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Jeffrey A. Kroessler

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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The City as Palimpsest

Jeffrey A. Kroessler
John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Jeffrey A. Kroessler is an associate professor in the LLoyd Sealy Library at John Jay College of Criminal Justice; he has a doctorate in urban history from the CUNY Graduate School. He is the author of *Greater New York Sports Chronology* (2010); *New York, Year by Year: a Chronology of the Great Metropolis* (2002); *Historic Preservation in Queens* (1990); and *Lighting the Way: a Centennial History of the Queens Borough Public Library* (1996), and contributed to the *Encyclopedia of New York City*; *The Encyclopedia of New York State*; and *Robert Moses and the Modern City*. He is involved with several preservation organizations, including the Historic Districts Council, the Municipal Art Society, and the City Club.

Abstract

“Palimpsest preservation” suggest the necessity of keeping the successive layers of urban form alive rather than simply effacing and rebuilding, for that keeps a city’s history alive. No city without a tangible, tactile history, without the capacity for denizens and visitors to reach into the past while experiencing the present, can be truly vital. But this is a contested approach. George Orwell’s *1984* offers a warning in the guise of a party slogan: “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” Preservationists may advocate on historical, architectural, or cultural grounds, but the final decision on designation is political. Preservation is essential for the health of the city, and the nation, for it preserves ideas, experience, and values no less than buildings and places. Maintaining a dialogue between past and present is essential for a citizen’s sense of identity. The article uses examples from New York City, including the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire, the Carnegie Libraries, Tin Pan Alley, and the Greenwich Village townhouse that was destroyed by the Weather Underground.

Keywords

Historic preservation; palimpsest; George Orwell; 1984; urban history; New York; Triangle Fire; Weathermen.

The City as Palimpsest

The late Elliot Willensky, vice-chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission and co-author of the indispensable *AIA Guide to New York City*, once confided that he had the ideal title for a book about New York – The City as Palimpsest. I think he told me so that I would write it. Now, some thirty years after his untimely passing, I am following his lead.

“City as Palimpsest.” Ever since Elliot crafted that phrase I have ruminated over its meaning. During the decades I taught history (which meant also teaching writing, of course), I cautioned students against starting any paper with “According to the dictionary...” But in this instance I headed toward the Oxford English Dictionary myself.¹

The earliest definition of palimpsest dates from the 17th century, a literal description of a physical object: “paper, parchment, or other writing material designed to be reusable after any writing on it has been erased.” By the 19th century, the definition had tightened to refer to “a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing.” During the 1800s, the word also evolved into a metaphor, as in “a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multilayered record.” Here the OED employs a disquieting example from George Orwell’s *1984*: “All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as necessary.” Oscar Wilde expressed the same idea rather more wittily: “The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.”²

The first definition certainly applies to the physical city, in particular the process of building up and tearing down only to build again in the same spot. Cities are made for this. Indeed, that is the very essence of urban vitality and prosperity. It is also a neutral statement, with no judgment implied as to what had been or what came after. The meaning that evolved by the 19th century suggests agency, a willful overwriting of the past to fulfill the immediate needs of the present. Here the OED refers to an example from Thomas Arnold’s *History of Rome* (1838) describing how “The Institutes of Gaius” was first discovered in a rewritten manuscript – palimpsest – of St. Jerome preserved in the Chapter Library in Verona. In the 1904 story “The Adventure of the Prince-Nez,” Sherlock Holmes is seen “with a powerful lens deciphering the remains of the original inscription upon a palimpsest.” In either case, something of value is to be found under more recent scribbling, suggesting the recovery of a lost narrative.

Palimpsest is used also in another context entirely: geology. In that field, the word refers to “a structure characterized by superimposed features produced at two or more distinct periods.” This description of a seemingly static formation might apply to a city as much as a rock formation. In geology, the word can also be used as an adjective, as in “palimpsest drainage” or “palimpsest sediment.”

