THE IMPLICATIONS OF FOLKLORISTIC THOUGHT FOR HISTORIC ZONING ORDINANCES

Henry Glassie and Betty-Jo Glassie

The instantaneous tradition is among the tracers of our civilization. In a day's conversation at this meeting we have developed a nearly obligatory opening forumla consisting of a statement of the individual's stance on applied folklore, on, to quote the report of the Committee on Applied Folklore, "the utilization of the theoretical concepts, factual knowledge, and research methodologies of folklorists in programs meant to ameliorate contemporary...problems." Given the introspective nature of current thought and the tacitly accepted old notion of functionalism, it seems strange that pure and applied research can be held as authentically distinct. One may aspire to a pure research model and have no intentions beyond truth's pursuit, but the research itself and, particularly, the open presentation of the results of research will have consequences beyond scholarship. Even the person who is opposed to the notion of applied science must attempt to assay the possible results of his work -- to do less would be immoral -- and once he has recognized his work's possible ramifications it would be his choice to cease research or to channel the research for good. Without thinking in applied science terms, any teacher of folklore is applying folklore -- applying it, at the least, to his own economic benefit, and applying it, ideally, to alter the thought and subsequently the behavior of his students. The ideological potential of even the most cautious folklore scholarship exists whether it is faced or not; historic-geographic, structuralist, and ethnographic research -- the recognition of regional, universal, and ethnic patterns -- are all latently subversive to nationalistic drives.

For an example of the possible results of rather conservative scholarship, we can turn to the area of folk architecture, a new and small but solid part of contemporary folklore research. Current architectural history with its plain leanings to connoisseurship has not only formed a frame for pedagogy -- it is, as well, the basis for law. "The preservation of historic property has become an accepted function of government at all levels,"[1] and directly and indirectly those in government have been prejudiced by the elitist aesthetic developed by the customary student of old buildings. An assertion of folkloristic philosophy and findings could bring about a drastic change in teaching about history and art, in the plans for preservation, in the legal dimensions of planning, and in the environments which result from the plans and ultimately from the teaching.

Modern writers on architectural preservation as a focus of environmental planning agree that a building should be saved only if it serves some contemporary use.[2] The most frequent rationalization for preservation is, in the words of the slogan of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, "guarding America's heritage." Architectural preservation, that is, is an exercise in myth making. The past is edited, wishfully reconstructed by selecting the few artifacts which modern men feel to be relevant to the chronology of power which led to today's <u>status quo</u>. Just as the genealogist constructs a lineage by selecting those individuals out of his past that he likes, the architectural preservationist rummages through the landscape, not to locate buildings which were typical of a

place or period, but in order to isolate those buildings in which, apparently, he wishes that his ancestors lived, those which are outstandingly picturesque or which are connected with a personage or event previously recognized to be significant. Carefully chosen, these buildings provide a plastic genealogy -- a prim view of our ancestry, a material charter for part of the society. The folkloristic emphasis on humble and characteristic forms would lead to a wholly different set of criteria for preservation. In establishing guidelines for preservation, the Department of Housing and Urban Development can state the criteria for the preservation of American Indian sites in one sentence, but it takes three long paragraphs to enumerate the kinds of European-American things worth saving; any sites "that contribute to the understanding of aboriginal man in America" can be preserved, but when it comes to white folks only some of the things that contribute to an understanding deserve attention.[3] If buildings were being chosen on the basis of their historic message one would not need guidelines from the government, but quantitative research of the kind that characterizes modern geography. The building chosen as symbol should not be that which Sandak, the teacher and preservationist, has nominated as the first, best or most bizarre, but rather that which systematic field research proves to be most genuinely representative. Soon enough preservation will have produced an antiseptic landscape spotted only with Georgian palaces and log cabins (and by extension a historic scene peopled only by aristocrats and pioneers, aggressive individualists of sundry sorts). A survey has been made of the county in which this city of Pittsburgh lies[4] and the preservationists have saved some mansions and a log cabin. But those buildings do not tell the story of this area; its story is told in immigration and industry, in the barges on the rivers, the J and L stacks in the sky, and hundreds of workers' homes where poor people from the South, from eastern and southern Europe, labored through life. You will not find the story of their heartbreak and success, integrity and compromise, reflected in Adam doorways or hewn logs, but rather in the sad facades of compact rows of little houses which nobody is preserving for the future. In Beaver, the next county north, they have preserved the buildings of an early communal village -- communal restorations which are very common in the United States are probably supposed to remind us of our tolerance -- but the old ethnic halls and late nineteenth century workers' homes which really illustrate the history of towns like Aliquippa will be gone, it seems before the restorationist gives them a thought. To the west, in Cleveland, Ohio, the only buildings worth attention, apparently, are the opulent mansions of the bosses.[5] And on it goes. If architectural preservation has as a goal the restoration and maintenance of buildings which teach us of our past -- and this is what the preservationist says -- then dingy industrial housing, cropper's shacks, bourgeois ranchers, vintage beatnik pads, New Mexican haciendas, Church of God of Prophecy store fronts -- all manner of buildings deserve a place in the making of our past, not just those few which fit the going myth neatly. With most kinds of buildings gone, it will be easy to forget most kinds of people, the workaday farmers and factory hands, the people that old style historians are accustomed to call little. If buildings were chosen for preservation truly on the basis of their utility for teaching people about their heritage instead of their adaptability to modern mythology, the positive results could be many. First, an architectural democratization would produce a more accurate picture of the past -- a desire of the pure folklorist. But there would be no way to stop the consequences of the move at that point. The minority groups who have complained about their

