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What is This?
Battle of the Port: Memory, Preservation, and Planning in the Creation of the South Street Seaport Museum

Robin Foster

Abstract
The creation of the South Street Seaport Museum in 1967 represents a dynamic synthesis of urban development, civic memory, and the use of heritage in urban revitalization. The dominant narrative of midcentury urban renewal debates, which pits growth-oriented modernism against a street corner preservationism antagonistic to change, offers an incomplete analysis of the founding of South Street as a historic museum district. The Seaport plan imagined historic preservation and the use of civic memory as integral factors in the process of urban modernity, not as a resistance to it. Rather than simply rejecting urban development and the modernist architectural landscape that had come to dominate the tip of lower Manhattan, boosters of South Street, like Progressive Era preservationists before them, envisioned historic preservation as an integral part of the future cityscape. This article argues that South Street boosters were far more concerned with sustainability and building a new urban future than preservationists of this era are often credited. The emergence of the South Street Seaport Museum symbolizes the maturation of historic preservation in the 1960s and uncovers an allegiance to early twentieth-century Progressive conceptions of a new urbanism. Finally, this narrative exposes the common ground that Seaport boosters and urban development supporters shared regarding the use of heritage and collective memory as necessary elements in the city’s development.

Keywords
historic preservation, New York City, civic memory, heritage

In September 2011, The Museum of the City of New York announced it would be taking over operations of the financially struggling South Street Seaport Museum in lower Manhattan. For much of the Seaport’s forty-four-year existence, critics have faulted South Street as an economically untenable project, occupying prime commercial real estate in the nation’s financial epicenter. To critics, maintaining the aesthetics of South Street’s nineteenth-century cityscape was incompatible with economic development plans to expand the financial district and increase tax revenues to the city. However, charges that the historic district was simply a nostalgic vision

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providing little advantage to redevelopment plans for lower Manhattan\(^1\) discount its founders’ understanding of preservation as an integral part of the modernizing city and the role that civic memory would play in urban revitalization initiatives across the country. Rather than simply rejecting urban development and the modernist architectural landscape transforming the tip of lower Manhattan, boosters of South Street, like Progressive Era preservationists before them, envisioned historic preservation as an integral part of the future cityscape. A close examination of the Seaport founders’ vision for a rehabilitated nineteenth-century aesthetic combined with strategies for commercial viability uncovers the maturation of historic preservation in the 1960s and the founders’ allegiance to Progressive reform conceptions of urban development. Further, this narrative exposes the common ground that Seaport boosters and urban development supporters shared regarding the use of heritage and civic memory as necessary elements in the city’s development.

The seaport district of the 1950s and 1960s embodied a deeply felt sense of place, where a cultural landscape littered with what historian Dolores Hayden describes as “storehouses of memory” still inhabited the district surrounding the aging Fulton Fish Market. Unfortunately, the midcentury urban landscape represented the wrong sense of place for both commercial developers and South Street Seaport boosters. By the 1960s, the seaport was gritty and the bustling days of New York as a vibrant port city had long since vanished.\(^2\) What remained on the east side of lower Manhattan just south of the Brooklyn Bridge was, by some accounts, a no-man’s-land, a dark urban jungle, a jumbled mix of junk shops, narrowly twisted streets, impossible traffic, and the rank stench of the fish stalls. By the mid-1960s, the best one could hope for along Fulton Street and Schermerhorn Row was a tasty bowl of chowder or a plate of finnan haddie. Surrounding the cobbled slips of the old seaport, Wall Street’s ever-multiplying pillars of finance emerged from the razed nineteenth-century landscape in a process of urban renewal.

It was at this transformative moment when two competing visions of development emerged for an eleven-block area just south of the Brooklyn Bridge. However, the dominant narrative of midcentury urban renewal debates, which pits growth-oriented modernism against a street corner preservationism antagonistic to change does not adequately explain the entangled visions these new plans represented nor acknowledge what Randall Mason has termed the “urbanistic preservation approach” of Seaport founders, in which preservation and the use of heritage were conceived as integral factors in the process of urban modernity, not as a resistance to it.\(^3\) The South Street Seaport Museum and, to a lesser extent, the City’s Lower Manhattan Plan, both capitalized on the role of memory in carving out the city’s future and both acknowledged the role that memory would play in transforming the urban landscape after decades of urban renewal’s antagonism to the past. Boosters for historic preservation, led by New York State Senator Whitney Seymour Jr. and Seaport founder Peter Stanford, and key supporters of the Lower Manhattan Plan, including David Rockefeller and his Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, both harbored an “urbanistic impulse” toward historic preservation, revealing the role that civic memory and heritage would play in New York City’s urban revitalization in the post-Moses era.

**Down at the Old Fish Market**

Joseph Mitchell, writer for *The New Yorker*, spent many mornings wandering the streets, fish sheds, and eateries of the Fulton Fish Market in the early 1950s. These pre-dawn jaunts among the bustling trade of fishmongers and hungry customers relieved Mitchell of any troublesome thoughts that may have distracted him, and the Fulton Fish Market, buried beneath the Brooklyn Bridge and the regular foot traffic that characterized lower Manhattan’s typical weekday rush, became Mitchell’s destination of choice. Mitchell recounts his conversations with local restaurateur Louie Morino in his essay “Up in the Old Hotel.” In the story, Morino remarks on the history of Fulton Street and the buildings of Schermerhorn Row, in which his eatery—Sloppy
Louie’s—was located. Morino recalled his first meeting with the landlord, a Mrs. Schermerhorn, when he first learned the history of the building:

I went back inside and stood there and thought it over, and the effect it had on me, the simple fact my building was an old Schermerhorn building, it may sound foolish, but it pleased me very much. The feeling I had, it connected me with the past. It connected me with Old New York. It connected Sloppy Louie’s Restaurant with Old New York. It made the building look much better to me. Instead of just an old run-down building in the fish market, it had a history to it, connections going back, and I liked that.4

