and cutting them off from the rest of the world. In Brooklyn Heights the fences are invisible economic boundaries where preservation, like museum certification of the value of a painting or a piece of furniture, launches the landscape into investment territory.

From the point of view of public history, there is no one true story to tell. What is problematic with landmark preservation districts is that while they tell a particular story, they show no effort to explicate their storytelling commitments. Indeed, these commitments may be unconscious. We, however, can examine those commitments and make more conscious the dimensions of the public history we find. In this light we see that the waterfront factory district is "truthful" about the un-self-conscious functions and history of a city, while the preservation district is truthful about how some want to see history—as a clean, neat, expensive portrait of our own current needs and desires.

Follow-up Activities

The following items suggest some ways of pursuing the ideas in this essay; some are things to read, some are things to do.

- Consider the historic district in any city: look at the newspaper advertisements for apartments to rent or houses for sale. What were prices like fifteen years ago, before the recent surge of consciousness about historic preservation?
- Consider the changes in class and income for a historic neighborhood. The census shows shifts over time, demonstrating the migratory patterns of urban residents. The same buildings that now are seen as precious examples of nineteenth-century architecture may once have been workers' cottages.
- For a discussion of the distortions of history in parks preservation, see Elizabeth C. Cromley, "Riverside Park and Issues of Historic Preservation," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43 (October 1984): 238–49.
- See Michael Wallace, "Reflections on the History of Historic Preservation," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public,* Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

The Politics of Public History

Michael Wallace

The title of this volume, *Past Meets Present,* is accurate and congenial. But it could be a bit misleading. It might be read as implying that there is something called a "past" that is sharply separated from something called a "present." To me the past is not really past. It's alive. It has force, inertia, momentum. It is an onrolling tidal wave whose cutting edge *constitutes* the present with majestic—though not determinative—power. One fruitful way of conceptualizing the relationship between past and present is inherent in Marx's dictum that people make their own history, but not exactly as they please, for they must make it in circumstances inherited from the past. People in the past, that is to say, have left us a living matrix of constraints and possibilities within which we must work in the present. That is why if we ignore history, if we are ignorant of the way our world came into being, we impoverish or even imperil ourselves.

Note that this conception of the past tells us nothing about what to *do* in the present. That depends on who we are and what we want. The future will be decided not by the past, but by the outcome of contention in the present between people with different visions of what they want the future to be. My thesis is simply that if we do not understand the past/present relationship, we live on the surface of things,

vulnerable to explanations that focus on the conjunctural, the transitory, the immediate; we misdiagnose our problems and hamper our search for solutions. Understanding the way in which the present has emerged from the past maximizes our capacity for effective action in the present—whoever we are. The truth doesn't make us free—but it is an indispensable precondition for freedom.

This is not a conventional point of view in the United States. Most Americans do not have a high regard for history. We tend to focus on today and tomorrow, not yesterday. This may be because our culture undercuts our capacity to make connections in time.

To be sure, our historical sensibilities are strengthened by our individual experiences with the continuities of life—by our being beings in time. They are also enhanced to the degree to which we are members of families or communities that are conscious of their roots. Many Americans still have a strong awareness and appreciation of their local histories and traditions: I have met Massachusetts farmers who trace their forebears back two centuries and for whom Daniel Shays remains a living presence.

But I have been more impressed, overall, with the power of the pressures that undermine Americans' temporal understanding. Ours is, I believe, a *historicidal* culture. A host of forces tend to undermine our ability to locate ourselves in time, to disconnect present from past, to promote a 24-hour attention span.

Some of the most fundamental historicidal pressures are generated by the everyday workings of American capitalism, considered as an economic, social, and cultural system. From its European inception, capitalism has been an antihistoric force, impatient with the constraints of customary morality and traditional standards on speculative and profitable investment. Its proponents favored lucrative innovations over value-conserving continuities and set out to dismantle "outmoded" historically rooted brakes on accumulation. In Europe this antihistoricity was tempered by the need of aristocracies, no matter how commercial their bent, to justify their class position through appeals to antiquity. But in the American republic, elites proclaimed their self-made status; they could, and did, more readily dispense with the past.

A belief emerged and became deeply embedded in our culture that the United States had broken free of the dead hand of the past, had shattered tradition's chains.

