"Subject To Our Choices:"

Anthony Tung on Preservationism's Mitigated Successes

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AMONG THE MANY compelling speakers at the recent Preservation Matters III Symposium, co-sponsored by the Preservation Resource Center and Tulane School of Architecture Preservation Studies Program, was Prof. Anthony Tung, former New York City Landmarks Preservation Commissioner and now an urbanist at Columbia University and MIT. While the bulk of the April symposium showcased evidence of favorable rates of return on preservationist investments (see last month's Preservation in Print article), Tung's lecture positioned preservation in a larger economic and political context beyond the borders of the United States. The talk examined successes as well as problems, many of which were the products of unregulated success. Specifically, Tung broached three topics that tend to send preservationists into polemical tizzies — touristification, gentrification and public housing — in a refreshingly forthright and deeply informative manner.

Drawing upon his book *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*, Tung noted the vast majority of preservationist legislation worldwide came about the late 20th century, representing "a global-wide eruption of municipal policy that occurred in response to a global-wide tsunami of unchecked development…by which were erased about 50 percent of the significant historic structures that existed in the year 1900." New York, for example, legislated its Landmarks Law in 1965, even as its downtown was about to be radically transformed. France legally strived to save select monumental buildings as early as 1840, but "a zoning statute to guard the entwined architectural center of Paris wasn't enacted until 1974," the same year London solidified protection of its Conservation Zones. Kyoto did not designate Traditional Building Preservation Districts until 1995. Historical urban cores by the new millennium comprised slightly more than 7 percent of all metropolitan areas, Tung said, but indiscriminate demolition had already claimed half their structures, reducing that proportion to about 3.65 percent. Moreover, if current trends of population growth and urbanization continue, the surviving historic core will likely shrink to one percent by 2100. Meanwhile, ironically, officially protected districts disproportionally account for the economic vigor and cultural iconography of their respective cities.

Witness SoHo in Manhattan, which successfully integrated historic streetscapes with Modernist infill development by the likes of Aldo Rossi within the Cast Iron Historic District boundaries, becoming one of the city's top tourist attractions — though not without the effects of hyper-gentrification and disastrous development outside its boundaries.

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Witness also Singapore, which in the early 1980s aggressively modernized its infrastructure — a new airport, a new airline, skyscrapers, thousands of new hotel rooms, a mall by "starchitect" I.M. Pei — with an eye on international tourist dollars in the emerging global economy. But what it got, by 1986, was dashed expectations and disappointed visitors. When interviewed, "foreign tourists responded: Why travel cross the world to visit a mall? Where is the Singapore of legend?" So the government created a $20 million Tourism Product Development Program to invest in heritage conservation, in areas such as Boat Quay, Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India. "By 1994," Tung reported, "6.9 million tourists spent $10.9 billion foreign exchange dol-

lars, meeting the targets in the planned economy of the often brilliant, often humanistic, and widely popular authoritarian government."

Then there is the case of Venice. Years of perilous subsidence thanks to an over-tapped aquifer, inadequate sewerage system, acidification of rain, and eutrophication of canals plus the devastating 1966 flood, cast doubt on the ancient gem's future. UNESCO intervened with an unprecedented international campaign and succeeded in stabilizing Venice's precarious geography at a cost of $2 billion. Afterwards, tourists came in droves: 7 million visitors in 1995, or 20,000 per day, pumping enormous sums into the service economy. "Yet one of the central problems identified by UNESCO consultants," Tung told the audience, "was not addressed. As Venice's mono-economy of tourism pushed its residential population out of the historic center, numerous buildings were not being repaired and maintained." The 178,000 residents of the historic core in 1945 had dwindled to 70,000 fifty years later, far outnumbered by the 300,000 living elsewhere in the municipality. "The inhabitants of historic Venice no longer constituted a voting majority in their city's government." Tourism commerce, meanwhile, had raised real estate values, and the "non-subsidized middle class was being squeezed out by the higher rents." With fewer working families came fewer services: "businesses that catered to residential needs decreased, [and] the quality of life for residents grew worse. More residents left and more shops disappeared. Soon, in many neighborhoods, schools closed." Tung called it the Venice Syndrome, and it demonstrates what happens when, as Charles Birnbaum had explained earlier in the symposium, a historic district's carrying capacity is not built into policies regulating tourism. It did not go unnoticed by locals at the symposium that the neighborhood just outside the door felt at times like it had caught Venice Syndrome; indeed, as attendee George Schmidt pointed out, over three-quarters of a million people had trod its sidewalks just a few days earlier, during the annual French Quarter Fest.


CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Brandon Dughman

An alternative to Venice Syndrome, Tung suggested, can be found in a comparable old European port, Amsterdam. After the catastrophe of World War II, the ancient Dutch city, though spared large-scale bombing, found its ancient rowhouses disheveled and stripped of wood for fuel. Public sentiment leaned toward full-scale modernization, to the point of eliminating its signature canals. A few voices rose in opposition, among them a young Amsterdammer named Geurt Brinkgreve, who as an art student in pre-war Rome had witnessed the impact of ham-fisted road modernization on architectural treasures. Brinkgreve, Tung said, "understood a similar terrible loss might occur in Amsterdam if its canals were filled to accommodate automobiles. So, after the war, once back home, he founded a citizen's group to resist such initiatives." Brinkgreve helped reposition historic preservation from an elite to a mainstream sentiment. "He also anticipated to some degree," Tung added, "the phenomena of tourism-driven gentrification that swallowed Venice and made it less inhabitable." Toward resolving both problems, Brinkgreve launched in 1956 Stadsherstel, literally "The Firm That Mends the City," to buy, restore and rent heritage buildings at affordable rates. Exploiting liberal governmental subsidies in social housing and preservation sectors, the limited liability company (LLC) also raised revenue by attracting investments from leading financial institutions (the city itself became a shareholder in 1970), paying low but consistent dividends


AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

Photo courtesy http://www.iamsterdam.com

of a five-percent tax-exempt annual return. As the volume of their activity increased, managers soon realized they "might foster the renewal of whole neighborhoods by purchasing select combinations of canalhouses: corner buildings, pairs of buildings, or dilapidated structures whose restoration was prohibitive for market-rate investors." As a result, Stadsherstel became a prototype for architectural restoration working hand-in-hand with affordable public housing — two phenomenon generally viewed as opposing forces elsewhere. In the past six decades, Stadsherstel has created thousands of subsidized apartment units in both renovated and new structures, seamlessly integrated into the historic cityscape, running in parallel with a for-profit private-sector market. Brinkgreve's idea, which has since spread throughout the Netherlands, has largely circumscribed gentrification as well as the proliferation of empty investment properties, while at the same time restoring historic structures and spatially integrating low-income and market-rate residences into the general population. Today, Amsterdam Centrum hosts 12 million tourism visitor days per year and is home to 80,000 residences, fully 35 percent of whom live in social housing — "the result of a decades-long communal commitment, but also [the] individual human creativity in the person of Herr Brinkgreve."

Could the Dutch answer to the preservation/gentrification question work in the United States? Tung offered Charleston as an American counterpart of sorts. When Joseph P. Riley, Jr. was first elected mayor of this gracious South Carolina port in 1975 — in what would be the first of his record 10 terms — he appointed Donald Cameron to head the city's Housing Authority. Charleston had enjoyed success in historic preservation since the 1930s and built a diverse and stable economy on, among other things, a vibrant heritage-based tourism sector. Cameron sought to offset one of the costs of this success, gentrification in the historic core. Among those displaced were members of the African American population who had long occupied its more modest historic abodes, and whose ancestors had built many of the city's gems. Worse, superblock public housing dating from the 1930s had spatially isolated and socially stigmatized the city's residential poor, as had happened also in New Orleans and elsewhere. What Cameron aimed to do was spatially integrate subsidized housing into the larger market-rate environment while architecturally disguising it within that historical milieu. "Mr. Cameron's Scattered Site Housing initiative was urbanistically smart," Tung said, "assuming semi-traditional architectural forms, always replacing intrusive buildings in the protected historic zone — thereby adding harmony when once there had been dissonance, always carefully maintained, and not wearing a label." Tung concluded his stirring lecture saying,

> The beautiful city is built by human volition.
> It is destroyed by human volition . . .
> It is restored by human volition . . .
> It is renewed by human volition.
> It always has been, and always will be, subject to our choices.

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