This same connection to Old New York and its seafaring past was the impetus behind the movement to preserve a five-block area of the old seaport as a living, historic museum. M. Christine Boyer describes, “No matter how brilliant its past, the area around South Street and Fulton Street had turned into a . . . no man’s land. When the real waterfront died and the real marketplaces were removed, they left a void in which it became possible to reconstruct the mythical ambience of an old seaport.”5 A visitor to Schermerhorn Row today would hardly recognize the scene from Mitchell’s day. This was not the sort of neighborhood where you simply happened to find yourself. The subway did not stop here, and the spires of Wall Street towered above but did not invite the lowly seaport to join in the majesty of the financial district. If you found yourself on Peck Slip or Dover Street in the 1960s, there was little charm to be found.6

![Figure 1. South Street, 1930s. Copyright the Municipal Art Society of New York.](https://example.com/south-street-1930s.jpg)

In 1966, New York State Senator Whitney Seymour Jr. introduced a bill to the Senate that would create a maritime museum in lower Manhattan. The bill quickly passed both the Senate and Assembly, and was put before Governor Nelson Rockefeller for approval. That same year, Peter Stanford, ex–Madison Avenue executive and nautical aficionado, organized the Friends of South Street, a grassroots organization created to support Seymour’s museum proposal and to expand the vision at South Street. The primary purpose of Stanford’s organization was to tell New York City’s maritime history, restore the vanished image of wind ships, and preserve the
federalist-style buildings that lined the streets. According to Stanford’s vision for the Seaport, this historic district would encompass a working community of tradesmen, shops, and ship restoration activities, each contributing to the maritime ambience of the seaport’s nineteenth-century heritage. While critics of the city’s crooked streets and muddled arrangement found fault with the nineteenth century’s lingering effects on the cityscape, Stanford meant to preserve a small remnant of the previous century’s “more natural, more mutually dependent, a little out of plumb” character.

Governor Rockefeller’s brother, Chase Manhattan Bank Vice Chairman David Rockefeller, was strongly opposed to the maritime bill. David Rockefeller had founded the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association in 1958, whose mission was to support the physical expansion of the financial district. According to a New York Times article, David Rockefeller’s personal appeal to the Governor regarding the Seymour legislation contained such heated objection that “those who saw the letter were surprised by the violence of the attack.” President of the D-LMA Edmund Wagner’s own appeal to the Governor reveals the reasoning behind his organization’s opposition to the development of the Seaport for museum purposes:

STRONGLY OPPOSE SENATE [bill] 3524 AWAITING YOUR SIGNATURE. SENATOR SEYMOUR, WHO INTRODUCED THE BILL, WELL-INTENTIONED BUT ENTIRE CITY BLOCK IN LOWER MANHATTAN, TOGETHER WITH FULTON FISH MARKET AND ADJACENT PIERS, LAND AND WATERFRONT PROPOSED FOR SOUTH STREET MARITIME MUSEUM, COULD BE USED BETTER FOR NATURAL EXPANSION OF FINANCIAL AND INSURANCE COMMUNITIES. CITY WOULD BENEFIT GREATLY FROM ADDITIONAL REAL ESTATE AND BUSINESS TAXES THAT COMMERCIAL STRUCTURE COULD PRODUCE. BILL IN APPARENT CONTRADICTION WITH CITY PLANNING COMMISSION PLAN FOR LANDFILL DEVELOPMENT AND DEPRESSED HIGHWAY ALONG EAST RIVER. MUSEUM PROPOSAL MIGHT CONFLICT WITH PLANS FOR RESTORATION OF FRAUNCES TAVERN BLOCK.

Likeminded letters of protest from stakeholders in Manhattan real estate, the chairman of a competing historic preservation project, and a variety of corporate lawyers soon joined opposition from David Rockefeller and the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association. At the root of this opposition were three words well known in real estate parlance: location, location, location. A historic museum located in the financial district was fundamentally viewed as an affront to the “orderly and dynamic growth of lower Manhattan,” and specifically as infringing upon the physical expansion of the financial industry in the years to come. A letter from one local real estate firm to Governor Rockefeller suggested if Senator Seymour insisted upon his “romantic museum,” proving a complete disregard for the interests of “every knowledgeable, interested and responsible person who lives and works downtown,” the museum might alternately be established north of Fulton Street, on less valuable real estate.

According to Senator Seymour, when the D-LMA got word that “this goddam crazy bill” had passed both houses, this flurry of protest was directed at the Governor’s office. Not content to allow his maritime museum to suffer at the hands of fraternal alliance, Seymour composed his own letter to Governor Rockefeller, in which he reiterated the importance of preserving New York City’s maritime heritage and reaffirmed the economic benefits that could be reaped from the museum endeavor. “I know your brother is opposed to this legislation,” wrote a seemingly defiant Seymour to the Governor, “and he probably recommended to you that you veto it. But I urge you to disregard him, and do the right thing and sign the bill.”

The D-LMA was the sponsor behind the World Trade Center and beyond that massive project, had proposed a series of redevelopment plans for the area. In addition to commercial redevelopment strategies intended to revive the flagging financial center, the D-LMA was a key sponsor of
Foster

the already in-progress Fraunces Tavern museum block restoration project, located just steps from the proposed South Street site. David Rockefeller and the D-LMA, while vehemently arguing for commercial utilization of lower Manhattan’s valuable real estate in a series of letters to the Governor and his Counsel, nevertheless had plans of their own for heritage commemoration and the integration of a “usable past” within the ongoing modernization of the financial district.16

Restoration of Fraunces Tavern, a popular establishment dating to the colonial era and best known as the site where General Washington gave his farewell address to officers of the Continental Army, had the support of the D-LMA, the Museum of the City of New York, and the City Parks Commission. The historic preservation project would be designated a city park and operated as a museum, the Downtown Museum of the City of New York.17 Supporters of the Fraunces Tavern project feared the Seaport plan would deplete fundraising opportunities and be in direct competition with the maritime museum planned at the Fraunces site. MCNY’s Chairman, Louis Auchincloss, composed his own letter of opposition to the South Street proposal. While Stanford’s vision for South Street conjured images of the lost days of nineteenth century sail, the Fraunces Tavern project presented an equally ennobling narrative of the patriotic Revolutionary War era. Both visions ascribed to lower Manhattan a national narrative steeped in heroism, this narrative particularly alluring during a time when the nation’s identity was challenged by a political and cultural race to win the Cold War, as well as swelling domestic unrest connected with the Civil Rights movement. What Seymour and Stanford saw in their visions for South Street, Fraunces Tavern supporters conveyed through their own preservation project: locating heroic memories in the physical landscape of the city was a critical component in the creation of civic identity and sense of place.

