

Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity

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is the real significance of motels in the American experience?" and welcome further research. *The Motel in America* might well then be considered the latest elaboration of an interpretive line that begs for new direction.

Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity, by Diane Barthel. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996. ix, 182 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$48.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

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Historic preservation has deep roots in American history, but the movement truly came into its own with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. In the thirty-plus years since, historic buildings and even entire districts have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and numerous properties have been rehabilitated through the use of preservation grants and tax credits as well as private funding. Having reached such importance, historic preservation has become part of the American mainstream—that is, its age and respectability have made it an institution. Like all such institutions, preservation has galvanized strong supporters and passionate detractors. It stands to reason, then, that preservation has also become a valid subject for critique among academicians and other interpreters.

Diane Barthel's *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity* is a new arrival in a growing list of preservation books that follow classics such as William Murtagh's *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation* (1988) and David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985). Like the latter, Barthel compares preservation in the United States and England. Being a sociologist, however, Barthel considers preservation to be "cultural capital"—a kind of spiritual currency that benefits its holders. Although its practitioners can make money in the field, Barthel notes that "the people involved in these activities like to see themselves as performing a public good whether the public appreciates it or not" (13).

Divided into a series of themed chapters that cover a wide range of topics such as utopia, industrial society, war and remembrance, religious preservation, and consuming history, this book is broad in scope and sweeping in its generalizations. It touches upon almost every conceivable facet of historic preservation, and reveals just how all-encompassing the movement has become. Although Barthel uses specific examples to illustrate points, she is especially interested in

what the movement means generally to our culture. The chapter on utopias is especially telling, for Barthel notes that they, like those who become obsessed with the past, are characterized by a need to eliminate change, achieve universal consensus, and become isolated from other communities. Barthel cites Iowa's Amana Colonies, which she has written about in more depth elsewhere (*Amana: From Pietist Sect to American Community* [1984]) as an example of nineteenth-century utopias that survive to the present to serve new needs. Of special interest to midwesterners, for they abound in this region, are what Barthel calls Staged Symbolic Communities—"small towns and villages where secure boundaries selectively filter the impact of the greater society, rather than being overcome by it" (49). These communities are ideally genteel, protected, and conflict-free—at least in appearance. As Barthel notes, historic preservation embodies a desire to control forces that might otherwise overwhelm individuals and institutions. To many people in the United States and England, the past and its material culture—buildings and objects alike—seem to offer an anchor of sorts to stem the tides and storms of social and technological change. Barthel also notes that historic preservation speaks to contemporary concerns such as cultural diversity and community revitalization, though uneasily at times due to its complex agendas and somewhat elitist following.

Barthel's *Historic Preservation* goes beyond traditional preservation. She covers a wide array of preserved aspects and features of our culture—from retro technology (such as old radios and vintage automobiles) to popular culture simulations of past places (such as Disneyland)—so many in fact, that the scope of the book is almost dizzying. The veritable litany of cultural artifacts that our culture seizes upon to convey a sense of the past—from restored churches, Ellis Island, historic shopping villages and malls, to the ultimate "Heritage Machines" that now package and market history—are interpreted as they relate to a collective sense of the past. Iowans should note with some pride—or perhaps dismay—that even the mythical "Field of Dreams" near Dyersville is an example for Barthel of how the media can create a sense of history from whole cloth—and they will indeed come. She wryly notes that "if an Iowa farm can be given mythic significance, then any site contains tourist potential" (121)—a point that she uses to discuss the power and significance of preservation tourism in our popular culture and economy.

If one message emerges clearly from this book, it is that historic preservation, as defined broadly, is also very big business, in part because it has become a vital part of the heritage tourism industry

that is the most significant force in the economy of many areas. Barthel also demonstrates how completely integrated the commercial and educational aspects of preservation have become. Her conclusion—that “preservationists can help develop the sense of solidarity and can reinforce collective memory . . . but they can never hope to rise above politics . . . because our collective memories contain elements that are both shared and individual” (154)—is sobering but true enough. This book will remind readers that we live in a culture (and time) wherein nearly every force in our lives—spiritual, educational, and commercial—is involved with a sense of the past. This book, then, should be required reading by all active, and would-be, historic preservationists.

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