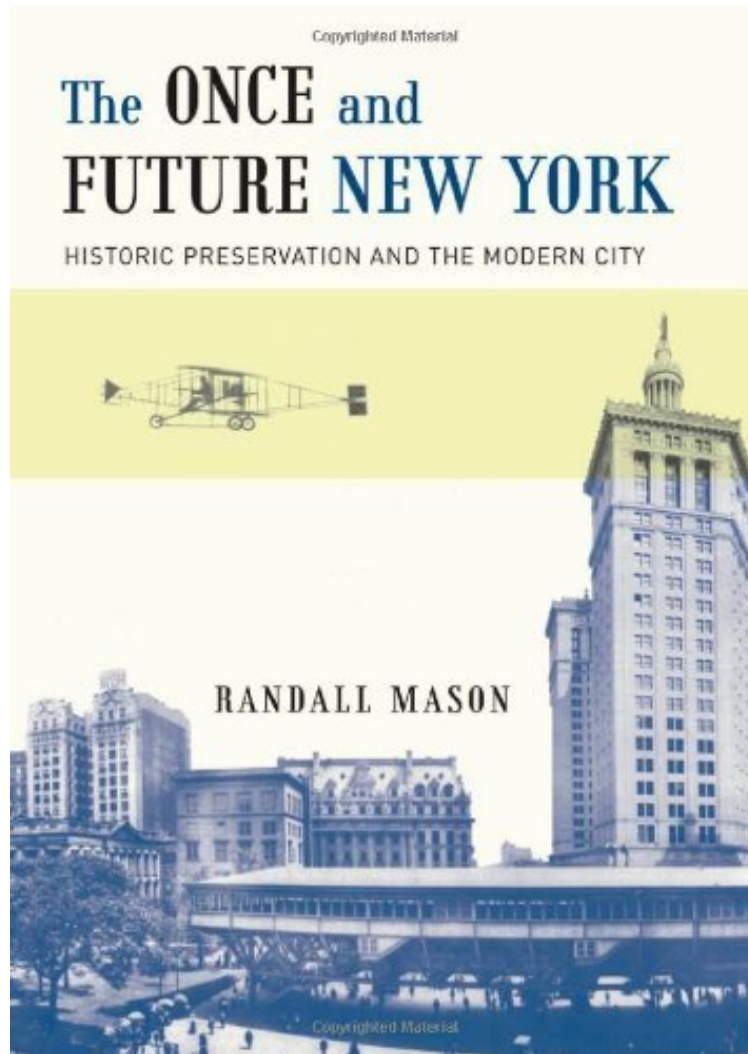


[Free] The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City

The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City

Randall Mason

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Randall Mason : The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. "The End of Preservation?" By Englewood Review of Books [This Review originally appeared in The Englewood Review of Books] Belonging to a church community that has been rooted in one place in Indianapolis for over one hundred years, it is almost daily evident what William Faulkner had in mind when writing, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Stories are told and retold through the lens of our particular place and people, tied in many ways to a larger context of geography. Through these acts of remembering,

attached to a specific place, we participate in developing - albeit not as intentionally - as what Randall Mason calls a "memory infrastructure." Mason's new book *The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City* explores the roots of modern historic preservation back to the decades around 1900, suggesting that the creation of this memory infrastructure is the impetus for preservation: Memory sites were not an end in themselves. They were envisioned as means to an end - a way to reform urban society and shape civic identity by exposing citizens to a memory-rich environment. Reformers and civic leaders sought stability to counter the gathering sense of cultural dislocation and the loss of memory in this period, and historical memory lent this appearance of stability to culture (239). Focusing on the histories of three locations in New York - St. John's Chapel, City Hall Park, and the Bronx River Parkway - Mason establishes preservation as a discipline with a history of its own, and one tied in many ways to supporting the further development of cities: "[Preservationists] lobbied not against development but for a different kind of development: not to halt change, but to modify or design it, to produce a 'Greater New York' at once more beautiful, more efficient, and more clearly rooted in its own past" (xv). The ways in which the "memory infrastructure" is developed in each case study is telling of the complexities with which preservation is practiced. The study of St. John's Chapel typifies the tenuous versions of memory and history that arise in preservation, as well as providing a context within the larger neighborhood and city development. St. John's Chapel was built in 1807, closed in 1909 and demolished in 1918. Along the way the Vestry of Trinity Church, owner of the chapel who ordered the closing, is seen to embody one version of history and development; the congregation of St. John's lives out another memory of the place; and later, preservationists and architects value the location for yet another history. Beginning with the active congregation's "traditional collective memory, characterized by continuities through time and space, a local and spatially bounded orientation, and strong religious values," after the Chapel was closed for many years, preservationists attached a "modern historical memory...abstracted from the historical experience of the site, metropolitan, and secular in character" (119). This shift in the remembering of St. John's Chapel "transformed [it] from a site of memory to a totem of history. As a historical memory, it was an artifact that managed only to be a weak link in the memory infrastructure" (115). In effect, the construction of "historical memory" may function in ways markedly different than original uses; as the redevelopment of our own neighborhood is underway, questions about how "memory infrastructure" is formed from within the community could be very helpful to sustain cohesion throughout time. City Hall Park is developed and preserved in some significantly different ways than St. John's; the park dates back nearly to colonial times, and City Hall itself was opened in 1811. In the following century, two buildings were constructed on the site of the park, both opposed to public opinion, and through many more decades, both were demolished, and the park returned to its "natural" state. Similarly, The Bronx River Parkway is developed as a "project integrating several kinds of infrastructure - transportation, public health, recreational, social, economic, administrative...The parkway embodied all the facets of 'improvement' that were the proudest achievements of Progressive reformers" (177). As with St. John's, though, the Parkway leveled several neighborhoods to make way for a roadway, parks, and the grading of the river; Mason considers both forms of remembering throughout these projects - that of the local memory and the civic history, focusing on the latter in the scope of this book, although not without providing many voices from those whose memory did not survive the "civic patriotism" encouraged by preservation. Considering the roots of historic preservation as we know it is helpful for considering neighborhood development in any city, not just these examples from New York. The ways in which communities may be participating within their own "memory infrastructure" could be a useful conversation for preservation of a place alongside development projects. Given the example of St. John's Chapel, I also wonder how congregations function within their setting, and to what degree a telling of alternative narratives, namely the Kingdom of God, can continue to break through "civic memory." Distinguishing between a rooted local memory that is "a process animated by people" and civic memory "constructed...an artifact" (115) may be the place to begin for preserving these narratives. As churches participate within the life of a neighborhood, sustaining local memory as a major part of development could preserve the particularities of any given place, and create stability that is truly rooted in its place. *The Once and Future New York's* telling narratives that link historical preservation, versions of history, and social reform is significant for our own participation as communities.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Historic preservation is a fundamental part of every modern city. By ROROTOKO "The Once and Future New York" is on the ROROTOKO list of cutting-edge intellectual nonfiction. Professor Mason's book interview ran here as cover feature on May 11, 2009.

Rich with archival research, *The Once and Future New York* documents the emergence of historic preservation in New York at the turn of the twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1920, preservationists saved and restored buildings, parks, and monuments throughout the city's five boroughs that represented continuity with the past.

About the Author Randall Mason is associate professor in the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania and coeditor of *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*.