The D-LMA’s primary objection to the Maritime legislation concerned the loss of commercial real estate and future tax revenues to the City with a nonprofit organization occupying valuable downtown property. The organization was also concerned that the creation of a historic museum at South Street would prove redundant to its own plans to move forward on the Fraunces Tavern restoration block and create competition among private funding sources.18 Despite this opposition, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, steeped in a tradition of Rockefeller family philanthropy, approved the New York State Maritime Museum legislation in the summer of 1966, after Senator Seymour removed all wording for the appropriation of any public funds towards the maritime project. Victory for the Maritime Museum legislation prompted the Friends of South Street to immediately focus on fundraising for ship restoration and real estate acquisition, although no decision was yet made as to the historic designation status, and therefore protection, of the properties surrounding the seaport.

In 1967, the Friends procured a charter from the State of New York Board of Regents for the creation of the South Street Seaport Museum. According to the Museum’s operating plan, “South Street Seaport was conceived from the beginning to tell the story of the men in ships who built the city’s greatness in the century that the young American republic came of age.”19 The Museum’s primary objective was to restore the ships and buildings of the city’s maritime past; this vision formed as a response to the current climate of massive commercial development in lower Manhattan and indicative of a renewed appreciation for heritage-based strategies in urban revitalization. “The Seaport is intended to weave back into the fabric of city life some of the warmth and accessibility that have been lost along the way,” and to provide a vital amenity to the shape that the modern city had become.20 Fundamental to the founding vision behind the Seaport Museum was the question, What has our city become? And what do we want this city to be?

It was an implicit response to the direction that the new New York City had taken—the conviction that, in its zeal for progress and economic revitalization, the city had lost something—that propelled the founders of the South Street Seaport Museum to envision an alternative and yet
complementary environment to the modern composition of cement and steel that was transforming the landscape of lower Manhattan. Like Progressive Era preservationists before them, Seaport boosters harbored a belief in the civic patriotism that preservation of the physical and cultural landscape would afford city residents and envisioned ways in which this might be integrated into the larger project of urban planning. Randall Mason uncovers the ideology behind Progressive Era preservationists and explains,

[They] were not exclusively devoted to saving old things; they saw preservation as one aspect of their larger project of transforming the city and its citizens. Preservation was integrated with city planning, public art, civic architecture and other reform efforts. Transcending, yet not abandoning the purist approaches to buildings as artifacts, urbanistic preservation led to more flexible strategies and negotiations. 21

Understood in this light, plans for the South Street Seaport Museum were not simply nostalgic or romantic. The Museum’s founders believed that this community of maritime-related shops, museums, cafes, and working tradesmen would provide an economic benefit to the city, tying in well with the recently proposed Lower Manhattan Plan for redevelopment. Stanford declared, “Our concepts in urban zoning enable the low-rise Seaport buildings to be fitted into the downtown business community without significant loss of gross commercial space and tax revenues to the city.” 22 Indeed, Stanford envisioned a new urban future in which South Street would become an economic as well as aesthetic asset to the city, predicting, “real commerce and small shops and craft activities should do much to maintain colonial maritime life in [a contemporary context].” 23 In addition to the physical preservation of Schermerhorn Row, Stanford was concerned with creating a viable economic asset similar to the economic successes realized by San Francisco’s Ghirardelli Square revitalization project. 24 In a letter from Peter Stanford to Warren Lindquist at Chase Manhattan Bank, Stanford asks for the D-LMA’s support of the Seaport and argues for South Street’s role in the larger project of the area’s redevelopment, remarking “[The Seaport plan] does not subtract one inch of commercially valuable land for lower Manhattan. It simply enriches open space set aside in the Lower Manhattan Plan.” 25

New York City however was not Mystic, Connecticut, or even San Francisco, sites of maritime preservation projects Stanford admired. 26 The demands and challenges of the country’s largest city operated within a paradigm unequalled in the seaport restoration communities so beloved by Stanford. The vision for this seaport district would have to confront the unique demands created by the economic and political climate of mid-1960s Gotham, where lower Manhattan real estate was valued among the world’s highest and the financial district was regarded as the Capital of Capitalism.

**One Yearns to Rearrange the Hodge-Podge and Put Things Where They Belong** 27

To understand the ideologies fueling midcentury urban renewal and the D-LMA’s vision for commercial revitalization in the 1960s, we have to look back to the early decades of the twentieth century, when emerging visions in urban planning characterized lower Manhattan, as well as downtown districts across the country, as a chaotic hodge-podge in need of systematic reorganization and “morally uplifting” architecture. 28 Historian Eric Darton explores the trajectory of modern urban planning, which has been heavily influenced by the prevailing vision of early twentieth-century urban theorists who demanded “the chaotic agglomeration of old structures . . . be demolished wholesale and the city rebuilt according to a vast, centralized plan.” 29 In the wake of the City Beautiful movement, which called for large, centralized architecture and the orderly configuration of urban space, The Regional Plan Association, through its *Plan for New York and Its Environs,*
recommended strategies for the recentralization of financial and commercial industries as well as the optimization of zoning and land use through more efficient and rational use of space.

