The Café

On Tuesday, July 26, 2011, twenty colleagues gathered for drinks, snacks, and conversation at the Neighborhood Preservation Center's third Preservation Vision Café. The theme for the Café centered on "Preservation and the Sustainable City," and explored the overlap and/or tension of preservation, green building and sustainability goals.

The Conversation
By Emma Waterloo

In contrast to the intense heat enveloping Manhattan, the cool meeting room of the East Village's Neighborhood Preservation Center welcomed café participants into its midst. Twenty people gathered for cocktails and conversation concerning the issue of "Preservation and the Sustainable City". Felicia Mayro kicked off the conversation by introducing the night's moderators: Lisa Kersavage* and Nathan Storey**. In addition to his role as moderator, Mr. Storey served as the evening's mixologist, creating a Hudson Valley Sunset cocktail from local, seasonal, and sustainable ingredients, inspired by the theme of the Café.

It was Ms. Kersavage who began by posing the question of how to balance the needs of a burgeoning city with preservation and the city's identity. She presented an extensive map analysis project in which the Municipal Art Society of New York has been engaged, investigating relationships between preservation, new construction, demolition, and rezoning in New York City. The findings suggest that locally designated historic buildings make up roughly 3.2% of New York City's building stock.[1] Cross-disciplinary ties with other like-minded organizations will need to be forged to advance preservation policy in the future. Additionally, MAS' mapping project confirms that neighborhoods designated as historic districts, like the Upper West and Upper East Sides, have some of the highest population densities in the city. These statistics disprove the perception that neighborhoods with historic designations are less dense than other areas in the city.

[1] Percentage derived from: (114 historic districts and 1,264 individual landmarks/27,000 New York Buildings)=3.2%

As a successful example of retrofitting historic buildings, Ms. Kersavage also introduced MAS' Henry Street Settlement project, which is improving the energy efficiency of three Federal-style rowhouses. The project is demonstrating that historic buildings can improve their energy efficiency with only a small amount of capital investment, and without significant alterations to their historic character.

Furthermore, some of the mapping that MAS has produced is helpful in developing a response to an anti-preservation article recently published by Harvard economist, Edward Glaeser. The conversation then turned to a brief recap of Mr. Glaeser's position on preservation. In addition, a recap of the recent preservation-centric show, "Cronocaos," exhibited at the New Museum by architect Rem Koolhaas, was also provided. Mr. Glaeser's and Mr. Koolhaas' critiques of preservation opened up the conversation following the presentations. Many of those gathered found that Mr. Koolhaas' show was too generalized an examination of preservation, and therefore misrepresented factual information. Preservation ordinances vary from town to town, let alone country to country, and so a global overview will not produce accurate conclusions. Using the preservation of the town of Alicante, Spain as a rare example where social issues were clearly addressed concurrently with historic preservation issues, Mr. Storey teased out from the discussion Mr. Koolhaas' point that preservation often has an image problem which needs to be addressed. One tool that would help could be historic preservation policy.

Mr. Glaeser maintains that preservation limits the amount of housing and new building construction. His solutions for the issue of the city and preservation range from capping the number of landmark buildings, removing zoning regulations and instituting impact fees, to reassigning planning tasks to community members (who would not have the authority to halt projects). The suggestion was made that perhaps the preservation community is letting Mr. Glaeser set the policy conversation, instead of crafting a proactive response to his critiques.

Picking up on the theme of managing density, which was a critique of preservation in Mr. Glaeser's article, the conversation moved on to an investigation of growing city density and historic preservation issues. Density is a key component to a city's sustainability, but it must be planned for. City planning in Chicago was held up as a successful example of managing density growth by utilizing the combination of light rail, cluster housing, and local commercial centers to promote development in less-dense areas around the edges of the city. Managing density, therefore, was argued to be a transportation problem, i.e. a planning problem, rather than an historic preservation one. One Café participant pointed out that in the conversation on density, quality-of-life issues were not being discussed. Density in cities can always be increased, but at what cost? She linked the high quality-of-life associated with living in historic districts with Ms. Kersavage's earlier assertion that historic districts in New York City are

among the more-dense neighborhoods. Many shared her belief that density is not necessarily the problem with historic districts as Mr. Glaeser suggested.

