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Urban Virtues

The values of historic preservation go far beyond the clichéd notions of nostalgia and NIMBYism.

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For those who think of localism as a basic tenet of green design, consider this: three firms—the Gil Studio, of Brooklyn; Bill Butt, of Staten Island; and Mel Greenland, of Manhattan—restored the 66 stained-glass windows and the multipane Rose Window in the 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Aurora Lampworks, a historic lighting and replication company in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with about a dozen local employees, worked on the 237 intricately detailed brass fixtures and the 75-bulb chandelier, originally designed for gas and converted to electricity in 1907. EverGreene Painting Studios, based in Manhattan, used about 45 of their artisans to conserve and restore the exquisitely detailed interior paint work. M. Fine Lumber, also of Brooklyn, supplied salvaged timbers from demolished buildings needed for missing or rotted elements of the structural system. And that’s merely a sample. Nearly all of the workers came out of the city’s five boroughs.

The significance of this magnificent restoration has multiple layers. This was the first synagogue built as a synagogue by the Eastern European Orthodox immigrants of the Ellis Island generation. With the completion of the project, it is now home to both a small congregation (which never missed a Sabbath in 120 years) and the Museum at Eldridge Street, the nonsectarian organization that oversaw the restoration and is currently developing the building as a tourist and educational site.

The synagogue is one of the largest independent restorations of a historic landmark in New York City, but it’s more than that: this \$20 million, 21-year effort, initiated by a group of intrepid New Yorkers (including this author), underscores important aspects of historic preservation that remain undervalued and unrecognized. Restoring landmarks and renovating existing buildings provide all of the economic benefits inherent to localism; these strategies are also far more sustainable (in the truest sense) than most new construction. As architect Carl Elefante has said, “The greenest building is one that is already built.”

Architects Jill Gotthelf—who stuck with the job for 18 years, regardless of funding—and Walter Sedovic, who joined her seven years ago, are practitioners of what might now be called “green restoration.” Under their skillful direction, the synagogue’s attic insulation, for instance, is made from recycled blue jeans; the bathroom-stall partitions are recycled plastic milk jugs; and the lobby countertop is recycled glass, produced by Ice Stone, the Brooklyn Navy Yard–based cradle-to-cradle recycling company. Virtually every material element found in the original building remains, a goal from the start of this effort in 1986, when water was pouring through the roof and pigeons nested in the ceiling. Elements that couldn’t be restored were replaced in kind with recycled material when possible.

“Most of the money in preservation goes into labor and into the pockets of the contractors rather than materials,” Gotthelf says. “In new construction the labor is less expensive, and the money is in materials and in the walls. Preservation keeps materials out of landfills, and it has spawned a lucrative local salvage market.”

Despite the obvious local benefits associated with the synagogue restoration, many of the firms involved say their ability to stay in business is threatened by recent zoning changes and intense real estate speculation, which has shrunk both the supply of industrial space and housing opportunities for the skilled workforce these companies depend on. Dawn Ladd, who moved her lighting company from New Haven, Connecticut, to

Brooklyn 18 years ago, says that “after a three- to four-year breathing spell, the big up-zoning of Williamsburg is weakening the web of different shops we work with and support. In one efficient local trip, I could go from the metal spinner to the lacquer finisher with a stop at my supplier.” So far, at least five firms she worked with have been priced out and left town.

“People were caught off guard,” Ladd says of the businesses she has seen disappear. “If they were older property owners, they couldn’t refuse the offer and became millionaires overnight. Renters are in a much shakier position and may consider quitting rather than move, start over, and hire new employees. Other states are now doing New York’s work. Distance adds shipping costs, diminishes quality control, makes one less competitive, and is logistically more difficult.” It also increases traffic caused by delivery trucks and creates air pollution.

But the benefits of localism go beyond economics or even environmentalism. Ladd, whose employees live within transit or walking distance, echoes sentiments expressed by all of these local businesses, noting that their biggest advantage is being “just over the bridge.” This was particularly important for the synagogue restoration. “We visited hundreds of times,” Sedovic says, adding that being able to “build relationships, discuss the nuances of the work face-to-face, have lunch, and convey the goals of the job was invaluable and can’t happen over the phone.”

Despite the zoning changes and accelerating costs pushing businesses and talent out of New York, many firms struggle to stay. Jeff Greene, of EverGreene, has been restoring decorative artwork for 30 years and today has more than 250 largely New York-based craftspeople working on jobs all over the world. “My skilled labor is uniquely New York,” Greene says. “There’s a different arts sensibility here than, say, Wisconsin.” His employees run the gamut from college-educated students who want to work with their hands to blue-collar workers carrying on family traditions. Greene’s company is located on West 31st Street; he is tight for space—it’s become increasingly expensive over the years—but says, “I can’t leave this labor pool.”

Having local contractors do the work with local craftspeople is only one underrecognized value of preservation. Preservation is fundamentally sustainable. Given the importance green-building experts place on “embodied energy,” it’s curious that the industry standard barely acknowledges preservation. LEED for Existing Buildings emphasizes maintenance and upgrade but not restoration; LEED for New Construction awards just three points out of 69 for “building reuse,” with all sorts of caveats attached. In contrast, providing bike racks and access to public transit earns one point for each. No penalties accrue for demolishing a viable structure and sending it to a landfill. You even get points for recycling elements from that lost building.

Mayors and governors around the country are appointing commissions to develop sustainable policies, but they’re doing it with little or no in-put from preservation leaders. New York’s PlaNYC 2030 is silent on preservation and merely asserts that the city “will seek to adapt unused schools, hospitals, and other outdated municipal sites for productive new housing.” Where’s the commitment to leaving viable buildings out of landfills? Local and state governments are not entirely to blame here since the environmental movement has been slow to recognize the value of building conservation and preservation.

The synagogue’s many urban virtues are uncannily mirrored by its surrounding neighborhood. This dense collection of tenements, lofts, and small apartment buildings has seen its diverse set of structures transformed countless times: different tenants, different uses, the same buildings, with all of their early-twentieth-century embodied energy intact. But the Lower East Side is not immune from gentrification. The new taller buildings are neither denser (they often have larger apartments with the same number of units) nor particularly local (ground-floor retail tends to attract franchises capable of paying higher rents). But the 121-year-old synagogue and its timeless neighbors hold a valuable lesson for the future, proving once and for all that the only thing new about green design may be the label.

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