In 1922, the Regional Plan Association was formed in New York City with the objective to create a comprehensive survey of the region. From 1927 to 1931, the RPA proposed several public works projects and land use strategies, including new highway patterns, bridges and tunnels, and skyscrapers with expansive street-level plazas in order to open up congested city streets. The RPA’s position held that misuse of land was the root of all the city’s problems, including the belief that the wrong sorts of buildings for the wrong sorts of purposes were occupying prime real estate in the city. The presence of industrial factories and tenement housing in the middle of prime real estate offended the sensibilities of the RPA, which argued, “Such a situation outrages one’s sense of order. Everything seems misplaced. One yearns to re-arrange the hodge-podge and put things where they belong.”

According to the RPA, this misuse of critical real estate was the root of the city’s failing health.

The modernization and rationalization of New York City’s physical landscape during the 1930s and 1940s followed RPA guidelines for commercial development and infrastructure improvements such as highways, bridges, and tunnels. A major turning point in land use development came in 1949, with Title 1 of the American Housing Act. This “federal bulldozer” legislation authorized federally subsidized clearance of undesirable, underutilized, and undervalued land. Robert Moses, arguably the most infamous of urban renewal icons, “intended to use the powers of eminent domain, slum clearance, modern architecture, and rational city planning to sweep away the built environment of the nineteenth century and replace it with a new cityscape.”

Underscoring the political as well as economic motivations behind midcentury urban renewal, historian Samuel Zipp reveals the political ideology behind the city’s makeover during the Cold War years. City construction coordinator Robert Moses and his supporters were interested not only in developing commercially profitable properties, but also “in clearing away this older urban world, they . . . hoped to give Manhattan a cityscape to match its growing global status and its emerging role as a symbol of American power in the Cold War. These paired concerns motivated a series of projects in the early 1950s all across the city.” Nineteenth-century quaintness, however nostalgic or sentimental, had no functional place in the modern economy of the city.

Lower Manhattan’s midcentury financial troubles date back to the Great Depression. The area experienced its first wave of skyscraper construction in the early twentieth century, but the collapse of the nation’s economy in 1929 left the financial district stagnant for the next two decades. By the end of World War II, more than 80% of the buildings in lower Manhattan had been constructed prior to 1920, most neither fireproof nor modernized. As the district was littered with industrial manufacturing lots, produce and food markets, and fringe tenement housing, many banking and other financial institutions fled for more modern accommodations in Midtown, where construction and redevelopment had already gained momentum. As banks, law firms, and financial institutions moved uptown, an aggressive plan for lower Manhattan’s redevelopment was seen as a critical factor in saving the district from further blight. When David Rockefeller announced plans in 1955 to build Chase Manhattan Bank’s new headquarters near the Battery, a strategy for the future of lower Manhattan materialized. In addition to its own superblock construction, Chase funded several other new downtown projects in accordance with the D-LMA’s recommendations set forth in its 1958 report, the Lower Manhattan Recommended Land Use plan.

The 1958 plan, which would be known as the First Report in a series of four over the next fifteen years, presented an analysis of land use, traffic patterns, and suggested physical improvements to the area. The D-LMA’s series of reports did not suggest what form new development would take; rather the plans recommended optimum use of land and resources. The physical
design of downtown’s makeover was left for future considerations. Critical to the report’s recommendations was its assessment that areas surrounding the financial core of lower Manhattan were in a poor state of decay and deterioration, occupying valuable land better served by direct support of the financial industry. The area just south of the Brooklyn Bridge, where the future South Street Seaport might emerge, was slated for middle-income residential development, intended to house financial sector employees as a “walk to work” locale. Mayor Wagner and the City Board of Estimate quickly endorsed the plan, hailing it as much needed and long overdue. The D-LMA’s Second Report, presented in 1963, reaffirmed its earlier recommendations for land use, adding that blight along the East River waterfront, from the Brooklyn Bridge to Battery Park, should be converted to a pedestrian esplanade. This recommendation for recreational waterfront usage was not unlike Stanford’s vision for a walk onto the piers amid the open sky and waterfront.

The D-LMA’s recommendations for land use and commercial development were given physical shape and form with the Lower Manhattan Plan of 1966. While four decades of regional planning and commercial construction had altered the landscape of lower Manhattan, many of the D-LMA’s recommendations to expand the financial district and increase residential housing had yet to be realized. Proposed as a comprehensive redevelopment scheme that would support the growth of the financial district with multiple residential complexes, pedestrian-only thoroughfares, altered traffic patterns, and a recreational waterfront, this dynamic new vision, The Lower Manhattan Plan, was presented to the New York City Planning Commission. While Seymour’s Maritime Museum and Stanford’s Seaport district were in their fledgling stages, the financial community of lower Manhattan was eagerly awaiting the City’s approval of the most expansive redevelopment plan to date.

Echoing the earlier 1958 plan presented by the D-LMA, The Lower Manhattan Plan remarked on downtown’s inability to compete with midtown’s “rich diversity of facilities.” Although the decade had seen a marked increase in office space downtown, employment in the area actually declined from approximately 400,000 in 1960 to 375,000 in 1965. This trend was startling, in light of the increase in office space that resulted from the creation of Chase Plaza and other modern skyscrapers that had been erected since 1960. By 1966, plans for the construction of the World Trade Center were well underway, in which an additional 7.6 million square feet of office space would soon become available. Dilapidated piers, elevated expressways cutting the city off from its rivers, inadequate parking, and poor use of space were all marked as detractors to the area’s financial business core. The plan proposed expansion of this business core in order to create a “strong physical impact on the area” and attract new businesses to occupy the World Trade Center as well as the current surplus of office space downtown. Critical to the Plan was the proposed creation of a desirable upscale housing market. Six waterfront residential clusters—to house 80,000 to 100,000 people—were designed, situated along waterfront plazas and connected by an esplanade.