absence from history texts as well as those who have not as yet noticed the fact would find themselves accounted for in the new statement. And the social benefits of including rather than excluding elements of the population, while ignored by our nation's current leaders, seem obvious; balanced pride and compassion could result. If we are to create a record of history in architecture, the humble as well as the grand, the common as well as the strange, need to be included. This thought is no novelty in folklore, a discipline that has been committed since its beginnings to the study of the people that historians neglect and the arts that art historians neglect.

The production of a material history is but one of the goals of architectural preservation. In an essay on the value of the past, Paul S. Dulaney states, "the buildings of the past may have value in terms of their historic associations or in terms of the quality of the architecture itself."[6] Aesthetic functioning is another of the reasons offered regularly for the preservation of old buildings; our efficient environment need not be ugly. The buildings selected for demolition are those which do not please the modern preservationist or the planners or the legislators who occasionally listen to him. Just as the folklorist recognizes that his taste is of no use in the determination of which tales to collect, the social scientific student of architecture knows that his personal taste is of no use in selecting which buildings to study. Intense study, however, leads past aesthetic relativism to a comprehension of traditional principles of taste, to the recognition of an artistic grammar, so that just as the folklorist recognizes that within its matrix a traditional tale can be as perfect as Hamlet or as grand as Moby-Dick, the folklorist as field worker can find little wooden farm buildings as fine as the Maison Carrée or Notre Dame du Haut. Intellectual and emotional commitment develop apace; the result is a broadened aesthetic. The person who appreciates ballads less than symbolist poetry is less, not more, refined than the person who loves them both. Among the early efforts from which modern folklore grew was that to expand aesthetics. Cecil Sharp set out not only to collect but as well to teach folksongs,[7] and William Morris, who founded the English Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings a quarter century before Sharp's first field trip, defended the little town houses of Oxford as being of equal importance "in their way" to the "more majestic buildings to which all the world makes pilgrimage."[8]

Folk architectural study could lead in a causative chain from a comprehension of the principles of traditional design to an appreciation of the art of "simple" buildings to a broadening of the legal codes which affect environmental planning. People living in folk architectural gems find themselves unable to get mortgages because bankers, bound by F.H.A. standards, will not lend money to those who wish to live in houses which fail to measure up to Good Housekeeping aesthetic standards, which cannot be made to come up to code for less than a fortune, or which do not happen to be located in upper middle class ghettos. The same householder is unlikely to get the governmental loans available through Housing and Urban Development. Although these grants are generous in that they provide fifty percent of the project cost, they do not consider costs of human relocation and they demand application from a "Public Body." The "Public Body," a history club or other assemblage of well-meaning citizens, is sure to be made up of people who have accepted the elitist position of the architectural historian, and even if the group should be made up of only folklorists, cultural geographers, and members of the AFL-CIO,

