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Notes

1. Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (New York: Reinhold, 1966).
2. Elaine Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism: English Architecture, 1945–1975* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015).
3. Claude Lichtenstein and Thomas Schreggenberger, eds., *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2001).

Saving Place: 50 Years of New York City Landmarks

Museum of the City of New York

21 April 2015–3 January 2016

New York City's landmarks law is fifty years old, and to celebrate this milestone the Museum of the City of New York mounted an exhibition to tell the story. Using both historic documents and contemporary photographs, the curators (Andrew S. Dolkart and Donald Albrecht, with Seri Worden) told this story well, from the demolition of the 1803 St. John's Chapel in 1918 through the enactment of the law itself in 1965 to the continuing efforts of preservationists to protect the historic city in the twenty-first century. If I had one quibble it was that they made it all seem so easy, so inevitable. The conflicts and controversies were there—the loss of Pennsylvania Station and the fights to save Grand Central Terminal and the Broadway theaters, the long campaign to protect Greenwich Village, the battle over a tower proposed for St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue—but they were presented in a rather cool and bloodless fashion. Where were the anger and the passion, of which there had been plenty? The story told by the exhibition ended triumphantly, even though new voices with new arguments seek to undermine the landmarks law today.

New York City today proves that preservation is crucial to a prosperous and livable city. This is a triumphant story, the victory of history and sentiment and aesthetics over commerce and shortsighted interests. The irony, of course, is that the citizens had to fight for the right to protect their city and to have their affection for their city respected.

The exhibition was organized chronologically in four sections: "Prelude to the Law," "Sparkling the Law, 1945–1965," "Defending the Law, 1965–1978," and

"The Law in Action, 1978–2015." Each section highlighted how New Yorkers engaged what in 1845 Walt Whitman called the city's "pull-down-and-build-over-again spirit."¹ What the exhibition made clear was that there was always a countervailing spirit, a strong public interest in history and historic architecture, and an almost visceral rejection of proposals threatening the historic city, such as Robert Moses's plan to demolish Castle Clinton at the lower tip of Manhattan to make way for a bridge and the red skyscraper slated to rise where Carnegie Hall stood. One can only marvel at the tone-deaf hubris of those supporting that proposal, but still, the Landmarks Preservation Commission did nothing to block the demolition of the elegant Metropolitan Opera House in 1967. The exhibition highlighted one of the most eloquent preservation stories that took place prior to the enactment of the law, the transformation of the Jefferson Market Courthouse in Greenwich Village into a public library, introducing the new concept of adaptive reuse. Appropriately, two giants of preservation were given their due in that section: Margot Gayle, who pushed to save the courthouse (and later founded Friends of Cast Iron Architecture and advocated for the SoHo Historic District), and architect Giorgio Cavaglieri, whose design remains a landmark of preservation.

The loss of Pennsylvania Station (McKim, Mead & White, 1910) held a central place in the exhibition, complete with a display of the *New York Times* editorial penned by architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable: "Until the first blow fell no one was convinced that Penn Station really would be demolished or that New York would permit this monumental act of vandalism. . . . We will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed."² Tragic as that loss was, the curators made clear that the destruction of Penn Station was not the impetus for the landmarks law; rather, it was the public outcry over the demolition of the Brokaw Mansion on Fifth Avenue that finally pushed a cautious Mayor Robert Wagner to sign the legislation.

Two additional sections were devoted to how the law works in practice. "Restoring Landmarks" featured photographs of

the restored Empire State Building, Carnegie Hall, Radio City Music Hall, and other landmarks, along with some sample materials. "Preservation and New Architecture" was more interesting and thought provoking, with examples of construction approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. This section presented a "greatest hits" collection, as well as a few misses. Visitors could view a model of Sir Norman Foster's glass-and-metal tower above the Hearst Building (Joseph Urban, 1928) and decide for themselves whether it is "appropriate," the term in the law for acceptable new construction. The wall text explained that "this open-ended concept has left it up to different generations of commissioners to interpret the word when reviewing proposals." The exhibition made it clear that the commission did not back away from modernist solutions—indeed, it even encouraged them, beginning in 1970 with the very first new building approved by the commission, a Jehovah's Witnesses dormitory and library in Brooklyn Heights (Ulrich Franzen and Associates). Another prominent example is the Greenwich Village town house rebuilt in 1978 to a modernist design by Hugh Hardy; the 1845 Greek revival original had been destroyed in 1970 when radicals used it as a bomb factory.

Above all else, the exhibition demonstrated that preservation is not about the past. Rather, it is integral to the living city. All the contemporary color photographs of landmarks showed them not in idealized poses but as they are experienced: automobiles parked in front; angry demonstrators blocking a sidewalk; scaffolding cluttering a façade; pedestrians talking on cell phones, oblivious to their surroundings. The images were heavily weighted toward Manhattan and Brooklyn, however, with Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island represented by only a handful of landmarks. Finally, many of the individuals whose names and faces populated this show are still alive and still fighting for preservation, because the losses continue. If this exhibition offered one message, it was that only the dedication of New Yorkers has prevented the city from destroying itself. And no, it has not been easy.