The conversation surrounding Mr. Glaeser's article reflected on current preservation issues, and from that springboard the conversation turned towards the future of preservation and sustainability. Expanding on historic preservation and a sustainable future, one colleague asked where the historic preservation movement projects to be in 100 years, given that new construction has a projected lifespan of only 30 years. Another questioned how preservation proponents could be proactively involved in the solution to achieve sustainability in the megacity. A third concern was if changing how preservationists argue their cause will lead to a compromised preservation ethic.

One strategy could be to focus on climate change. The carbon footprint of new construction and demolition have a real environmental impact, but that impact has not been adequately studied nor quantified. Maintaining the existing building stock is one way to mitigate this impact on the environment. But to do this, the preservation movement will have to communicate these facts and be in dialogue with the environmental movement. Furthermore, Ms. Kersavage stated that she believes that it is critical that preservationists become vocal advocates for improving the energy efficiency of historic buildings and demonstrating how to do so without compromising historic preservation standards.

Understanding the environmental movement's goals and using their language will be an important factor in having a successful dialogue. Another solution could be to raise the cost of demolition, as they have done in California. Education and awareness of preservation issues were also offered as possible solutions.

There is no simple prescription to these questions. There are projects, such as Henry Street, promoting and demonstrating that historic preservation has the potential to be a strong advocate in defining a sustainable future. To accomplish this, preservationists will have to work and communicate across disciplines to change the perception of preservation to advocate policy change on a city-wide scale. With the call to go out on the street and begin conversations with more members of the environmental movement, the main conversation drew to a close. A final round of Hudson Valley Sunsets was offered as smaller conversations paired off, and the guests drifted back out into the city heat.

*Lisa Kersavage is the Senior Director of Preservation and Sustainability at the Municipal Art Society of New York (MAS) and the Historic Preservation Policy Strategy Development Consultant at the William Penn Foundation. She has served as the Executive Director of the James Marston Fitch Charitable Foundation; the Executive Director of Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts, and was the Publications Specialist at the architectural firm Polshek Partnership.

**Nathan Storey is an urban planning graduate student at Hunter College and is the Commissioner for Institutional Responsibility for the Graduate Student Association at CUNY. He also serves as the Communications Manager for City Atlas at the CUNY Institute for Sustainable Cities and is a contributor to PlaNYC. Previously, he was the Digital Media Fellow for ioby.org. Mr. Storey is also a mixology consultant (nathanstorey.com/mixology).

The Drink

Courtesy of Nathan Storey.

Hudson Valley Corn Whiskey, made in upstate New York by Tuthilltown distillery, was chosen for this café because this distillery is reviving a sustainable agriculture tradition of using excess crops to make spirits. Laird's Apple Jack (a company based in New Jersey) was selected because of the importance that hard apple cider has played in America's western expansion away from the east coast. Apples and cherries in season this time of year,were chosen to highlight a sustainable commitment to using local and seasonal ingredients.By contrast, Fee Brother's East Indies Orange Bitters were used to remind us of the historical importance to New York of the East Indies trade route, emphasizing the idea that while it is important to focus on local ingredients, not everything we use need to be local. Here, a few drops of an exotic ingredient go a long way.

Hudson Valley Sunset

1 oz. HUDSON NEW YORK CORN WHISKEY
0.5 oz. LAIRD'S APPLE JACK
1.5 oz. fresh apple cider
0.5 oz. fresh cherry juice
0.5 oz. fresh lemon juice
2 drops Fee Brothers Orange Bitters

Shake over ice and strain into a fancy glass with ice. Garnish with a large lemon peel and cherry sliced in half.

The Neighborhood Preservation Center is a unique place, office space and resource center that shares information and facilitates exchange among those working to improve and protect neighborhoods. The Preservation Vision Cafés continue the discussions initiated during Preservation Vision NYC and aim to strengthen the future of preservation in New York City by fostering more conversation within and outside the field. If you would like receive more information about future Cafés, contact Felicia Mayro at fmayro@neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org or 212-228-2781.