Our impatience with the past had attractive dimensions. It promoted an exhilarating, innovative spirit (Schumpeter hailed it as "creative destruction"). But the triumph of marketplace over social considerations generated drawbacks that more than offset any liberatory potential: a lust for quick satisfaction and return, an instant and enclosed individualism, a profitably fast exploitation of resources, a borrowing from the future to solve current problems, and the consequent repeated subordination of public good to private gain. Entrepreneurial activities, in turn, constantly reinforced the antihistorical temper, most notoriously repeatedly demolishing the built environment and uprooting living communities—the material and cultural legacies of the past—to make way for profitable new construction. This destructive dynamism, no matter how appealing in its energy, took a psychic toll, diminishing Americans' sense of place, disconnecting us in time as well as space. And, to add insult to injury, after creating this deprivation and an attendant yearning for temporal reconnection, the entrepreneurial order would frequently turn an additional dollar by making history (or ersatz history) into another commodity for sale. Much public history, in consequence, became another entertainment—a comestible to be consumed, digested, and excreted.

Another wellspring of our historicidal culture is, of course, our continual reconstitution through immigration (voluntary or involuntary). This is not the simple business of severance and new beginnings that it might appear. It is true that many European settlers were farmers and artisans fleeing the rise of capitalist social relations; they sought to break with extant practices and to begin life anew. But they also aimed to retain the best of their cultures, by freezing time and thus halting the destructive accumulation process, or by establishing a better balance between past and future (a practice nicely caught in the place names they chose: New York, New England, New Orleans, New Utrecht). But the balance proved difficult to sustain. The settlers' need to purge the continent of its original Indian population set transcendence of history at the heart of the American experience. They saw fit to rip a black labor force out of its African context. The operation of the international labor markets repeatedly reinforced the severance from the past, creating a unique multicultural society whose history more and more resembled self-conscious artifact than received legacy. Again, while immigration (and continual re-migration within

the continental borders) had its benefits, by making flight into the future the solution to a host of inherited problems, it left a deadly legacy: the assumption that the past could be endlessly evaded.

The consequence of these and many other factors was the development in the United States of an undernourished historical consciousness, characterized not just by an insufficiency of facts, but by an impoverished understanding of how history happens. Americans alternate between several everyday philosophies of history, each of which mystifies the nature of the connection between past and present. On one hand, there are the modern-day variants of the "escape from the past" tradition: "be here now," we are enjoined; let us "make today the first day of the rest of our life." But it is not possible, even for go-ahead Americans, to step out of time. Trying to ignore the bus of history leads to getting run over.

Alternatively, we hew to a conception of history as a seamless and inevitable march of progress, its trajectory predestined by God, by a manifest destiny, by implacable social forces such as "modernization," by invisible hands, by the iron laws of something called "History." This notion, whether advanced by the Left or the Right, either robs us of power to act (by making us helpless agents of grand historical forces) or, conversely, gives us a ferocious sense of righteousness (History is on *our* side). Even the Santayana variant—those who do not study the past are condemned to repeat it—lends credence to the notion that "history repeats itself," another mechanical and profoundly ahistorical concept. All these ideologies diminish our capacity to make our own history.

These ideas in turn feed the American willingness to dismiss the past, to consider it dead, musty, irrelevant to present concerns. History becomes a source of boring edification for children (a corpus of facts, names, and dates, to be memorized, regurgitated on tests, and then blissfully forgotten), or a wardrobe of fancy-dress trappings for soap opera romances on the tube or in paperback novels.

It is difficult, given these attitudes, for Americans to believe, as I do, that history is a powerfully subversive and liberatory form of knowledge. Historicizing the present robs it of its sense of inevitability and restores a sense of human agency. It reminds us that things can go backward as well as forward. If we know nothing of how the eight-hour day, the social security laws, or democratic rights came into being, we might believe complacently that they are given features of the landscape, things that

have been and will be with us always. If we do not know they were won through struggle, and must be retained through struggle, it becomes much easier for us to lose them.

There is one last general explanation for the thinness of our culture's historical sensibilities worth considering—the functional utility of our not looking too closely at the roots of our own contemporary power (a characteristic shared, undoubtedly, by other highly successful societies, but perhaps enhanced by our convictions of our own inherent goodness). As an example of what I mean, let us look for a minute at a story that most Americans are firmly convinced is true, though professionals—and much of the rest of the world—know it to be utter hogwash: the Christopher Columbus saga. We all know its elements: everyone but Chris thought the world was flat, Isabella hocked her jewels to pay for the voyage, Columbus the undaunted explorer tricked his timorous crew into going on until, in the end, he "discovered America." Whereas, of course, the truth is that they knew perfectly well in Lisbon that the world was round and the journey theoretically possible, Columbus had backing from Genoese merchant bankers and powerful Church leaders, he was sued by the Pinzon brothers who claimed *he* had wanted to turn back, and he could not have "discovered" America because millions of people already lived there. Much more to the point, most people's knowledge stops abruptly on October 12, sustaining Columbus's benign explorer image. Thus they are usually astonished to hear about the second voyage, his launching of the first European pacification program in the New World, the subsequent slaughter, enslavement, and virtual extinction of the Taino Indians. Or that Columbus's operations were a bloody forerunner to the Iberian assault on the Central and South American mainlands, the demographic collapse of the native population, the importation of millions of slaves from Africa, and the profound alteration in the global balance of power between continents. For many Americans, "conquistador" means either an intrepid explorer or a type of decor found in hotel conference rooms. Other parts of the world know better: as Hugh Masakela sings, "Columbus, he's no friend of mine."

