BASIC IDEAS AND PRINCIPLES FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF HISTORIC LANDSCAPES

DR. ALBERT FEIN

In the last session I concluded with some thoughts as to some of the problems related to safeguarding historic landscapes. My thesis is that in order to safeguard such landscapes in the United States the functions as perceived by professionals must transcend piety, patriotism, and even local attachment — however eternal each of these is. Yet, these emotions often dominate. In an important conference on the state of preservation cosponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Colonial Williamsburg, leading experts on the history of preservation attested to these motivations as being primary among the thousands of efforts nationally to save certain architectural structures and sites. It was also noted at that time by Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., the leading historian of the preservation movement in the United States, that until 1962 the dominant element has been private — not governmental or public. Mr. Hosmer wrote that "the American preservation movement . . . has been from its very beginning largely the work of private individuals, and it remains so today."

There is no doubt that Hosmer's figures are correct, however, one must also indicate that Hosmer was referring here to sheer numbers — not acreage — and, like most preservation authorities, was referring primarily to architectural structures. I mention this now because it seems to me that another important objective for professionals is to rescue historic landscapes from the subservient position it has occupied vis-a-vis architecture and engineering. This is true notwithstanding the fact that when considered in terms of land area an overwhelming percentage of historic sites are included within some category of landscape. Moreover, I believe that the economic value of historically significant land held by governmental bodies frequently is greater than that of architecture. One need only consider the value in tax dollars to the City of New York of the land of Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1858 — or of any existing Olmsted park system in the United States, be it in the City of Boston (Massachusetts), Louisville (Kentucky), or Rochester (New York). It is also reasonable to assume that even given the fact that during certain seasons attendance at landscape sites declines, the total number of visits made to such places may well far exceed those made to architectural restorations.

I do not mean to imply that I am arguing here for some type of definition which attempts to reduce the significance of other types of restoration. Nor am I even hinting at a further separation than already exists between these interrelated design professions.

Indeed, my position is that separation and competition should be outshone by greater interprofessional cooperation based on the scientific processes and aesthetic perceptions of all of the disciplines involved rather than on labored and contrived definitions of what is architecture and what is landscape; particularly since we all know that in any significant historic project all are involved. Nevertheless, if one is to attempt such integration of what have become increasingly competitive and often restrictive professional practices, it is first necessary to understand what are the realities, and to attempt to understand as well why historic landscapes have been comparatively ignored by professional preservationists.

Part of the answer, I believe, lies in the inherently more radical implications of historic landscape preservation, particularly if such preservation is correctly perceived as being subject to processes which relate not only to piety, patriotism, and local interests, but to scientific planning. Thus, if one were, for example, to attempt to preserve a regional forest, sections of a large river-basin, or one of the parkways which so enhanced American urban life during the last decades of the nineteenth century and during the early twentieth, one is by definition compelled to move into increasingly more complex systems affecting large numbers of persons.

Some evidence for this point of view is in the proceedings of the seminar on preservation and restoration held at Williamsburg, Virginia in 1963. Among the few really different points of view which emerged at that conference perhaps the most discernible was the argument over which scale was most important for preservationists. Dr. William Murtagh, at that time Director of Education of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, felt it necessary to emphasize the historic district. Professor Christopher Tunnard, who was trained as a landscape architect and who made such an important contribution to the Symposium on Preservation and Development of Historic Quarters in Urban Programmes held in this country in 1970, extended the concept of planning historic districts to the city as a whole through the application of principles of urban design.

Just as Professor Tunnard was broadening the scope of Murtagh's scale preservation, Nathaniel A, Owings, a senior partner in the influential architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, was increasing the scale of Tunnard's focus. Owings wrote: "In his paper, Professor Tunnard refers to the city as a matrix for rehabilitation. As I see it, we are really dealing today with a monster called the metropolitan area within which we have the core city." Among possible solutions, Owings pointed to "comprehensive regional planning where all aspects of metropolitan area problems are considered and, joined with this, a unified metropolitan government with the authority to act." It is very interesting that even Mr. Owings, with whose general point of view I agree, does not mention once

the role of landscape preservation in any direct or meaningful way. And one should add, that until recently this omission assuredly remained the rule rather than the exception in my country.

