

Snapshot: Preservation Vision Café No. 1

The Café

On Tuesday June 22, 2010 the first Preservation Vision Café was held at the Neighborhood Preservation Center. Twenty colleagues gathered for cocktails and conversation inaugurating the series, which continues in the spirit of *Preservation Vision: Planning for the Future of Preservation in New York City*.

The Conversation

By Dana Schultz

Through café tables and generous libations, the Neighborhood Preservation Center's first-ever Preservation Café transformed the Center's meeting rooms into a welcoming, homey space "where everybody knows your name". Even before the official conversation began, the more than a dozen attendees were introducing themselves to new colleagues, catching up with old friends and already finding common threads of interest and news. Small tables were arranged with bar nibbles and before long the drinks started making their way around the room. Simeon Bankoff* served as the night's mixologist preparing three drinks - one to accompany each topic discussed. He, along with Anthony C. Wood,** led the discussion and kept up a lively banter throughout. As the two men pointed out, the height of summer is when things slow down a little in the greater preservation world of New York City (or alternately get snuck through), therefore making it the perfect time to pause and look back at the year. Since most of everyone's time is generally spent on specific preservation campaigns, it was felt that a public "following up" and evaluation of a few larger issues would be advantageous, if only to see if the goals of specific issues were successfully accomplished.



On that note they introduced the first topic, one that Tony felt would be the least "controversial"; the case study of St. Vincent's Hospital. Simeon asked the crowd if they felt that they had won now that the O'Toole building is no longer being demolished. The majority present seemed to agree that that was more of a matter of chance rather than a preservation victory. Most of the subsequent discussion focused on the fact that despite a neighborhood issue turning into a city-wide concern, there was no camaraderie or coordination between the greater preservation community. The various groups that were fighting to save St. Vincent's' buildings needed to have a shared strategy, but, instead, they were unaware of what their counterparts were doing. Everyone agreed that, in the future, a system should be put in place for, at the very least, the heads of different preservation groups to communicate and align.

The discussion on St. Vincent's had some specific highlights as well. A comparison that arose on several occasions was that of St. Bartholomew's versus St. Vincent's. It was felt that in the St. Bart's case, the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission was an ally of preservation advocacy groups, but with St. Vincent's, the LPC was on the other side. It was pondered whether this was a matter of politics and many felt it was. The other interesting subject that most agreed on was the issue gets tricky because both the hospital and preservation advocates were aiming to do good. One insightful point brought up about this was that, in truth, the St. Vincent's case was largely decided on financial hardship when, in fact, finances were not the issue. This inappropriate decision-making made for a bad precedent which needs to be watched. Overall, the St. Vincent's portion of the evening was definitely the longest and most thorough and evoked a common emotion for the need for change.



Coney Island's development was the next topic to be introduced by the hosts. A lack of leadership from preservationists was blamed for an inability to counter or even really answer the proposals made by the city and the site's owners, Thor Equities. Small groups such as Re-imagine Coney and Save Coney Island were fighting, but there was no larger, city-wide umbrella to anchor this battle. There was a debate on the "branding" of Coney Island and if it was a positive thing or whether it was just something that developers commercialized on. Another debate occurred when one attendee said that the Coney Island advocacy groups think they are trying to save something that has been gone for forty years, that the preservation battle there is mythical, and that one cannot landmark use. In opposition to this, another attendee stated that the hope of landmarking in Coney Island is more about a state of mind and emotion rather than a state of place.

Finally, the third and final case-study of the evening- West Park Presbyterian Church, an issue of preservation versus religion, was discussed. The most heated response to this was by one guest who felt that the landmark designation of the church was a "get-out-of-jail-free" card for the owners as it makes it easier for them to now sell or demolish the building under hardship. Others argued that the church's reluctance for landmarking was due to a lack of information. The church doesn't get a "booklet or pamphlet" when designated that explains the benefits of such a protection – although a simple point, this really is a very smart idea. There needs to be more education and outreach given to parties involved in a landmarks hearing. Interestingly, the West Park Presbyterian conversation kept reverting back to Coney Island; perhaps this was because people felt they had more to say about the previous topic than time allowed or perhaps it was because both topics similarly evoked a need for reform from preservation groups towards city agencies.



As the night drew to a close it was summed up that the larger issues at hand for the preservation community were a lack of leadership and the need for coordinated action and information-sharing; in short, that preservationists need to re-become a movement. It was cited that there had been, at one time, a regular gathering of preservation groups and perhaps it's time to try to regularly convene again. Simeon poured the final cocktails and people began to slowly disperse. Many lingered behind, not to finish their drink, but to get in that final word they were itching to say or to continue forming new acquaintances in the preservation field. The night was surely a success as almost everyone in the room spoke at least once. Yes, there may be work to be done, but recognizing this need and uniting to achieve it is the first step towards an even more successful preservation community in New York City.

The Drinks

Aviation

2 oz. Gin
 ½ oz. Lemon Juice
 ½ oz. Maraschino

Red Hook

2 oz. Rye
 ½ oz. Punt E Mes
 ¼ oz. Maraschino
 Lemon Peel Garnish

Martinez

1½ oz. Gin
 1½ oz Punt E Mes
 ¼ oz. Maraschino
 Orange Bitters

***Simeon Bankoff** has been the Executive Director of the Historic Districts Council, the citywide advocate for New York's historic neighborhoods, since 2000. A lifelong resident of Brooklyn, Simeon previously worked for a number of other historic preservation organizations in New York City, including the Historic House Trust, the Historic Landmarks Preservation Center and the New York Landmarks Preservation Foundation. He is a frequent lecturer and participant in cultural exchange programs concerning urban preservation and has been a featured columnist for *The New York Times*.

**** Anthony C. Wood** is a preservationist, writer, teacher, historian and grantsmaker. He has worked for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Municipal Art Society, The J.M. Kaplan Fund and is currently the Executive Director of the Ittleson Foundation. Tony is the founder and Chair of the New York Preservation Archive Project, and author of *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks*.

The Neighborhood Preservation Center is a unique project that acts as a catalyst for the work of others, serving as a meeting 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 or the Neighborhood Preservation Center, contact Felicia Mayro at fmayro@neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org or 212-228-2781.

The Preservation Vision Café program is made possible through the gift of an anonymous donor. More photos can be viewed on [our Picasa page](#).