H.U.D. requires that they prove historic or architectural significance in the terms of the familiar myth. Further the group must demonstrate the existence of emergency factors, such as the need for federal assistance and imminence of loss, priority in state or regional planning (such as inclusion on the National Register, an almost certain indication of specific mythical relevance), and the potential contribution of the buildings to the community.[9] As any hard working preservationist knows, the system works perfectly: you are not able to make a strong case for preservation until a building is in danger; once a building is known to be in danger the plan is a fait accompli and it would not be economically feasible to alter it (the stakes have been driven, the dozer is in gear), so the building, and with it important information for getting at what really happened in the past, is demolished.

Communities are able to apply for H.U.D. funds under the Neighborhood Development Plan. This, however, also requires a "Public Body" applicant: in effect, a community may, in the face of relocation and urban renewal, apply for a grant, but the problems are, superficially, the difficulty of achieving consensus on anything more novel than erecting new street lights or patching sidewalk cracks, and, more deeply, the fact that the American educational system has not prepared people to appreciate any but a very limited number of kinds of art. Extant communities, such as the village of Port Royal, Virginia, which could serve to balance such tidied and trussed representations of the same culture as Williamsburg,[10] are constantly torn apart because we have not taught people to appreciate them. They have wrecked the old Chicano section of Tucson in order to build a phony Spanish style trap for turistas.

Speculative preservation of historic zones has been very successful as evidenced by the existence of organizations such as the Vieux Carre Restoration, Inc., the Historic Charleston Foundation, the German Village Society of Columbus, Ohio, Historic Richmond Foundation, and El Pueblo Viejo.[11] Old Town districts are a boon to real estate salesmen, to the owners of tony boutiques and to settled swingers desirous of prestige addresses, but the area's old inhabitants are forgotten in a flurry of cosmetic restoration. The laws of a democratic country should make it as easy for a poor romantic as a wealthy romantic to rework the material manifestations of past cultures; they should make it as easy to preserve a monument to a blue collar worker as it is to preserve a monument to an exploitative capitalist.

A truism within the doctrine of modern design theory is that all artifacts are partially the products of aesthetics put into play -- the humblest of things is in some measure art -- and a desideratum of design since the high period of the Bauhaus is that the artifact should effectively combine practical and aesthetic functions. This ideal is frequently achieved in folk architecture so that by modernist criteria the simple statements found in barn architecture or traditional boat design are, in fact, better art than luxurious heavily sculptural buildings. The problem is that the taste upon which the law of the land has been based is that of the elite of a former age which has survived, by dint of unquestioned momentum, into the university. From a cultural relativistic viewpoint a brick farmhouse in the Pennsylvania Dutch country and a Gothic pleasure dome in Newport are aesthetic equals; from the angle of modern art, the farmhouse is decidedly the superior. This, however, has not been recognized within the antique aesthetic of the preservationist and lawmaker.

The ideal is not the replacement of one myth with another, nor of the replacement of one taste with another; the ideal is the expansion of heritage and art. Buildings of all kinds should be saved because of the real contemporary needs for material statements of history and beautiful cultural environments. Some city planners still strive for what they call harmony; that is, visual and social monotony.[12] The planner with his unconscious peasant heritage persists like the mid-American politician in his attempts to create an impossible homogeneity, to eliminate the diversity which is the proof of freedom. He defines areas like Boston's West End[13] as slums when they are not slums but only areas he has been unable to appreciate as artistic and social entities; he destructs them, scattering the community's members and builds in their places bland monuments to government's collusion with the captains of industry. At both ends of the political spectrum there is current dissatisfaction with the grotesque nature of urban renewal as practiced. Rather than wrecking areas, planners might search for ways to utilize the qualities the areas already possess.[14] Zoning ordinances have often included the argument that preservation -- the conservation of cultural ecology -- not only saves the heritage and enhances the beauty of an area, but that there are as well practical social and economic benefits which follow historic preservation.[15] A broadly inclusive diversity is a mark of humane planning, and the folklorist, trained to discern quality and reason where others miss it, might be helpful in developing concepts which can be of use in expanding the philosophy of preservation and planning, thereby increasing the possibilities for human comfort in the man-made environment.