¹ “Palimpsest,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Third Edition, March 2005 [<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/136319?result=1&rskey=nfOv6a&>].

² Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic*, in Isobel Murray (ed), *Oscar Wilde: the Major Works* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 256.

I am encouraged to introduce a new term – “palimpsest preservation.” Moving beyond the static geological sense, it would suggest the necessity of keeping the successive layers of urban form alive, a more nuanced practice than simply effacing and rebuilding. Palimpsest preservation would rightfully imply a mandate to maintain the layers of history, and with them, the layers of meaning. Urban vitality should mean more than mere economic prosperity, public safety, and a healthy environment, though those aspects are certainly essential to any city. But no city without a tangible, tactile history, without the capacity for denizens and visitors to reach into the past while experiencing the present, can be truly vital. That experience would be closer to sterility.

Architectural historian Anthony Robins, author of books on Grand Central Terminal and the World Trade Center, explains that he sees the city in layers.³ For him, Times Square exists in its present form, and simultaneously in its dangerous and decayed state of the 1970s, its midcentury heyday, and even in the unbuilt skyscrapers designed by Philip Johnson in the 1980s. We are at a loss when such complexity is erased. Historian Marvin Bram remarked that “To extract the past layer by layer from the city is to replace depth with surface; and however pleasing the surfaces might be, they cannot replace depth.”⁴ Lose depth and we sever our intimate connection to a living past. Architect Hugh Hardy, who has restored and redesigned many landmarks, explains that “as physical uniformity increases across America, cities become a more and more valuable source of authenticity; their dialogue between old and new is essential to contemporary culture and cannot be simulated in vacuum-molded plastic. The immediate cultural discoveries found in landmark structures help define both the past and present city, giving each generation responsibility for passing on their record of ambition and achievement to those who follow. But how is this best done?”⁵

The south side of 11th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues is lined with distinctive 19th century row houses, but Number 18 stands apart. On March 6, 1970 an explosion leveled the building. The Weathermen had been using the house as a bomb factory, and a device they were preparing accidentally detonated. Three young revolutionaries were killed; two others escaped. How would this home, located within the Greenwich Village Historic District, be rebuilt? Should it replicate what had been, or should its new history be acknowledged? Architect Hugh Hardy designed a façade that would clearly fit with its antebellum neighbors, but would never be taken for an original. He rotated the middle two floors so they jut out from the façade plane. No one walking down 11th Street today has to ask which house the Weathermen blew up. Ada Louise Huxtable, architectural critic of *The New York Times*, wrote of the new building, “Mr. Hardy was not willing to pretend that there was no bomb. Or that history of another kind is not part of West Eleventh Street. Architecture is not a stage set: it is the continuing evidence of a city’s reality. Nothing can bring number 18 to life again. The house is dead; long live the house.”⁶ On this street, history is not denied; it is integral to the living city.

³ Anthony Robins, *Grand Central Terminal: 100 Years of a New York Landmark* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2013); *The World Trade Center*, Classics of American Architecture; (Englewood, Florida: Pineapple Press, 1987).

⁴ Marvin Bram, private correspondence with author, 2014.

⁵ Hugh Hardy, *Theater of Architecture* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2013), 15.

⁶ Hardy, *Theater of Architecture*, 22-25; Ada Louise Huxtable, “Compatibility Called Key to Building Plan,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1971.



The row house at 18 West Eleventh Street in the Greenwich Village Historic District, Hugh Hardy, architect. The original the house was destroyed in 1970 by the Weather Underground (author's photo).