Fulton Street was earmarked as the northernmost residential cluster along the East River, just south of the Brooklyn Bridge—the site of the proposed South Street Seaport Museum. All but two buildings in the proposed South Street Seaport district, which would receive its charter within months of the Lower Manhattan Plan’s release, were designated in the plan as expendable, “Built prior to 1915, not fireproof, not modernized. These factors are considered as militating against its performance.” None of the buildings in the proposed Seaport district was tagged for either short-term or long-term life expectancy. The plan suggested razing of the entire district so that a residential cluster to house approximately 10,000 new residents could be built.
A careful reading of the report reveals these urban planners were not averse to the idea of the area’s maritime heritage, once the old Fulton Fish Market moved to Hunts Point in the Bronx and cleared way for the new residential development. Despite its emphasis on commercial development and economic revitalization, local heritage and civic memory were incorporated into the Lower Manhattan Plan’s vision for a new urban landscape. Waterfront access and recreational usage, along with a revitalized maritime-inspired district displaying “drying nets and other maritime paraphernalia, and seafood sold from permanently-anchored fishing boats” would offer a distinct reference to the memory of the old seaport’s role in lower Manhattan. The plan proposed that the new residential cluster at Fulton Street might retain some links to the area’s seafaring past through oyster bar cafes and “oysters sold from boats.” While the plan called for removal
of the seaport’s outdated structures, its designers recognized the benefits of incorporating the old seaport’s special character and sense of place into the new construction.41

The Lower Manhattan Plan’s philosophy on land-use echoes earlier reports by the RPA, with its proposals for altered traffic patterns, the designation of specific “functional areas,” and waterfront redevelopment. The City Planning Commission hailed the plan as “a bold guideline for the downtown renaissance”; planners and architects praised the plan as raising the bar on the aesthetics and functionality of urban redevelopment.42 The plan had the support from key stakeholders in City government from its outset; the impact of the economic slump in lower Manhattan cannot be overstated. With declining employment statistics, a surplus of unoccupied office space and increasing competition with Midtown for commercial investment, lower Manhattan was seeking salvation. The area required a physical overhaul in order to attract new investors and increase the financial district’s impact not only on New York City, but on the entire country. With declining employment statistics, a surplus of unoccupied office space and increasing competition with Midtown for commercial investment, lower Manhattan was seeking salvation. The area required a physical overhaul in order to attract new investors and increase the financial district’s impact not only on New York City, but on the entire country. Warren Lindquist, David Rockefeller’s aide and fellow D-LMA member, stated what members of the financial community most certainly felt—that lower Manhattan was “the heart pump of the capital blood that sustains the free world.” Further, Lindquist felt it was the responsibility of the D-LMA to ensure that the financial community of lower Manhattan remain active in “the expanding commerce of the city—excuse me—of the country, and of the world.”43 The Lower Manhattan Plan was meant to reposition the city’s financial district as the epicenter of capitalism and promote a new vision of modernity in urban planning. Less awe-inspiring but by no means incidental, city officials foresaw job creation and increased investment as much-needed boons to the local economy.

Historic Preservation and Memory

The project of historic preservation is intimately tied to memory. However, the influence of collective memory on urban development, while experiencing a resurgence during the 1960s, was not new to urban discourse at this time. The debate surrounding historic preservation and its implications on property rights can be traced to the pre-Civil War era, when America was very much preoccupied with nation building, westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. M. Christine Boyer examines the nation’s fundamental tendency to emphasize progress over preservation, and argues, “Anything that inhibited the free exchange of private property, its acquisition, enhancement, and subsequent resale at market value would as well hinder the country’s development. In consequence, there was little public interest in protecting historic properties from demolition: whatever stood in the path of progress could simply be wiped away.”44 The conflict and contention wrought by the Civil War caused many Americans during that time to look nostalgically to the past, to a mythical simpler time of the colonial period. During the mid-nineteenth century upheavals associated with Civil War, industrialization, commercialization, immigration and urbanization, “there arose a nostalgic cry for all things colonial.”45 Growing anxieties created by the restructuring of society manifested in a sentimental yearning for a collective memory that was itself a myth; an idealized conception of the past born from present-day anxieties about the changing political, economic, and social landscape emerged. Early twentieth-century Progressive Era reformists felt this yearning as well, as increased industrialization, immigration, and the new social problems associated with an increasingly urbanized American society prompted a desire to incorporate vestiges of the physical past in the city’s modern push forward.46

Fast-forward to New York City, circa 1960, which experienced new anxieties fueled by urban renewal’s swift and sweeping changes to the physical landscape, Cold War fears, and the transition to a postindustrial economy. Upheavals—quite literally, city blocks were demolished, turned over, and created anew—and the fear of an uncertain future created an environment in which feelings of nostalgia and the desire to preserve if not re-create memories of the past were intensified. In the midst of urban renewal’s utter chaos, the historic preservation movement functioned as a remedy to the swift pace of modernity and an appreciation for the smaller scale of the nineteenth-century cityscape.
Nostalgia, however, is not the only motivating factor behind historic preservation. Historian Diane Barthel complicates a purely sentimental motivation fueling historic preservation, arguing, “While patriotism was the major motive behind many nineteenth century preservation efforts, it was soon joined by an economic motive. This second motive also reveals the extent to which preservation must be seen as a culturally specific response to industrialization.” While an idealized version of the past in the face of contemporary chaos can serve as a motivating factor behind historic preservation, so too can the desire to retain links to the early economic achievements of the nation. Historic sites serve as narratives of the toil of labor on which early industry was founded. These exhibits and sites honor the enterprise and physical labor that built the industrial nation. Collective memory is critical to the creation of community identity and solidarity and, Barthel contends, “preservation can help respond to this collective need, enabling people to view themselves not simply as individuals.”

