Johnson's various and changing architectural interests over the years, beginning with the International Style and moving on to decorative classicism, and various kinds of sculptural modernism. It is a kind of autobiography in architecture, and one of the greatest and most stimulating autobiographies written in modern times. Since Johnson retained a life interest in the estate, he continued to live there until his death, which came two years ago, when he was approaching his 99th birthday. So it is only now that the house is being readied for public visitation: it will open this June.

The National Trust also owns what we might call the other great International Style house, a precursor of Johnson's Glass House although it was actually finished a couple of years later: Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, in Plano, Illinois, outside of Chicago. In some ways this is actually an even more beautiful, sublime structure than the Glass House, though it is a single building, not a compound, and not something an architect built for his own use.

The point I make by mentioning these isn't about the houses themselves, though I should say that they are both remarkable and absolutely worth visiting, but about the commitment they represent to

preservation of the modern. The National Trust was given the Glass House, but the Farnsworth House had to be bought, and it was a daring and bold commitment that made it happen. It was put up for auction at Sotheby's by its previous owner, and several potential bidders, including the one who was most serious, wanted to dismantle it and move it to another piece of private property. The Trust stayed in the bidding and spent quite a few million dollars to acquire the house, saving it and now re-opening it as a public museum.

That is what I mean when I talk about preservation again being daring and radical. It took vision to know that this building is as important as any 18th-century colonial house or 19th-century Victorian house, and a willingness to bet the farm, so to speak, on the premise that it could be a viable National Trust site, and then to pay a great deal of money to acquire it. I suspect that preservationists in the future will look at the acquisition of the Farnsworth House as similar to the rescue of Grand Central Terminal in New York, as an absolutely key moment in the evolution of preservation. In the case of Grand Central it was the Supreme Court validating preservation law and turning back the challenges that tried to prove that preservation amounted to an unfair taking of property; in the case of Farnsworth, it was the willingness to commit precious and limited resources to the important goal of twentieth-century modernist preservation, even when the legacy of modern architecture still remains questionable.

Of course as I was saying a moment ago, the real challenge isn't going to be in saving great modernist landmarks like Farnsworth, though finding the money to purchase and restore them is indeed going to be a challenge. But the deeper and more troubling challenge is our altogether legitimate discomfort with a lot of what was built in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. The reality is that modernism did not create a decent vernacular – that was, in fact, its problem. It could more easily create great individual works than an urban fabric, so there was no modern equivalent of the brownstone, or the exquisite Colonial houses of our landscape, or of any other style whose average buildings everyone could jointly admire and feel comfortable about preserving. And here in New York I am still not entirely sure what to do about this, since the glass office towers of so many downtowns, including here in Salt Lake City, or the high-rise apartment slabs, not great buildings, however important they are to the historical context of the city. When we talk about urban fabric, as I've been doing, what are we to do when that urban fabric is actually rather banal?

The passage of time is critical to architecture, but it should not be allowed to mellow our sensibilities so much that we lose all critical faculties. How to balance the natural human tendency to be kind to that which has the patina of time, with the essential ability to make judgments between good and bad, is a challenge we will have to face as the preservation movement goes forward into the next generation.

We are not the first to face it, however. To one generation the excesses of Victorian architecture that we now so treasure were the height of vulgarity. To another generation, the zestful lines of Art Deco and Art Moderne were mere commercial expedience, not real architecture. Now we value both, and struggle to preserve them. I'm certainly not trying to say that the architecture of the nineteen-sixties is the same as these periods and will benefit from the same kind of delayed appreciation – but I think it is too soon to say that it is certain to be different, either.

As I said earlier, once, when we allowed good buildings to go, it was because we felt there was a better than even chance of getting equal or better new ones. We ceased to feel that the new would be the equal to the old for much of the nineteen-fifties, sixties, seventies, and maybe even the eighties – understandably, as I have said, since the architects of that period gave us plenty of reasons to indulge in the deep dark underside of preservation, how often we preserve not to protect what we love, but to save us from what we fear. But if we lose sight of the new, and of the value it brings, we have lost the very point of historic preservation. We do not preserve to bring ourselves back into the past – we preserve to make use of the past to build a better present. Anything else would be creating a false city. And cities, whatever else they are have always been places of the real. We live in the city, after all, not because we crave the easy comforts of the false, but because we value the greater challenge of the authentic.

Making time visible means making the present visible as well as a series of layers of past times. And it means using the values of the past to inspire the present, and to encourage us to find new ways of expression that speak comfortably to the old. It is to create a sense of resonance in the city, a sense that things have been there for a long time and will be there for some time to come, but at the same time to always assure that you are in a place that is alive, not dead. If we are truly successful as preservationists, we will know it not only by what we have saved, but by what new architecture we have inspired. Much of the job of saving the greatest landmarks of previous generations is done – not all of it by any means, but a lot of it. The challenge now is to take care of what we have saved, and to protect it and nurture it – and also, to assure that we never forget the need to create the landmarks of tomorrow.