A building at the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street has bronze plaques affixed to its base. One installed by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union reads: "On this site 146 workers lost their lives in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire on March 25, 1911. Out of their martyrdom came new concepts of social responsibility and labor legislation that have helped make American working conditions the finest in the world." In fact, it is not merely "the site," but the actual building. The Asch Building is now part of the campus of New York University, housing classrooms and offices; students, faculty, and administrators walk past the building with no awareness of the drama that unfolded there a century ago, unless by chance their eye falls upon the bronze plaques. Asserting that historic preservation only impedes a great city's dynamism, urban historian Kenneth T. Jackson has suggested that the building itself is irrelevant; the history of the event, our historical memory, is sufficient. In the competition among

cities, he has said, “History is for losers.”⁷ Can that be true? Does it matter whether the Alamo survives in thriving San Antonio? Is what happened in the Asch Building any less historic? Labor historian Richard Greenwald, author of a book about the fire, believes that “it matters very much that the building is still there. It can and should serve as a reminder of what happened. Those 146 people died and it was preventable.” According to Greenwald, the tragedy and the mass protests that followed “resulted in 60 new laws to protect workers, and helped spur the growth of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the modern labor movement.”⁸



The Asch Building (now the Brown Building), a block from Washington Square, 2014. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was located on the top three floors (author’s photograph).

In the words of Arthur M. Schlesinger, “History is to the nation as memory is to the individual. As persons deprived of memory become disoriented and lost, not knowing where they have been and where they are going, so a nation denied a conception of the past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future.”⁹ With respect to our built environment, I take Schlesinger’s analogy as a mandate for preservation. Indeed, that idea is stated in *With Heritage So Rich*, the seminal 1965 report from the National Trust for Historic Preservation: “A nation can be the victim of amnesia. It can lose the memories of what it was, and thereby lose the sense of what it is or wants to be.”¹⁰ If we lack a historical imagination, the present cityscape becomes

⁷ Elliot Willensky and Norval White, *AIA Guide to New York City* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1988), 112; Kenneth T. Jackson speaking at “Is Landmarking Out of Control?” Crain’s Breakfast Forum, May 20, 2014 [http://www.craigslist.com/article/20140520/REAL_ESTATE/140529989/rare-common-ground-found-in-landmarking-debate]

⁸ Richard Greenwald, private email to author, October 8, 2014; Greenwald, “Will Eric Garner be our Triangle Shirtwaist Fire?” *New York Daily News*, December 6, 2014; Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2005).

⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “Folly’s Antidote,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2007.

¹⁰ Albert Rains, Laurance G. Henderson, *With Heritage So Rich* (New York, Random House, 1966).

our only frame of reference. Experiencing the present only, the effaced and rewritten upon streets, buildings, and institutions, our options for the city's future will be tragically circumscribed.

George Orwell, again from *1984*, offers a warning in the guise of a party slogan: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." That is, on the surface, a puzzle. If the past is over and done, immutable, how can it be controlled? It is at base what happened, and that cannot be altered. The past is eternal. In truth, history is not what happened, but our record of what happened, and that record is subject to constant reinterpretation. In the dystopian world of *1984*, Winston Smith toils in the Ministry of Truth, rewriting the past so it conformed always to truths accepted in the present, and that troubled him, even as he diligently performed his tasks. "If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, *it never happened*," he mused, "that, surely was more terrifying than mere torture and death?" How lonely to understand that if all records told the same tale, and if everyone else accepted that story without question, "then the lie passed into history and became truth." That was the real horror. Once Winston saw a scrap of evidence proving that the party's official narrative was untrue. "It exists," he exclaims when his interrogator, O'Brien, briefly shows it to him. "No," said O'Brien as he tossed it into the memory hole. "It does not exist. It never existed."¹¹ While Winston Smith lived in fiction, scholars behind the Iron Curtain would joke that the hardest thing about being a historian was predicting the past.¹²

At times, a society will embrace a common narrative, while at other moments that narrative becomes contested terrain. What one generation accepts as fact, another dismisses as opinion. Arthur Schlesinger was fond of quoting Dutch historian Pieter Geyl's truism: "History is indeed an argument without end."

