Respecting the Layers of Urban History

NATHANIEL POPKIN

One day about seven years ago, when my daughter, Lena, was nine, we were walking toward our house on Bainbridge Street in Philadelphia. Pre-boom, change was coming to the neighborhood in fits and starts. Workers were transforming the worn-out antiques store next to our house into condos. But at the corner where our house sits, only an old furniture store, lovingly reimagined as a crêperie, had new life.

We stopped in front of the Norge appliance showroom, which had been boarded up as long as I could remember. Now the owner was finally ready to sell. Workers were cleaning the place out. They'd removed the store's iconic three-foot-tall, yellow metal letters—N-O-R-G-E—and had stacked them inside the doorway. The letters were to be scrapped, the workers told us, and we started to walk away. Sensing my disappointment, Lena suggested I ask if we could take them. Ten minutes later, they were sitting in our living room, once a carpet store and then a grocery store and a café. We put the O in the storefront window to show our support for Senator Obama's campaign for president.

Our corner is on the border of two neighborhoods, Queen Village and Bella Vista—names invented by Realtors in the 1970s. The only views in flat Bella Vista are from third- and fourth-floor decks, but the name acknowledges the long history of Italian immigration,

The former Norge appliance store, now a pub, reused the premises—and even the sign letters—of an earlier men's clothing store. Such modest commercial buildings represent a long tradition of small-scale entrepreneurship. Ignoring such buildings disregards a rich vein of community history.

PHOTO BY PETER WOODALL

which began here in the mid-19th century (as I write, I can glimpse the steeple of the first Italian Catholic church in America, St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi). The "queen" in Queen Village is Christina of Sweden, who commissioned a colony here in the 1630s, the short-lived New Sweden. This part of the city, indeed, has been shaped and reshaped by waves of migrants and immigrants since then: British, Scottish, and Welsh sailors; the largest free black community in early America; Irish; Italians; Poles; and Jews. But preservationists have had little to say about and almost nothing to do with maintaining the architectural presence of these culturally and economically vital groups that have so thoroughly shaped our nation. Most buildings on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places aren't schools or churches or civic buildings or mills or workshops, but houses—private displays of ambition. The lack of attention to these threads of urban life robs us of a true understanding of the urban fabric's intrinsic richness while exposing the preservation movement's deeply entrenched bias toward buildings and places valued by the WASP elite.

For much of the 19th century, Irish immigrants lived cheek-by-jowl on claustrophobic alleys with even poorer African Americans, neighbors and nemeses in the fight for jobs at the port. The great defender of the Irish against both blacks and Protestants was William McMullen, who ran a tavern, a hose company (a private firefighting fraternity), and a Democratic political club. Aside from the alleys themselves and one or two corner taprooms that suggest the powerful intimacy of McMullen's tavern, his world is gone (there had been, in McMullen's time, 450 liquor licenses in the neighborhood). The hose company was purchased by an Italian immigrant group and restyled as Columbus Hall; recently a real estate investor turned the building into an apartment house, retaining C-O-L-U-M-B-U-S--H-A-L-L in stone on the cornice. McMullen is infamous for ordering the assassination of leading black teacher and powerful national activist Octavius V. Catto during an Irish election-day assault on black voters. The Italianate-style Institute for Colored Youth, where Catto taught, is one of only three Bella Vista buildings on the National Register. The neighborhood's other

key civic and commercial spaces including St. Mary Magdalen, Columbus Hall, and even the century-old Italian Market are missing from the list.

Urban neighborhoods such as Bella Vista evolve mostly by accretion. Like sediment, the layers collect over centuries. The built form—the scale and size of buildings, the street patterns—remains. These are the good bones of an old place. The joy in them is in the discovery of the sedimentary layers of all those people who have come before. Preservation ought to have a role in the process.

HOW PRESERVATION TOOLS FALL SHORT

A problem is that the tools of preservation are both underutilized and limited in this context—a crippling combination that has left whole swaths of urban America out of the preservation conversation. On another Bella Vista block, a developer of upscale rowhouses recently purchased a century-old carpet warehouse and showroom to tear down and replace with three new houses. The warehouse wasn't exceptional, but as a sturdy and handsome commercial building it asserted the neighborhood's depth of history and character. The building formed part of a layer of Jewish culture and mercantile identity that developed here over 70 years, from the 1880s to the 1950s. Yet no one posited preservation as a practical means of opposition to the rowhouse plan. Rather, the developer used it to cudgel the neighbors: if you don't allow me to build luxury houses, I'll convert the warehouse into apartments for transients.