Peter Stanford’s early writings on the Seaport Museum, in which he outlined his plans for the function and future of the museum district, evoke these same psychological and sociological implications of historic preservation. According to Stanford’s vision, the Museum would encompass a working community of tradesmen, shops, and ship restoration activities, each contributing to the maritime ambience of the seaport’s nineteenth-century past. Stanford indicated the impact this new historic district might have on the city’s collective memory, pledging “The ships are gone, but they have left us proud memories, and if you come to walk down South Street today, turn in at Schermerhorn Row on Fulton Street, there you will find the offices of the South Street Seaport Museum where the story of the ships and the men who sailed them is being retold.” Stanford’s cry “Hurrah for old humanity!” might appear more nostalgic than a testimony to the age of industry; his writings indicate that this nostalgia sprung from a response to the climate of large-scale redevelopment that lower Manhattan had witnessed over the course of the previous two decades.
The community of citizens and organizations concerned with the expanding disaster zone that had transformed lower Manhattan had several key supporters, including the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Municipal Art Society. In 1965, Mayor Wagner established the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and signed the city’s first Landmarks Preservation Act. Several local organizations were in opposition to the LPA, including the Real Estate Board of New York, the Commerce and Industry Association of New York, and the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association. A spokesman for the D-LMA had requested the Mayor reject the bill, citing that it was “complex, ambiguous in many respects and will certainly be difficult for a property owner to understand.” Under the new law, a landmark was defined as a structure at least thirty years old, with historical and/or architectural significance to the city. The power of the commission was less in its ability to prevent an owner from demolishing his landmark property if he was intent on doing so, but rather to delay him, whereby an agreement could be reached for rehabilitation or renovation. Many owners were far from pleased with the landmark status that was bestowed upon their properties and cited infringement of personal property rights as well as the inability to make the most optimal use of these properties. To this, however, Municipal Art Society member Arthur C. Holden replied, “To say they can do nothing unless they destroy a building is a palpable confession of impotence and intellectual bankruptcy.”

The Municipal Art Society, a local preservationist group formed in 1892, appealed to the Landmarks Preservation Commission in calling for historic landmark designation of the Schermerhorn Row buildings on Fulton Street. An active voice in preservation efforts long before the Commission was created to address these issues, the Art Society had cautioned the city and its citizens to keep “a watchful eye on any changes that would effect the esthetic [sic] possessions of New York, and, when necessary, our voices should be heard in combating any such attempts to destroy the cherished remembrances of the past.” Several members of the Municipal Art Society, including New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, were resolute about the necessity for adaptive re-use (this term was not used by the MAS but has become commonplace since) of the city’s many historic structures. These supporters encouraged architects to look at new ways to utilize city landmarks, including the old Merchant’s House and the Astor Library, because “you can’t make a museum out of every landmark.” Landmark designation alone was not enough to save a structure from demolition or obsolescence; in order to keep these buildings viable and integrated within the fabric of the modern city, contemporary use and economic feasibility must be prime considerations.

A feasibility study conducted by the New York State Historical Commission provided validation for the Seaport project, outside of its architectural merits as some of the finest remaining federalist-style structures in the city. Arguing “adaptive usage of Schermerhorn Row is not only a feasible but also a most effective solution” to the question of land use in the district, the Commission cited recent preservation ventures in the redevelopment of Georgetown, District of Columbia and Newburyport, Massachusetts. The report invoked Walt Whitman’s reference to New York as “The City of Ships,” in this way recalling the glory of the city’s maritime history and recommending that collective memory and local heritage play “one small part” in the redevelopment of one of the world’s greatest cities. Most importantly, the report insisted Schermerhorn Row represented a “visible symbol of memory,” critical in maintaining the public’s sense of local and national heritage.

Ada Louise Huxtable, arguably historic preservation’s most colorful supporter, provided Times readers with an often-scathing commentary on the loss created by urban renewal’s demands for orderly progression. Huxtable chronicled the bulldozer’s progression across the island of Manhattan as if she were tracking General Sherman’s March to the Sea. The Times’ critic reported that “the southern tip of Manhattan, the city’s most famous face, looks like a disaster area,” argued that the city had spent twenty years “of ruthless and indiscriminate bulldozing of Manhattan’s most historic areas carried out with a single-minded insensitivity compounded about equally of bureaucracy and ignorance,” and remarked that “it usually takes bomb damage
or bulldozer public renewal to produce clearance and rebuilding on a comparable scale.”62

Huxtable was adroit at exposing the simple fact of economics in the urban renewal versus historic preservation game, challenging capitalism’s demand for the productive use of land with her indictment, “The reasons [for demolition] are obvious. There are no profits in preservation.”63

The South Street Seaport Museum

To lose history is to lose place, identity, and meaning. But continuity can be achieved only if the past is integrated into the contemporary context in a way that works and matters.64 (Ada Louise Huxtable, 1997)

It was very feisty. People wanted to do what they wanted to do. And the real estate industry was gung ho, it took a lot of negotiation and a lot of back and forth trying to give a little but not too much and try to have them preserve things.65 (Lenore Norman, past director of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, interview, 2008)

Negotiations over the proposed development of South Street as a historic museum district finally simmered after two years of adamant maneuverings on both sides. By December 1968, several key developments had taken place. First, the Lower Manhattan Plan had been approved by the City Planning Commission and had been hailed by city officials, commercial developers, the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, and the press as a promising lifeline for the still flagging downtown economy. Second, Mayor Lindsay had created the Office of Lower Manhattan Development to act as an organizing agent and liaison between the city and commercial developers in order to implement the Plan. Third, Governor Nelson Rockefeller had signed Senator Seymour’s proposed legislation, creating the New York State Maritime Museum, although in response to David Rockefeller and the D-LMA’s aggressive opposition to the legislation, Seymour had agreed, at the last minute, to omit wording of any/all public funding for the Museum. The D-LMA at last conceded, “Since plans for development of the South Street Seaport Museum appear to be progressing steadily with substantial financial support from private sources, there is a reasonable basis for approval of this project,” and suddenly reversed its vocal two-year opposition to the Seaport plan.66 Fourth, the South Street Seaport Museum, backed by the Friends of South Street and headed by Peter Stanford, had been granted a charter by the New York State Board of Regents. Lastly, the City of New York had designated the eleven-block area as a special urban renewal district within the Brooklyn Bridge Southeast Urban Renewal District, in which the Seaport Museum was named the unassisted (i.e., no public funds would be spent) sponsor of that district. Under the terms of this sponsorship, the city would acquire properties under eminent domain, but the Museum would be responsible for raising funds and covering all acquisition costs of those properties. As in the case of the New York State Maritime Museum, the charter was granted by the state, but in neither case would public funds be directed towards the cultural organizations.