The genesis and perpetuation of the myth are beyond us here. But it strikes me that it serves as a foundation myth of what William Appleman Williams calls a culture of imperialism. Along with much else it allows us to accept the contemporary division

of the world into developed and underdeveloped spheres as natural and given, rather than a historical product issuing from a process that began with Columbus's first voyage. Imagine if the real story were common knowledge to American schoolchildren; would it be quite as easy to obfuscate the issues in the contemporary situation in Central America?

I don't want to overdo this. It's perfectly possible to know that events in today's El Salvador and Nicaragua are rooted in structures going back centuries and still want to send in the U.S. Marines: it depends on who you are and what your contemporary interests are. But if your long-run interests are in fact *not* so well served by an invasion, then your ability to resist it might be stronger if you were less susceptible to fantasies about outside agitators.

Latin Americans have a saying about North Americans: "They never remember, while we never forget." Why? Is amnesia the tribute memory pays to expediency? Can there be a desire not to know? Is not truth unwelcome in certain circumstances? Perhaps. But I am reluctant to make the free-market assumption that the ideas people buy are simply those they want to believe. When I tell people the real Columbus story, some are distressed about being deprived of myth. But most are angry at having been conned and are curious to know more: there is a liberation of intellectual energy.

If I am right in my assumptions and assertions so far, it follows that public historians have an immensely important role in this culture. As trustees of the public memory, they are superbly situated to inform Americans about the continuities between past and present. What public historians do can *count*. But they can also be relegated to the status of custodians of dead artifacts, keepers of pleasant but irrelevant preserves of the past. For what constitutes public history is not entirely up to the public historian. To paraphrase Marx again, while public historians may make historical consciousness, they don't get to make it exactly as they please.

I see any particular interpretive strategy, the core of any public history presentation, as the result of tussles among three different participant-producers. The actual producer (historian, exhibit designer, media person) must take into account the desires of, on one hand, the sponsor—the private or state agency that puts up the money—and on

the other hand, those of the audience, the intended consumers. The pressures from both sides can set considerable limits on the freedom of action of the public historian.

Sponsors tend to have the dominant impact on the interpretation's political perspective, an impact that, in the past, more often than not, has tended to mystify rather than clarify relations between past and present, and to underwrite rather than challenge the status quo. I do not think this is always a matter of crude and conscious intention. Power seldom operates with Brechtian directness. More often sponsors, be they philanthropists or museum boards, engage in messy, ambiguous attempts at influence. Nor are the politics of sponsors mechanically determined by their prior positions. Witness Henry Ford's resignation from the Ford Foundation on the grounds that the institution, in giving away money to critics of capitalism, had forgotten the roots of its fortune. Nevertheless, sponsors tend to represent established power and to balk at presentations that contest the way things are.

Audiences too are active, if more indirect participants in the process of constructing interpretations. Most public history (apart from that aimed at schoolchildren, a captive audience) is produced for a market, as a commodity. People don't have to buy if they don't want to. Consumers have their own conventions and assumptions, and tend not to gravitate to presentations that don't reinforce these. For producers who aim to *change* their audiences' minds on some matter, the prior necessity of attracting them as customers can act as a drag on innovation. But more often than not, I suspect, audience conservatism is simply taken for granted. The cry that something "won't sell" is often used as an excuse by those who want a program killed on other grounds. Conventional wisdoms are fluid things; audiences change with the times, and when challenged, often respond favorably. Witness the triumph of *Roots* in a culture once seemingly mired in the pieties of *Gone With the Wind*.

Roots suggests a larger point about the viability of interpretations. In the last analysis, the boundaries on what public history producers can do or say are established by the balance of power between contending groups in the larger society, not simply by the particular sponsors and audiences with whom public historians work. I tried to argue this in a piece on history museums in the *Radical History Review* a few years back. Among other examples, I noted that between the 1930s and the 1950s, blacks were virtually invisible at Colonial Williamsburg, though they had constituted the

majority of inhabitants of the eighteenth-century town. In the 1960s, the institution could no longer get away with this approach. The audience had changed. Blacks made active demands for restoration to the historical record, and many whites, influenced by the civil rights movement and exposed to new kinds of history in their schools, refused to accept the older filiopieties. This opened up space for struggle by producers within the museum.