Let me put this in a different perspective. In my first talk at this conference I expressed optimism over the fact that so much environmental legislation has incorporated historic preservation provisions. This is true. The challenge is one of implementation of such a powerful synthesis of the past and the present. Let me offer one example of such a challenge. Several years ago the United States Corps of Army Engineers were confronted with a serious challenge concerning the preservation of Niagara Falls, a most important natural and historic site which occupies part of the demilitarized boundary between the United States and Canada. The central issue was whether to attempt — through engineering — to stabilize the Falls, which was receding owing to natural causes with accumulation of rocks at the bottom of the Falls. In short, the Falls — according to some — seemed to be falling down. To assist them in their deliberations, the Corps constructed an excellent model not only of the Falls but also of the surrounding area, and invited a most distinguished international group of planners and landscape architects to advise them on a future course of action. And it should be noted that the Corps, which has come under sharp public criticism for policies and actions deemed in violation of environmental standards, was very careful to include in its process a full measure of citizen participation through questionnaires. The essential point is that almost to a person each of the invited specialists argued against any form of intervention with natural processes, instead they advised a program of analysis and planning for the entire Niagara River as a complex system.

It is this type of approach, mandated by the logic of the problem, which makes the safeguarding of historic landscapes so "radical" a process, encompassing such a large area and involving so many different systems. It is simply an enormous task and represents in my judgment for my country still an ideal rather than a reality. And yet, the ideal is inherent in each of the laws passed in the last ten years. What all of this means, I believe, is that the movement to safeguard historic landscapes in the United States, if it is to be sustained — that is become part of the future development of the country — requires some large-scale governmental actions accompanied by shifts in the status, role, and training of landscape architects. It means, for example, the passage of national land-use legislation accompanied by the kind of funding which transforms into a complete, ongoing, study, analysis, and planning of the nation's natural resources.

In this regard, then, I would argue that a basic principle in safeguarding historic landscapes in the context of spatial expansion must be the necessity for comprehensive

surveys, analysis, planning, and design. And for this purpose it is necessary to train and assemble those groups of specialists who can best undertake such surveys on at least regional scales. Interdisciplinary training and cooperation is essential to any large-scale project.

Another part of this definition, it seems to me, must be the realization that one does not wish to see the entire landscape declared an historic site. Indeed, it would not be unfair to state that one of the implicit biases of many preservation-minded groups is that they are opposed to industrialization and urbanization — and not without due cause. However, as a long-term strategy for preservation, it seems more logical to accept the need for economic and technological change and, indeed, to provide for both within the context of large-scale planning such as Professors Ian McHarg, Phillip Lewis and Carl Steinetz have demonstrated is possible. That there will be constant tension between the two is obvious, but it is obvious, too, that one without the other cannot exist. Without a sound economic base there will be no funds or capacity to preserve landscapes; without a satisfactory understanding of what needs to be preserved — and how to do it — technology geared to a completely free market and unrestricted land-use will destroy the very sources of wealth which make the earth productive — including that most fragile element now termed "quality of life."

To accomplish such a large undertaking, however, will require an even more "radical" shift of values than has already taken place in my country. For example, it would mean incorporating into law the principle that natural objects possess rights under the law even as do persons or corporations. An attorney Christopher D. Stone has argued in his book, Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects (1974), that natural objects should and can have such standing. Although the Supreme Court of the United States did not accept this principle when it was presented in an important case (Sierra Club v. Morton) several of the nine judges did agree, and in the history of the Supreme Court it is not unusual for a minority opinion to become a majority opinion as public sentiment about a significant issue changes. In this respect, then, it is useful to quote the words of one of the most important and courageous Supreme Court justices ever to occupy that position — William O. Douglas. Justice Douglas also has been the most outspoken environmentalist to have served on the court. He wrote the following as part of a dissenting opinion:

> The ordinary corporation is a "person" for purposes of the adjudicatory processes, whether it represents proprietary, spiritual, aesthetic, or charitable causes.
>
> So it should be as respects valleys, alpine meadows, rivers, lakes, estuaries, ridges, groves of trees, swampland, or even air that feels the destructive pressures of modern

What is being suggested is that while a nation has a right to stress in its preservation policy the work and lives of the "successful" and the "unusual," it also should preserve for the living symbols of its "failures," as well. There are enough mental hospitals, prisons, paupers' cemeteries and sites of riots in every nation to match the best designed estates, parks, and battlefields to keep a generation of landscape architects and assorted specialists busy for a long time.