In academe, controversies over the historical narrative can rage, or simmer, for decades as one historian refutes another with new research and new conclusions, or emphasizes a dimension of the story that had been ignored for generations. Over time, an accepted narrative may fade from favor as a fresh interpretation gains precedence. The dominant school of thought at any moment determines what will be taught of the past, what will be passed down to the rising generation. As they control what is taught in the present, they control, or at least influence, how we will think in the future. Still, earlier narratives remain on the shelves and in databases, available for any student curious enough to delve into how we once thought about a historical question. Conclusions change, but the sources remain.

Apply now Orwell's slogan to the physical city. Obviously, property owners can demolish and rebuild according to their needs and taste without regard to the architectural or cultural significance of what they are destroying, restricted only by zoning or building codes. Economic power is its own rationale. But in the public realm, whoever controls the levers of political power or the mainstream media can influence public opinion and thus the course of the city's future, at least as long as they are in office. They also control the past. Ultimately, city agencies and elected officials determine what has historical merit and what does not, what

¹¹ George Orwell, *1984* (New York, Everyman's Library, 1992 [1949]), 37; 78-81; 259.

¹² Brendan Simms, review of Lynn Hunt's *Writing History in the Global Era*, *Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 2014.

therefore merits preservation as a treasured component of our heritage and what can be demolished with only the slightest shrug of the shoulders. Demolition, like extinction, is forever.

West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenues is lined with fairly typical four and five-story 19th century buildings, an unremarkable block perhaps. Architecturally, there is no compelling argument for preservation. But from the 1880s into the mid-20th century this block was known as Tin Pan Alley. The ordinary buildings were jammed with music publishers, composers, and lyricists. The pianos in those rooms gave birth to the great American songbook. George M. Cohan, George Gershwin, Harry von Tilzer, Harry Warren and dozens of others frequented this block. Is it necessary to preserve these buildings to preserve the memory of Tin Pan Alley, or would a plaque be sufficient? Alexander Garvin suggests that, as the block's contribution to the Great American Songbook is celebrated every day by those who keep the music alive, "cultivating the cultural patrimony does not require conferring landmark status on a building or designating a historic district."¹³ He is right to ask what we would be losing if that row was redeveloped. In 1968, just three years after the landmarks law was signed, *Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable penned an answer: "In urban terms, preservation is the saving of the essence and style of other eras, through their architecture and urban forms, so that the meaning and flavor of those other times and tastes are incorporated into the mainstream of the city's life. The accumulation is called culture."¹⁴ Unless the Landmarks Preservation Commission chooses to recognize the cultural heritage embodied Tin Pan Alley, those buildings are at risk of vanishing, like a piece of evidence thrust down the memory hole. The decision rests not in the hands of history, however, but politics.

¹³ Alexander Garvin, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't* (New York, McGraw Hill Education, 2014), 532.

¹⁴ Ada Louise Huxtable, "Where Did We Go Wrong?" *New York Times*, July 14, 1968.



Tin Pan Alley, West 28th Street near Broadway, 2014 (author's photograph).

Sometimes demolition involves more than just a building. We sometimes lose a way of thinking or a set of values. Consider the city's Carnegie libraries. A day after selling Carnegie Steel to J.P. Morgan for \$500 million in 1901, Andrew Carnegie wrote to John Billings, head of the New York Public Library, to offer \$5.2 million for the construction of public libraries. Carnegie would fund the buildings only, the city to provide the site, the books, and the maintenance. Between 1902 and 1909, an astonishing 55 branch buildings were completed across the five boroughs. These were not cheap and merely utilitarian structures, but were built to designs by the most accomplished architectural firms in the city, including McKim, Mead & White, Heins & LaFarge, and Carrere & Hastings.¹⁵ The result was a collection of 67 branch buildings erected to the highest standards, public architecture serving a public purpose. New York had never enjoyed anything like it before – well-appointed spaces free and open to all.