The value of diversity in planning would not seem to require argument, now that Jane Jacobs' powerful, readable The Death and Life of Great American Cities[16] is over a decade old, but dysfunctionally uptight planning persists. With the preservation of examples of characteristic local architecture comes the maintenance of a social community's landmarks. Without physical reminders of a community's depth in time, people living in proximity may never cohere into a responsible network. A police administrator in a midwestern town commented, when interviewed,[17] that there was much more vandalism in the new fancy suburbs than in the older, considerably poorer sections within the town; one cause for this fact, presumably, is the often referred to matter of roots. A neighborhood composed of housing of mixed ages not only has possible visual appeal, it can include houses of widely divergent price range and can, therefore, suggest a creative mixing of life styles and uses.

Instead of streets lined with identical brick boxes and silver maples, instead of sections used for business from 9 to 5 and deserted from 5 to 9, instead of residential districts inhabited by only the aged, the arty, the young, or the wealthy, the natural system, complexly diverse, could be sheltered in a richly textured plan which would allow for the expansion of human as well as material resources. Front yards could be decorated with cobwebby boxwood or quince and forsythia as well as silver maples. The dime store could be a meeting hall for Golden Age Club members at night. The school district could serve and be served by children from the homes of both manual laborers and professional men. In regular contact with each other neither the elderly nor the young would be vulnerable to the falsehoods disseminated through the media about the elderly and the young. The craftsman whose skills are not needed in the jerry built suburbs could find patronage in expanded private restoration. One needs only to read Jane Jacobs' book and pay attention to the things

that are happening to come up with a lengthy list of the values that result from keeping neighborhoods safe for diversity.

Preservation that protects a simplistic myth and zoning that protects constricted lifestyles have helped to make the problems we are trying to solve. The folklorist may not wish to work directly on the solution by sitting on zoning commissions but if he does no more than his traditional job of fieldwork, analysis, and education he can have positive effect upon the thought which underlies the decisions that produce the environment in which we all have to exist.

NOTES

1. "La Recherche du Temps Perdu: Legal Techniques for Preservation of Historic Property," *Virginia Law Review* 55:2 (March 1969), p. 324.

2. For examples: W. H. Godfrey, *Our Building Inheritance: Are We to Use It or Lose It?* (London: Faber, 1946), p. 13; Christopher Tunnard, "Planning and Preplanning of American Cities," *Historic Preservation* 16:1 (1964), pp. 8-9.

3. Robert C. Weaver, *Preserving Historic America* (Washington: H.U.D., 1966), p. 75.

4. James D. Van Trump and Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr., *Landmark Architecture of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, 1967).

5. See Richard N. Campen, *Architecture of the Western Reserve* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), pp. 239-248.

6. *The Architecture of Historic Richmond* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1968), p. 171.

7. Maud Karpeles, *Cecil Sharp: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), chapter 5.

8. Asa Briggs, ed., *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), p. 82.

9. See *Grants for Historic Preservation: Information for Applicants: A HUD Guide* (Washington: U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1970).

10. See the reasoned statement by John L. Cotter, "Colonial Williamsburg," *Technology and Culture* 11:3 (July 1970), pp. 417-427.

11. See Robert L. Montague, III, and Tony Wrenn, *Planning for Preservation* (Chicago: American Society of Planning Officials, 1964).

12. A rather typical statement of this authoritarian sort of thinking can be found in Boris Pushkarev, "Scale and Design in a New Environment," in Laurence B. Holland, ed., *Who Designs America?* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 86-119.

13. See Herbert J. Gans, _The Urban Villagers_ (New York: The Free Press, 1965), especially chapter 14.

14. _Social Aspects of a Town Development Plan_ (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1951), p. 123.

15. For example: Frances Griffin, _Old Salem: An Adventure in Historic Preservation_ (Winston-Salem: Old Salem, Inc., 1970), p. 67.

16. (New York: Random,House, 1961).

17. He did not wish to be quoted.