Small-scale investors and developers—the vast majority of those renovating old buildings—are notoriously averse to wide thinking or bureaucratic tools. Efficiency and simplicity are paramount—preservation as we now conceive it eschews both. Had Columbus Hall, an elegant civic building, been listed on the National Register, it's unlikely the developer of that property would have pursued historic preservation tax credits. It wouldn't have been worth the trouble.

About two years ago, another neighborhood investor took possession of B'Nai Reuben, Philadelphia's first Hasidic synagogue, one door down from the Norge appliance showroom. The 1904 baroque revival building (the congregation had been founded in

This 1904 former Jewish synagogue found a compatible use for a while as an antiques mart. When a new owner, converting it to apartments, obliterated the finely crafted interior murals and exterior carvings associated with the building's original use, no protections were in place.

PHOTO BY BRADLEY MAULE

the 1880s), designed by Charles W. Bolton and John J. Dull, with two copper onion domes (the only pair in the neighborhood to survive), is one of the most delightful buildings in this part of the city. For years, after the synagogue closed in 1956, it housed an antiques mart, Antiquarian's Delight. Wooden signs covered over the Hebrew writing on the building, but several Stars of David, in carved stone, adorned the facade. When the investor, owner of a beer distributor and popular neighborhood brunch spot, purchased the building in 2012, he indicated that his plan was to convert the interior, including the second-floor sanctuary with its vaulted ceiling, into apartments. This would mean the loss of that special interior space, unused for so long, and historic murals of Hebrew months and mazalot (zodiac signs). But the investor said he planned to restore the exterior. Then, last June, a disturbing surprise: workers chiseling off the Stars of David and the Hebrew writing over the doorway that read, "This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter into it." Concrete was troweled into the blank spaces, the Stars of David replaced by generic forms that resemble the Greek cross (the investor is Greek). In a single day, a layer of the neighborhood's history, evident in quiet iconography of this single landmark building, had been erased.

When workers chiseled off the iconography that adorned the facade of the former Jewish synagogue a layer of the neighborhood's history was erased.

PHOTO BY ROB KOPF

The news story that my publication, the *Hidden City Daily*, produced on the removal of Jewish iconography from the building provoked a reaction from City Councilman Jim Kenney, the likely next mayor of Philadelphia, who wondered why the synagogue wasn't listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places (it's not listed on the National Register, either).

Because the local register has regulatory (as opposed to financial) power, historic status would have effectively stopped the destruction of the Jewish symbols and Hebrew writing. While the National Register wasn't needed to preserve Columbus Hall, the Philadelphia Register would have forced the investor to put his plans for the synagogue before a public agency, fomenting discourse. In this case, there was a role for a strong preservation tool, but the underfunded Philadelphia Historical Commission didn't have the resources to commission a nomination. With development pressure increasing almost everywhere, citywide preservation advocates were also overstretched.

The year before he purchased the synagogue, the same investor picked up the old Norge showroom. He turned it into a gastro pub. Up the block, we hung two of the old N-O-R-G-E letters in our family room to spell out O-R, a kind of existential provocation in a room full of books. The letters of the Norge sign, we learned later, had come from the building's previous occupant, Sam Gerson, whose men's clothing store was one of dozens of Jewish stores in this part of Philadelphia. In G-E-R-S-O-N, only the S had to be discarded to form N-O-R-G-E.

ENGAGING PEOPLE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The circumstances of this one corner where I live carry us deeply into preservation's gray area, where the questions often fail to clarify. Is it more important that B'Nai Reuben and the Norge building survive or that they function as culture signifiers? Do we

need buildings to express history and, if so, can we imagine that owners of real estate are capable guardians of public memory? Whose memory? Who decides, and what kinds of tools are available? Must the buildings be architecturally distinctive or historically important to be considered as targets for preservation, as traditional preservation tools dictate? In poor neighborhoods, where the real estate market has negative value, do preservation tools help or hinder investment? And if traditional preservation tools are not available, or the building doesn't fit the requirements of the historic register, how do we preserve the suggestive layers of the city? Must we continue to write off so much urban history?