Even in the first decade of the 20th century land was expensive in the city, and the NYPL expended \$1.6 million to acquire sites for the branch libraries, nearly half of what was spent on construction. Today, these modest buildings occupy some of the most expensive real estate in the world. At the same time, the city's three public library systems suffer from chronic underfunding. The easy solution would be for the three systems to monetize their assets, that is, sell branch buildings and negotiate the placement of a new library in the new structure that would rise on the site or relocated nearby. The NYPL did just that in 2008. It sold the Donnell

¹⁵ Mary B. Dierickx, *The Architecture of Literacy: the Carnegie Libraries of New York City* (New York, the Cooper Union and the New York City Department of General Services, 1996), 19-52.

Library, located on West 53rd Street across from the Museum of Modern Art, and a replacement branch will open in the lower level of the new luxury skyscraper. In 2015, the Brooklyn Public Library sold the Brooklyn Heights Branch, to be replaced by a new, smaller branch library in the luxury tower that would rise on the site.

But a library building belongs to the public, not a private developer. The meaning changes when the library is no longer free-standing, but an appendage to a larger, more grand private development. With each loss of a well-designed branch library, the public sphere is diminished. To enter a branch library situated in its own structure is to set the public sphere on an equal plane with private interests. It means that the public library is independent, not the beneficiary of private largess, and that the public realm is not just another negotiable asset.



(Image 4) The Columbus Branch of the New York Public Library, 10th Avenue between 50th and 51st Streets, Babb, Cook & Willard, architects (author's photograph).

In New York City, when the Landmarks Preservation Commission determines that a building or neighborhood has historical, cultural, or architectural merit, it can designate and protect it for all time. If, however, the commission decides that the site lacks merit, there is nothing to shield it from unfortunate alterations or demolition. The law states that sites of historical, cultural, or architectural significance can be designated, but in practice the very human

commissioners and staff make that determination. And after the LPC designates, the City Council must ratify the decision, thrusting the question into the political arena where on occasion a designation is devoured by the lions.

Giving the present an absolute veto over the past disavows the very real debt we owe to the past. English philosopher and poet G.K. Chesterton wrote, “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to that arrogant oligarchy who merely happen to be walking around.”¹⁶ In no sense does he suggest that we must submit as prisoners of the past, of tradition, but at the same time that we have no right to disregard it.

More than a respect for a living past, preservation serves a fundamental human need. “Man is not rootless,” wrote Nathan Silver in *Lost New York*, “but has long taps back into time.” It is not the place alone that resonates, but time.¹⁷ Lewis Mumford famously commented, “In the city, time becomes visible.” But Mumford’s oft-quoted truism continues: “Buildings and monuments and public ways, more open than the written record, more subject to the gaze of many men than the scattered artifacts of the countryside, leave an imprint upon the minds even of the ignorant or the indifferent. Through the material fact of preservation, time challenges time, time clashes with time: habits and values carry over beyond the living group, streaking with different strata of time the character of any single generation.”¹⁸

Palimpsest is an ideal metaphor for the living city – a writing tablet on which layer after layer of messages was inscribed, always legible yet never completely erasing what was written before. The palimpsest city sets the values and contributions of our own time among the monuments of the past. In our casual, day to day experience of that dialogue between the new and the familiar we rediscover the city’s charm, and that is precisely what compels so many of us to love our city. We encounter history, as with the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, and we encounter a value system and an approach to urban governance in every Carnegie Library. But a palimpsest should never be confused with a blank slate. However well-conceived, any project which demands the erasure of preceding generations to accomplish its goal will never be embraced by those of us who love the city. Press delete, and we lose the palimpsest.

¹⁶ G.K. Chesterton, “The Ethics of Elfland,” in *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, Image Books, 1959 [1908]), 48.

¹⁷ Nathan Silver, *Lost New York* (New York, American Legacy Press, 1976 [1967]), 1, 7.

¹⁸ Lewis Mumford, “What is a City?” *Architectural Record* (1937).