Amid critics’ charges that the historic district would detract significantly from the Lower Manhattan Plan’s strategy for physical and commercial revitalization of the financial district, Stanford conceptualized a multiuse commercial and residential environment at South Street. Inspired by the maritime preservation work in San Francisco and Mystic, Connecticut, Stanford envisioned a working community with restored nineteenth-century row houses occupied by a mélange of house museums, cafes, small shops, and exhibitions. The neighborhood would be the museum, “a place where citizens could seek out and enjoy an important chapter of the heritage of their city.”67 Echoing Jane Jacobs, who observed that local residents and visitors are more likely to spend time on the streets when there is a mixed-use of shops, restaurants, commercial establishments, and upper-floor offices, the Museum’s earliest plans called for a lively street culture. “To keep the streets naturally alive is the essence of the restoration. . . . Real commerce and small shops and craft activities should do much to maintain this kind of life in twentieth

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Stanford understood that a healthy neighborhood depends on multifunctionality, and that the unique characteristics of the seaport district would encourage and sustain an animated street culture; indeed, commercial viability was integrated into South Street’s visions from the start. These expectations were heavily based on the economic success realized by San Francisco’s Ghirardelli Square waterfront restoration project earlier in the decade. Not simply concerned with historic preservation and a lively street scene, Stanford envisioned a “major economic stimulus in redevelopment.”

Financially, the Seaport project appeared promising. Plans to sell the Seaport’s air rights to neighboring properties, as the Seaport would not build up beyond the height of its present structures, would provide real income to the organization. Neighboring developers would pay heavily for the transfer of air rights from the South Street district to their own construction projects. In addition, a large influx of lower Manhattan residents was anticipated, expected to invigorate foot traffic in the neighborhood and provide a local source of patronage and consumer-based revenue. A projected 50,000 residents would soon call the neighborhood home, based on the approved Lower Manhattan Plan’s proposal for residential development along the waterfront. This influx of residents would create active pedestrian traffic and support the Seaport’s shops, restaurants, and public events. A second residential complex, Battery Park City, was planned for the west side of lower Manhattan, expecting to house an additional 45,000 residents and providing future foot traffic to the entire area. After a series of delays, both political and financial, Battery Park City was finally completed in 1985, but never yielded the kind of cross-town pedestrian traffic originally anticipated. Plans for the Manhattan Landing east side residential complex, a housing development spawned from D-LMA reports and the Lower Manhattan Plan, were approved by the City Planning Board but stalled during the city’s recession in the early 1970s and never got off the drawing table. This would prove a devastating blow to the Seaport’s economic strategy, as the historic district was depending on the strong residential base the new complex would bring to the area, and would have turned the sale of the Seaport’s air rights into a real financial asset.

**Legacy**

By 1969, the fight for historic preservation of the Seaport district in the midst of an expansive downtown redevelopment plan had been won; the federalist buildings of Schermerhorn Row survived and the South Street Seaport Museum emerged beneath the shadows of steel and concrete. New York’s connection to the sea would be experienced, and perhaps remembered, through the masts of nineteenth-century clipper ships moored alongside the renovated row houses of Schermerhorn Row. The South Street Seaport Museum emerged as a visible symbol of national and civic memory. The Seaport plan succeeded in staking a claim to the jumbled streets and sloped-roof buildings where the maritime heritage of old New York might be recalled. Not a rejection of the modern city, but rather a critical component to the fabric of a new urban landscape, the Seaport preservation project was fundamentally a victory for the future of urban development, arguing that heritage preservation and the incorporation of place-based memories were fundamental considerations in the growth of the modern city.

While preservationists of this era are frequently characterized as opposed to urban change, South Street’s founders anticipated that this museum district would be an integral and viable part of the new urban future. The Seaport’s founders were committed to economic sustainability and assimilation of the nineteenth century district into the contemporary fabric of the city, a position rarely credited to preservationists of this era. Like Progressive Era preservationists before them, who perceived historic preservation as a tool of reform amidst the swift and sweeping changes of modernity, South Street’s supporters envisioned preservation as a critical factor in transforming the landscape of the city. This, after several decades of an urban renewal strategy devoted to
widespread razing of the city’s physical and vernacular history, signaled a shift in the role that heritage would play as New York City struggled to reconfigure itself in a postindustrial urban landscape.

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Notes

2. The Fulton Fish Market was founded in 1821, “grew steadily in size and preserved a whole neighborhood of buildings from the clipper era and earlier. The slope-roofed buildings of Schermerhorn Row [were] built in the winter of 1811-12.” Peter Stanford, A Walk through South Street in the Afternoon of Sail (New York: South Street Seaport Museum, 1967), 16.


6. Ellen Fletcher Rosenbrock and Edmund V. Gillon Jr.’s photographic guide, South Street: A Photographic Guide to New York City’s Historic Seaport, provides a fascinating look at the neighborhood in the early 1970s. This was what Sharon Zukin would have described as a truly authentic neighborhood; the seaport was gritty.