Unless you believe that preservation need only be concerned with buildings of landmark status as determined by experts, the questions only intensify the gray. And in no sense, as you can see, do I imagine adaptive use as fundamentally different from preservation. The answers to some of these questions, then, require us to push beyond regulatory and financial tools to real engagement with people in neighborhoods.

In Philadelphia, where intense development pressure threatens an entire layer of neighborhood architectural forms—churches, schools, libraries, community centers, fire stations, factories, movie theaters and workshops, landmarks of migrant and immigrant life—staff and members of our nonprofit organization Hidden City Philadelphia, in conjunction with the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia and the journalism site Plan Philly, have been using the internet and public tours to expose the economic and cultural significance of these sites. The Hidden City Festival, presented twice now, has invited artists to reimagine 20 vulnerable buildings and places. The National Trust has engaged too, particularly on landmarks of African American cultural significance including Joe Frazier's Gym.

The broad public push has produced preliminary results, opening the Philadelphia Register nominating process to nonprofessionals. Activists have saved some buildings, and artists and entrepreneurs have given others new life. Though politics has weakened the protections granted by the Philadelphia Register in some notable cases, more people are involved in the quotidian work of saving

buildings—from triage repair work on a neighborhood church's roof to reimagining an Art Deco school as a center for art and innovation—than there have been in two decades. A next step will be to give residents the technological tools to assess buildings of significance in their neighborhoods.

LIVING WITHIN LAYERS OF HISTORY

On most days, I leave my house, built by the immigrant Gerace family in the 1920s to be their grocery store, walk through the slender remains of William McMullen's turf to take a bus (along an old streetcar line) to an office on the third floor of the old Wolf Envelope Company's factory. In a city whose built form erupted in the century between 1850 and 1950, all of us inhabit the ruins of someone else's city; all of us carry it forward.

The point of preservation in the urban context, then, may not be to set architectural masterpieces in perpetual amber, but to deepen the experience of the city itself and thus, in turn, the active, palpable feeling of being human, connecting to others across time and space. At B'Nai Reuben, on my corner, the sloppy investor overlooked the two cornerstones of the synagogue, put into place on May 22, 1904, inscribed in Hebrew and English. Inside them are the names of the people who founded the congregation in 1883, their families, and newspaper clippings about the synagogue, a place of refuge for Russian rabbis in the years before their world would be shattered by pogroms. The Jewish quarter was founded in 1881, according to historian Harry Boonin, and this would be its first new synagogue building. The 23-year lapse tells us something about the immigrant struggle. On dedication day, so many thousands crowded the street to get into the 1,600-seat sanctuary that the synagogue's elders had to yell down to the crowd to keep order. "They might as well have attempted to whistle down the wind," said a writer for the *North American* newspaper.

Whistling down the wind, it seems to me, is a decisive metaphor for the process of preserving the layers of the city. Just three blocks from B'Nai Reuben is the Institute for Colored Youth, whose Italianate architectural style equally calls to my mind the villas that line the streets of Rome's outlying districts and the monumental

Although now a condo building, the former Institute for Colored Youth still stands as a reminder of that respected and pioneering school and of its accomplished faculty, notably the national activist Octavius Catto, whose racially motivated murder shocked the city.

PHOTO COURTESY CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

ambition of Philadelphia's post–Civil War black elite, who sought justice through education and organizing. The tools of preservation have maintained this palpable layer of urban history, but elsewhere in the city, similar buildings are threatened.

Octavius Catto, the respected black leader who spoke Latin and Ancient Greek, inhabited these blocks—my blocks—with as much guile as anyone before or since. Often I walk by and someone, a resident of one of the condos inside perhaps, will be walking out, taking the same path Catto did after dismissing his students the afternoon of October 10, 1871, about to become a martyr to the cause of justice. He was whistling, probably, down the unsettling wind of terror and violence; seeing that building, I'm sure I can still hear him. **FJ**

NATHANIEL POPKIN is editorial director of Hidden City Philadelphia and the co-editor of the *Hidden City Daily*. He is the senior script writer and editor of the documentary film series "*Philadelphia: the Great Experiment*."