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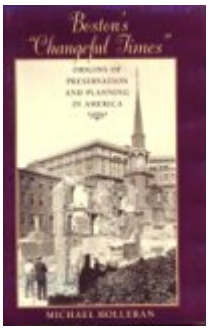

Michael Holleran. *Boston's "Changeful Times": Origins of Preservation & Planning in America.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xii + 337 $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5729-4.

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Construction began in 1897 for Westminster Chambers, a tall, fashionable apartment building located directly off Copley Square in the institutional heart of Boston. Max Bachman, who had just sculpted the artwork for the International Trust Building, designed an ornate terra-cotta cornice with free-standing figures to crown the structure. But, an outcry followed because the developers were snubbing the city's new limitations on building height. Their well-heeled foes retaliated with a high-pitched campaign of angry petitions, legislative acts, and lawsuits. As Michael Holleran aptly explains, "Westminster Chambers took on lasting significance as the first case to bring height restrictions before a state supreme court, and ultimately to the U.S. Supreme Court" (p. 174). By 1898 the city parks commission and mayor had signed off on the completed building, but the commonwealth's highest court concluded otherwise a year later: at 96-feet, the structure was six feet too tall. In upcoming years, the developers, with the support of city hall (which realized it would be forced to pay compensation) and the real estate lobby, sought legislative relief. But in 1903 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the limitations, and that year the roof and its sculpture literally came down. Incidentally, the site would be cursed. The Westminster Hotel was replaced in 1975 by the monstrous, sixty-story John Hancock Insurance Tower, which flagrantly disregarded every height limitation on the books.

The episode of Westminster Chambers is but one of the many fascinating stories that Michael Holleran relays in examining the development of Boston's landscape from 1860 to 1930. With a particular eye on issues of city planning and preservation, he focuses on the often bitter tug between the forces of change and those of permanence. First presented as a Ph.D. thesis in Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1991, ***Boston's "Changeful Times"*** has been long anticipated as a significant study of the dynamics of change in one of America's preeminent cities. Today the author is an assistant professor of planning and design at the University of Colorado's College of Architecture and Planning.

According to Holleran, Boston's history is especially important to study. "Boston was in the

forefront of American reactions against environmental change," he writes. "It was one of the earliest centers of urban preservationism. It was the source of critical case law establishing deed restrictions as a tool for private planning. It made the first public efforts at preserving landscapes threatened by metropolitan growth. Its regulation of building heights, the first such restriction in the country, served as a national precedent for zoning. Responses to change were earlier, stronger, and more successful in Boston than elsewhere" (pp. 9-10).

The reasons were apparent as old-time Boston changed forever in the years after the Civil War. Though the city had been growing piecemeal, a fire in 1872 burned sixty-five acres of its downtown and prompted a construction boom. Concurrently, the emigration of Anglo-Saxon Yankees and immigration of diverse Europeans was traumatically altering its culture and society. With the simultaneous creation of independent commuter suburbs such as Brookline, the city's elite were gradually forced to reevaluate their long-established willingness to accept change. According to Holleran, "a cultural gesalt-shift" was in the making (p. 43). The demolition of familiar buildings, together with the frenetic entry of architectural eclecticism, caused a "cognitive disorientation" prompting more and more people to accept the notion of preservation (p. 49). At the same time, the calls for city planning were intensifying. The construction of railroad stations, department stores, and other large buildings, whose enormous costs needed to be amortized over longer periods, and the development of exclusive enclaves, like the Back Bay, required better mechanisms to ensure stability. Private interests acted first through deed restrictions, so that by the early 1900s, such covenants were used by developers to market newly constructed neighborhoods.

But what about the preservation of existing buildings and monuments, the ones that Jane Holtz Kay pictured so well in ***Lost Boston*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980)? Holleran answers that "Bostonians' thoughts throughout most of the nineteenth century were innocently simple and strangely contradictory" about preservation (p. 85). The demolition of the John Hancock house on Beacon Hill in 1863 was a turning point, however. The campaign to save the Old South Church was the first fruit of those changing attitudes and, according to the author, "the greatest American preservation effort of the nineteenth century, the one that brought preservation to the cities" (p. 95). Known for its antiquity and prominence in the Revolution, the church was most appreciated for its visual appeal. In the midst of the nation's Centennial, and just as the steeple was being disassembled, preservationists won a reprieve and saved the building.

That visual quest for permanence also prompted the conservation of Boston's greenery. As in the establishment of an "emerald necklace" of parks in 1875 and the hiring of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted three years later, Holleran notes, "Massachusetts incubated many of the ideas that produced the American parks movement" (pp. 110-13). Yet, the landscape was redefined to favor natural appearances and the sense of age. As in the case of the Common, whose formerly grubby pasture was remade by Olmsted, other uses were excluded, such as commercial exhibits or urban thoroughfares. So too was an ancient burial ground appreciated as "'an open breathing space in a crowded part of the city'" (p. 127). That appreciation prompted Charles Eliot, son of Harvard's president, to not only organize in 1892 the Trustees of Public Reservations, which conserved landscapes as found, but persuade the legislature in 1893 to establish a Metropolitan Parks Commission, which made open space available for public use. Before his untimely death, Eliot helped build the parks system to some 9,000 acres (pp. 132-34).