11. Western Union Telegram from Edmund F. Wagner, President of DLMA, to Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller, June 10, 1966 (Rockefeller Archive Center, Record Group IV 3B 24, D-LMA Projects South Street Seaport 1966, S 2.3, Box 167, Folder 1594).


13. South Street Maritime Museum (Schermerhorn Row), Summary of Concept, March 21, 1966 (Rockefeller Archive Center, Record Group IV 3B 24, D-LMA Projects South Street Seaport 1966, S 2.3, Box 167, Folder 1594).

14. Letter from Sylvan Lawrence Company Inc. (Real Estate) to Gov. Rockefeller, July 19, 1966 (Rockefeller Archive Center, Record Group IV 3B 24, D-LMA Projects South Street Seaport 1966, S 2.3, Box 167, Folder 1594).


16. Randall Mason refers to the search for a “usable past” as a remedy for the culturally disorienting effects of urban modernization during the Progressive Era. “Historic Preservation, Public Memory,” 143
17. Curiously, it is the MCNY, which has, in late 2011, assumed control over the current South Street Seaport Museum.
18. Letter from John B. Goodman, Exec. Vice President of D-LMA, to Robert R. Douglass, Esq., Counselor to the Governor, July 18, 1966 (Rockefeller Archive Center, Record Group IV 3B 24, D-LMA 2.3 Projects South Street Seaport 1966, S 2.3, Box 167, Folder 1594).
20. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 19.
24. *South Street Seaport Museum; A Proposal to Recreate the Historic “Street of Ships” as a Major Recreational and Cultural Resource in the Heart of New York City*, July 1967. In the proposal, Seaport founders cite the maritime restoration successes in San Francisco, in which “over $20 million of private capital development went into the rehabilitation of the waterfront that followed the establishment of the museum and state historic park . . . visited by some 3 million tourists annually,” 9, 18 (Rockefeller Archive Center, Record Group IV 3B 24, Series 2 D-LMA, Sub-series 2.3 Projects, South Street Seaport, 1969-1972, Box 167, Folder 1595).
26. Mystic Seaport is a living history maritime museum on the coast of Connecticut. It was established in 1929 as a marine historical association and was highly regarded by Peter Stanford, serving as a model for his vision for the South Street Seaport Museum.
28. Ibid., 28.
29. Ibid., 28.
30. Ibid., 29–30. According to the RPA report, “Some of the poorest people live in conveniently located slums on high-priced land. . . . A stone’s throw from the stock exchange, the air is filled with the aroma of roasting coffee. . . . In the very heart of the ‘commercial’ city on Manhattan Island south of 59th Street, the inspectors in 1922 found nearly 420,000 workers, employed in factories. *Such a situation outrages one’s sense of order: Everything seems misplaced. One yearns to re-arrange the hodge-podge and put things where they belong*” (my italics). The fact that the RPA found the aroma of roasting coffee an insult to the potential of the financial district is, in this age of Starbucks and the $5 cup of coffee, ironic and amusing.
33. Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*.
34. In her introduction to the reprint of *The Lower Manhattan Plan of 1966*, Ann Buttenweiser notes that roughly 25% of all buildings in the Wall and Broad streets areas had been razed and rebuilt during the 1920s, and that, curiously, “No remorse was expressed, however, for the loss of landmarks of the city’s early skyscraper history.” The reaction to the urban renewal schemes of the 1960s, then, must be viewed in the context of broader factors which characterized that era.
35. Regarding Chase’s decision to take the lead and build its headquarters downtown: “The financial community in lower Manhattan was unhappy with the crowded streets, poor public services, and antiquated buildings, and many had already taken steps to leave the area. Midtown Manhattan was the preferred destination for most. . . . My personal view as that it was vital to keep the financial district intact in the Wall Street area and that Chase had to take the lead in the process.” David Rockefeller, *Memoirs* (New York: Random House, 2003), 160.
36. Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, “Lower Manhattan Recommended Land Use” (1st Report, DLMA First Report, S 2.3, Box 197, Folder 1807; Record Group IV 3B 24; Box 197, DLMA Series 2).
37. Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association, “Major Improvements Land Use Transportation Traffic” (2nd Report, November, 1963, DLMA 2nd Report, S2.4, Box 198, Folder 1810; Record Group IV 3B 24, Box 198, DLMA Series 2.4 Bulletins & Publications).
40. Willis, The Lower Manhattan Plan, 85.
41. Ibid., 75.
45. Ibid., 387.
46. For a detailed examination of Progressive Era preservation battles in New York City, see Max Page and Randall Mason, Giving Preservation a History; and R. Mason, The Once and Future New York; Historic Preservation and the Modern City (2009).
49. Peter Stanford, A Walk through South Street in the Afternoon of Sail (New York: South Street Seaport Museum, 1967), inside back cover.
54. Ibid.
55. Sloppy Louie’s restaurant, mentioned earlier in this paper, remained in its location at the corner of South Street and Schermerhorn Row until 1998.
56. Francis Keally, Past President of Municipal Art Society of New York, Letters to the Times: “Saving City’s Landmarks,” New York Times, October 4, 1961. Interesting to note, Senator Seymour had briefly held the office of President of the MAS in 1965 before he resigned that post to run for the State Senate seat to which he was ultimately elected.
59. Ibid., 12.
66. D-LMA memo to members of the Executive and Planning Committee from John H. G. Pell, Chairman Historic Sites Committee Re: South Street Seaport Museum, May 21, 1968 (D-LMA, Projects: So Street Seaport 1968, Series 2.3, Box 167, Folder 1596).
67. South Street Seaport Museum, South Street Seaport: A Plan, 1.
68. Ibid., 15, 19.
69. Letter from Peter Stanford, Chairman Friends of the South Street Seaport Maritime Museum to John B Goodman, D-LMA. December 16, 1966 (Rockefeller Archive Center, Record Group IV 3B 24, D-LMA Projects South Street Seaport 1966, S 2.3, Box 167, Folder 1594).

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