Issues of historic preservation generally arise in very specific local contexts. After World War II in Europe, many cities had to decide whether they would restore buildings as they had existed before devastation by bombing or whether they would rebuild in new forms. Numerous issues arose if the path of restoration was chosen—e.g., what period should be restored? How much should a city look to its past; how much to the future?

Urban renewal projects triggered similar questions in some American cities. I was thinking partly as an historian, partly as a planning director, when I presented a paper on historic preservation to the Second Annual Conference on Public History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1980. As director of the Detroit Planning Department, I had been obliged to play a key role in the project to raze 450 acres of what Detroiters called Poletown for a new General Motors automobile assembly plant. When the editor of Historic Preservation *(journal of the U. S. National Trust for Historic Preservation) asked me to write an article applying my Pittsburgh paper about historic preservation to Detroit's "Cadillac Mall" situation, he meant Poletown where the new General Motors plant was scheduled to build Cadillac cars. I thought he meant a shopping mall project in a downtown area near Cadillac Square about which there had been such a bitter preservationist battle that the mall was never built, the disputed old building stood empty, unable to find tenants, and the whole central part of downtown was blighted for two decades. The excerpts below are taken from that article published in* Historic Preservation, *33* (*1*) (*January/February, 1981*).

CHAPTER 11

An Example of an Historic Preservation Issue: Detroit Must Move Forward

Because of the recent battle over tearing down Hudson's Department Store and the even more recent proposals to clear space for a new General Motors plant, Detroit may have gained some notoriety among historic preservationists. However, there is a legitimate point of view that preservationists may have been overlooking.

The key to a city's perspective on history is summed up in the title of Kevin Lynch's important book, *What Time Is This Place?* A community may be primarily past-oriented, present-oriented, or future-oriented. Where their temporal focus lies, or what the balance is between past, present and future depends on the larger culture in which they are imbedded, and on their place in that larger culture.

A community whose heyday has passed may glory in the past. People who "have never had it so good" relish the present. But, a group attempting to better its condition needs to focus on the future.

The artifacts of a city, its landmarks and especially its buildings, express and punctuate that city's temporal orientation. Charleston, S.C., appears to be mostly memory; Houston appears to be mostly present activity or hope.

Detroit is a city that is still bonded to its past, but—for its economic well-being—must "move forward" (in the words of the mayor) toward the future. The city's leaders cannot allow it to dwell too much on memories of past glories or else it will not marshal the needed energy and will power to transform its economy to provide jobs for thousands of unemployed people and the wherewithal for continuing civic life. [In 1980–1981 when Detroit was in a deep recession, an estimated 75 percent of the city's black teenagers were unemployed.] It cannot dwell excessively on the memories of its former white community or else it will not give living expression to the culture and feelings of its present population, which is over 50 percent black.

Any historian who does not grasp the essential dynamism and flesh and blood of history is no historian at all, but merely an antiquarian. Buildings in a living city cannot be treated as archives. They are the stage and scene and the very costume of that city's daily life, its human activities and struggles, and its self-expression. To be sure, there are sites and artifacts that should be preserved as part of mankind's cultural heritage, and preservationists do us all a public

service when they battle to preserve these. But the historic preservationists, expressing the mood and emotional phase of only a portion of American society, should be reticent about pressing their values upon a community beyond a certain point.

The poignant paradox of Detroit's situation is that the heyday of the automobile industry and of its power elite was a time when jobs were plentiful and well-paying and suited to unskilled workers. The possible future bases of employment are not so promising for unskilled workers. With automated factories in the offing, the blue-collar workers' numbers will inevitably dwindle. New technology is a necessary catalyst for the city's industrial survival in an increasingly competitive world economic context. But to require strange new skills requires new habits and new cultural orientations, which is painful and difficult. Once many of Detroit's workers (or their parents or grandparents) farmed for a living in faraway places. Acculturation to the city and factory life was enough of a shock. The cybernetics future does not lure the heart, even though the mind may recognize its imminence. Its powers and glories would seem to be the property of technocrats. Black people in large numbers, at the present time, do not view themselves as technocrats. Yet, if they are to ride the wave of the future, it is essential that they do so.

Detroit, then, is a city caught between the past and the future, in a present that is far from painless. To fulfill the city's needs and to express its hopes, how then should the city's buildings and other forms be configured? What time should be this place?

Because the city began on the riverfront, a large number of its historic sites are in or near the central business district. The central business district must perform a triple function for the larger community. It is a symbolic focus, an entertainment and communication center and the financial center for the whole state. [It should be added, 20 years later, that it was rapidly losing those roles to the suburbs.] It is a very important civic center for the people who live within Detroit's boundaries. It is being developed into a neighborhood in its own right, a place where people will live 24 hours a day.

For the central business district, the question, then, is how historic buildings relate to those three necessary functions as well as how they serve the iconography of the community's larger cultural perspectives. Even though some buildings stand empty, resources are scarce enough so that each building must truly serve a major, community-defined, functional or cultural purpose.

Some preservationists fought hard to retain the Hudson's department store building in Detroit primarily on the grounds of its sentimental value—the memories it evoked of community life over a large part of the 20th century. Some of the city's black population said that the people who remembered the building most fondly were suburban whites with no commitment to the city's

present needs or population. The final decision was that the building should come down to make way for a new Cadillac Mall.

The "mall" signified making the city's retail core competitive with suburban shopping centers, while historic buildings were retained at the edge of the mall to co-opt some of the city's commercial past. To be like suburbia, in the eyes of some of the city's residents, was to be successful and socially acceptable. The name "Cadillac" evoked both the city's French beginnings and its association with the automobile industry. The retail center would aid the downtown in becoming a neighborhood. The project would act as a bridge between past and present. Multiple connotations, as well as practical needs, would be served, except that it did not speak directly to the iconography of the larger economic future. The General Motors plant project attempts to bridge the economic present and the future [i.e., it kept an important auto company presence in the city, albeit one that employed more robots and fewer workers, while the city administration did what it could to marshal other projects].

The historic preservation movement, at the moment, stresses the cost of tearing down old buildings (a high cost for large buildings, which is one reason why old industrial cities have difficulty clearing away obsolete factories to make room for modernization). Properly restored historic buildings can also add greatly to a city's attractiveness, which improves tourist trade and raises property values and the city's tax income. But there are times when historic preservation comes close to being the straw that breaks the camel's back. Detroit is a case in point. The fight over Hudson's cost the city directly a minimum of $70,000. The indirect costs of the delays may run into several millions in added costs of new construction due to inflation, at a time when the city is having to lay off hundreds of workers. [Ultimately, the project died because the Voelker recession set in during the long period of delay caused by preservationists, but then—later—Hudson's had to be torn down anyway.] There is, moreover, the fundamental problem I have already alluded to—the necessity of not diverting the city from its focus upon new directions for the future.

[This is not to say that the future of the city should be turned over to unguided developers. Both developers and preservationists had taken far too piecemeal an approach to cities. They needed to be aware of the city's whole fabric, the whole texture of its larger meaning and purpose.]