Indeed, it is not remiss, I think, to point out that in some instances the same site at different times displayed quite opposing social values. Some of our most important neighborhood parks were once sites of cemeteries for paupers — such as Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. Greenwich Village is an affluent community and one which several years ago could not bear to have in its midst a women's prison. The prison was levelled and a garden took its place — the prisoners were were removed to a more rural out-of-the-way area. Is the garden a symbol of a social failure or of modern design?

The question, therefore, of whether to safeguard the actual situation or to attempt to restore an older composition seems to me to hinge in part on the social perspective which one has. Certainly a nation needs to have representative examples of the landscapes of each period in its history — if only for educational purposes. It needs to preserve examples of the work of its most significant public and private institutions; it needs to have examples of regional-type landscapes and of the work of its most signiticant designers just as much as those indigenous designs which are part of organic developments. In selecting such landscapes one needs to establish a set of chronological periods based on such related factors as types of plant material, methods of construction, style to be analyzed with reference to region, kinds of settlements, functions as well as the work of individual designers.

But we must also be conscious that unless one is careful historic designation and preservation without special social efforts can aggravate social problems. For example, in New York City there is a neighborhood called Fort Greene. This community includes Fort Greene Park, the site of a fort which helped to guard New York City's harbor during the early part of the eighteenth-century and which later became, because of its topography, a place where the poet Waot Whitman would come to listen to outdoor speeches for a working-class population. It is also the site of public park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in the 1860s and contains an important monument in which are buried the bones of several thousand American prisoners-of-war who died on a prison ship during the American Revolution.

The community of Fort Greene today is one of the most socially deprived in the

United States. Yet it still has in the blocks immediately around the park some of the handsome houses constructed for affluent persons in the last third of the neneteenth century — homes which have in recent years been bought at inexpensive prices by younger middle-class families. There can be no doubt that such new residents help to stabilize the community; such home-owners participate in community matters and help to guarantee a higher quality of life for all. Yet what about the deprived who live there and require special services and attention. A policy of restoration which ignored their needs would simply — even in a practical way — be doomed to failure. In fact, this is what happened. New York City invested substantial sums of money to rehabilitate Fort Greene Park; the design, I believe, was good but the project failed. The restoration failed for the same reasons that a garden located in a polluted are will die; in this case the surrounding social environment is too ill to permit such an effort to succeed.

When one speaks of a "sick" social environment, one is speaking not only of crime and poverty but of a will to live — a wish to enjoy the environments of health. Today in some of the inner cities of the United States there is an unemployment ratio of close to forty percent among youths of ages 16 to 24. This is the group which is creating much of the fear in our cities. A program of preservation in such areas needs also to be a program in training at least some of these youths to do the many general as well as specialized tasks required in maintaining such sites. In this way lies hope for the future. It is not in my judgment an unreasonable goal, since — notwithstanding all of the national, state, and local programs and laws about which we have spoken — we do not yet have in the United States a truly comprehensive program of historic preservation of landscapes. Nor do we even have a handful of landscape architects who are trained by education and/or experience to undertake such work. In the process of creating such resources, there is surely room and need for many talents and abilities.

Finally, I should like to conclude, if I may, with another important goal regarding historic preservation; and this has to do with the emphasis given to national matters. It is, of course, natural that nations should seek to stress those aspects of the natural landscape which are unique to their regions and history. However, it is just as important to emphasize the similarities and interrlationships shared by nations. No nation has a supply of plant materials which has not borrowed from others and no designer at least from the seventeenth century on has not been influenced by work in other parts of the world. Perhaps the most radical challenge for landscape architects in the decades ahead will be to insist that this interdependence be reflected in the design of new institutions, a more harmonious and equal distribution of the world's resources, and demilitarized boundaries reflecting a spirit of life, goodness, and tranquility which is the most desirable "radical" principle of all.