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Related Publication

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Notes

1. Walt Whitman, "Tear Down and Build over Again," *American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art, and Science* 2, no. 5 (Nov. 1845), 536.
2. "Farewell to Penn Station," *New York Times*, 30 Oct. 1963.

The SAAL Process: Housing in Portugal 1974–76

Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, Portugal

1 November 2014–1 February 2015

Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal

12 May–4 October 2015

Against Le Corbusier's opposition of architecture and revolution one may instead ask whether architecture—as a process rather than as an object—can itself be a form of revolution. *The SAAL Process* convincingly answered this question in the affirmative. An offshoot of Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution, the Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local (Local Ambulatory Support Service) was enacted by a decree of the provisional government on 6 August 1974. While SAAL was a direct consequence of the revolution, it sprung from research on housing conditions in the 1960s conducted by architects Nuno Portas and Fernando Távora. Instituted during Portas's nine months as secretary of state for housing and urban planning, SAAL was a government-funded initiative to empower the massive numbers of previously voiceless (and often illiterate) Portuguese living in substandard housing at the time of the revolution.¹

The SAAL process was a performative one in which experts had to learn to design with—as opposed to for—residents, who themselves had to learn how to be clients. Led by architects (whose own commissions had dried up with the revolution) and students (whose universities had been closed), SAAL brigades collaborated with local residents' associations, and women often played a leading role in negotiating their future housing. Active from August 1974 to

October 1976, the brigades included approximately one thousand people working with almost forty thousand families on 170 projects. The brigades' goal was not to design formally inventive architecture—although that often resulted—but rather to produce the physical conditions for social mobility: decent housing as a prerequisite, and affirmation, of democratic citizenship.

As the exhibition curator Delfim Sardo states, "There was no one SAAL."² The experience of each brigade, in each neighborhood, with each participating family was unique. The exhibition sought to reflect this heterodoxy through the selective choice of ten SAAL interventions as case studies. The variety was noticeable. While northern SAAL brigades centered on Porto intervened mostly within the historical city, those in Lisbon were often charged with urbanizing peripheral sites in the face of advancing sprawl.

In Porto, the SAAL interventions dealt with *iblas* (islands), informal neighborhoods often hidden behind formal buildings on major thoroughfares. The *iblas* were sites of great social solidarity, but they were also ghettos to which the poor were consigned. Their central location within Porto's urban fabric led to dual demands from their inhabitants: for the right to decent housing—beautifully summarized in the slogan *Casas sim, barracas não* (Houses yes, shacks no)—and for the right to the city. All too often the (inevitably partial) satisfaction of the first has led to the denial of the second, with the poor shunted to the urban periphery. Projects such as Álvaro Siza Vieira's for São Victor (for which he became well known internationally) and Sérgio Fernandez's at Leal, both in Porto, exemplify the elegant formal possibilities that can result from a serious consideration of these human rights. Perhaps inevitably, the brigades completed only a few of their planned projects before their abolition in October 1976; while their artisanal localism was in tune with the revolution's (often anarchic) sprouting of participatory democracy, it was ill suited for Portugal's new era of representative government.

The exhibition's focus was on SAAL's participative process and not its relatively modest—although often impressive—built production. The reproduction of large diazotype drawings (blueprints) supported

this curatorial decision, as did the display of presentation boards handmade by architects to communicate their sociological analyses of the communities with which they were collaborating (Figure 1). These elements clearly conveyed a sense of the banal tools and techniques of design meeting the heady environment of revolutionary Portugal.

A particular challenge was to depict the agency of the local residents within their all-too-brief moment of empowerment. While exhibition visitors who did not speak Portuguese were limited in their ability to absorb the surviving minutes of neighborhood meetings or the content of newsletters distributed by the residents' associations, the evocative graphic identities produced by the brigades for the associations testified not only to the architects' commitment but also to their awareness of the revolutionary power of imagery. Patient viewers profited from a series of films, produced by the Serralves Foundation, that documented events at which architects, administrators, and local residents met again in 2014 to discuss SAAL. While tinged with nostalgia, the testimonies within these films provided visitors with the exhibition's closest contact with the emancipatory energy of the process, as well as the innumerable anecdotes it produced.

The SAAL Process joined a number of varied and yet thematically consistent exhibitions presented in the past decade at the Canadian Centre for Architecture under the guidance of its director, Mirko Zardini, and chief curator, Giovanna Borasi. These exhibitions have explored themes such as the agency of nonarchitects to shape their environments and the radical openings that moments of crisis offer for rethinking existing structures. *Actions: What You Can Do with the City* (2008) celebrated another form of the "right to the city": the right to shape it.³ Against the dominant ideologies of CIAM functionalism and the omnipotent planner, *Actions* presented bottom-up, small-scale strategies for urban inhabitation, from freecycling to seed bombing. The place of the architect within such practices was ambiguous; the most compelling examples used design expertise as a tactic for maneuvering around the boundaries of legality, performing a radical, if not overtly illegal, jujitsu with civic regulations.