According to Holleran, this "ahistorical brand of preservation" was also applied to buildings like

Charles Bulfinch's State House, whose importance was initially defined by its visual appeal (p. 135). The quest for permanence, ironically, led some to recommend building a larger but more accommodating imitation. In the end, the campaign united those who favored both history and sentiment, even to the point of making architectural aesthetics a significant weight. One by-product of the attempt to protect the capitol's dome from encroaching development was the first law (1891) in the United States limiting a new building's height. Says Holleran, "Boston enacted further restrictions that became precedents for modern American land-use and urban-design regulation through zoning" (p. 165). At first, height limitations were part of the city's police powers, but through an idiosyncratic process the state legislature passed provisions using eminent domain, thus leading to the imbroglio of compensating the developers of Westminster Chambers.

The heretofore ad hoc preservation movement was institutionalized with the founding in 1910 of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities which, for the record, was the subject of this reviewer's own ***Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). As Holleran rightly notes, SPNEA's founder William Sumner Appleton, Jr. was an antiquarian whose medievalist longings, Brahmin interests, and upper-class sensibilities helped as much as hindered the urban preservation movement. Although he was opposed to government intervention, unwilling to commit himself in a major way to Boston's own preservation, and generally unable to see buildings within a larger spatial relationship, Appleton nonetheless became New England's paramount preservationist. After spearheading the campaign to save Paul Revere's Boston home and putting the headquarters of his organization on Beacon Hill's back slope, Appleton did little in "the Hub." All the while, SPNEA became the nation's most influential preservation organization.

Thereafter, issues related to zoning became the new battleground. While Boston adopted its conventional zoning in 1924, it only adopted its first historic district laws in 1955, some two decades after New Orleans and Charleston. The reason for such a delay, according to Holleran, was the fact that the preservation movement had been uncoupled from the planning and parks movements by Appleton's art-historical definition of preservation. The author does credit Appleton's "consistency and comprehensiveness," however, in eventually making those historic districts feasible (p. 267). Yet, he concludes that "preservationism grew increasingly irrelevant to most of Boston's urban landscape" as the city became more modern (p. 277). All the while, zoning became more important, and Holleran provides a spirited defense.

Boston's "Changeful Times" is written from the perspective of a planner, but its analysis would have benefited from a more extensive discussion of the era's history. From the start, Holleran limits his focus to exclude so-called intangible changes in Boston's landscape, such as those caused by ethnicity, race, class, and gender (p. 6). Yet, the creation of the Back Bay and the defense of Beacon Hill had as much to do with Boston's affluent trying to escape the immigrants as seeking permanence and stability. The author announces his intention of examining "the culture of city building, the working suppositions of the many people who were involved in making cities" (p. 8), but he sidesteps much of the "real" Boston of that day. Other than the campaign to save Paul Revere's house, for example, Holleran misses the North End. Ironically, its own permanence was jeopardized not by its Italian and Eastern European immigrants who commonly sought family and cultural stability, but by the Yankee planners who at variously times sought to demolish its buildings and disperse its residents. In 1933 plan-

ners won a small victory with the demolition of a city block for the construction of the Paul Revere Mall.

Another neighborhood essentially unmentioned is the old West End. Once a middle-class district, it had become a patchwork of immigrants living in boarding houses and tenements by the late nineteenth century. Holleran rightly criticizes Appleton's "purist preservationism" for "driv[ing] people with broader and more heterogeneous interests elsewhere" (p. 270), but he turns a blind eye toward city planners. Their own prejudice against cultural heterogeneity, voiced openly at the time, would lead to the urban atrocity that Jane Jacobs lamented when almost the entire West End was demolished for so-called urban renewal. Reminiscent of the Vietnam War, planners seemed to be saying that the neighborhood had to be destroyed in order to save it. That's what prompted architectural critic Robert Campbell in *Cityscapes of Boston: An American City Through Time* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) to see SPNEA's architecturally-refined headquarters as cold and aloof in a sterile setting. It's therefore hard to understand Boston's "changeful times" without the North or West Ends.

In other ways, Holleran de-emphasizes the volatility of the era. He aptly shows that the propertied classes were anything but united at the time, but what about the restless multitudes whose every movement affected those with wealth? Surely planners and preservationists had things to say about class problems, as they did during the "Boston-1915" movement, which the author overlooked. While this reviewer has placed the preservation movement in the context of progressivism, Holleran's setting is the City Beautiful Movement. Such a reading led him, for example, to narrow the work of English reformer C.R. Ashbee, who actually wore many hats; he was also a socialist who criticized uncontrolled capitalism. Similarly, Holleran's focus group is almost entirely male, but he does acknowledge that it was Mary Hemenway's money that saved the Old South Church. He mentions further that Beacon Hill was a hotbed of preservationist sentiment, but leaves unstated the fact that its women not only opened their pocketbooks to the cause but often irritated their male counterparts about the work to be done. Readers would have benefited from more description and analysis of the conflict or consensus between the classes and sexes.

Throughout, Holleran frames his analysis by employing a sense of preservation that was developed in the post-urban-renewal generation. As a result, he can approvingly quote Charles Hosmer that "the number of houses lost in New England was remarkably small between 1910 and 1947" (p. 238). Similarly, he can argue that zoning has worked in Boston, despite its major changes, because "almost all of the icons that those Bostonians set out to save remain saved" (p. 273). Yet, Hosmer's accent on stylized and antiquarian architecture is nowadays considered static, while the preservation of icons is but one small element in the preservation movement. Holleran endorses a definition of preservation as "curatorial management" of the built world that James Marston Fitch developed in his *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World* (New York: McGraw Hill,1982). Certainly these approaches have their own logic, but today's social and cultural historians, as well as an increasing number of preservationists, endorse a more holistic approach, whereby the goal of preservation is the conservation of a sustainable, diverse human and material landscape. Had Holleran considered such an approach, he would have asked even more penetrating questions about Boston's "changeful times."

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