To illustrate the complex interaction between sponsors, audiences, and larger political climates consider the following three case studies.

Disneyworld is not usually thought of as a public history production. But I'd argue that it's drenched in it. Indeed, as roughly 30 million visitors patronize its West and East Coast branches each year, I'd say Mickey Mouse may be the most influential historian in the country.

EPCOT, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, though ostensibly about the future, is in fact largely about the past. When Walt Disney died, his vision of a living experimental city died with him. The Disney corporation went to leading multinationals and offered them aid in constructing pavilions that would both sell products and refurbish their corporate images (and that of the business world's generally, also sagging in the early 1970s). As a Disney executive put it, "Industry has lost credibility with the public, the government has lost credibility, but people still have faith in Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck." Corporate giants agreed: a General Motors vice president noted that EPCOT would both give them the chance to "make contact with millions of motorists" and "be a good opportunity to point out how technological progress has contributed to the world and the free enterprise system."

How to do this? Partly by deploying the traditional Disney approach to historical material, first worked out in movies and then perfected in the Disneyland of the 1950s: to vacuum clean the past. As a Disney "imagineer" explained: "What we create is a 'Disney Realism,' sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements."

By the 1970s there were signs that this wasn't good enough. Indications of its inadequacy appeared at the Hall of Presidents. Built in the 1960s on a 1950s design, it features a stage full of robot presidents—all nodding or solemnly (if somewhat arthritically) gesticulating. A sepulchral voice-over calls the roll of these men "who have defended the Constitution." The atmosphere of awe lasts until the narrative reaches Richard Nixon, at which point the disparity between artificial history and living memory is too great, the spell snaps under the strain, and chortles and guffaws break out.

In the 1970s, a different approach to presenting the past was developed. Each corporation sponsored a pavilion that explained to visitors how a particular area of American life would look in the future: tomorrow's world of transport is brought to us by General Motors; Exxon does energy; Kraft, food; AT&T, communications. At the core of each pavilion is a ride on moving cars that haul visitors past dioramas that provide a history lesson about that particular system. Each runs from the Cavemen to the Future, and the import of each is that most of history was a smooth progression of ever-greater technological mastery, provided in large measure by inventors and businessmen.

But—and here the weight of the assumed audience makes itself felt—when the cars approach the recent past, there is a sudden departure from triumphalism. Each presentation acknowledges that there have been Problems. Kraft recalls dust bowls, Exxon the energy crisis. All are noticeably silent on corporate contributions to these states of affairs, which are blamed variously on "technological man" or something called "we"—as in "we polluted the air" or "we abused the environment." Each presentation asserts that there's no need to worry, that socially responsible corporations are on the job, fixing these problems, manning the ecological front lines. As a Kraft vice president summarized the strategy: "Hopefully [visitors to our pavilion will] be aware that major organizations are working at new ways of controlling the land—without disrupting the ecology—to ensure an adequate food supply. To our benefit will be the message that here is Kraft with that kind of concern."

Finally, all the cars break through into the Future, which is always set in outer space, replete with corporate logos (as in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*). In the future all problems have vanished. Says a Disney man: "We admit to being optimistic over man's future. You can call EPCOT our answer to the gloomy future predictions of the Club of Rome." Visitors have thus been ridden, literally on rails, from a bowdlerised past to a corporate future.

Of the many ways in which EPCOT profoundly distorts the nature of the historical process, one example suffices: in all the depictions of the past as a continuous expansion of man's possibilities through technology, there is not a word about war, either the critical impetus it provided through the ages to scientific development, nor the phenomenal destruction such development has wrought. In the Disney future there are no killer satellites whirling around up there in outer space, despite the fact that several of the participating corporations are defense contractors.

Another point: corporate history is unidirectional—implying a smooth and inevitable development from Leonardo to Exxon. (The theoretical roots of this history were developed in the academy, in the modernization theory popular since the 1950s.) An accurate temporal road map of the route from then to now would show that there were many forks along the way; traveling down any of them might have led to a different present. By whiting them all out, it is made to appear that there never were any alternatives to the contemporary order, and it is implied there are no alternatives to a corporate organization of the future.

For all the problems with EPCOT, its 1970s-style corporate liberalism can generate feelings of fond nostalgia when it is compared to historical productions of the 1980s.

A more up-to-date approach is currently floating in the Hudson River—the "Sea Air Space" museum housed aboard the 900-foot, 41,000-ton aircraft carrier *Intrepid.* It was set up by a prosperous real estate developer who visited the *Intrepid* in its incarnation as the Bicentennial exposition ship in Philadelphia, and—impressed by the Smithsonian's treatment of the history of technology—set out to bring the ship to New York and convert it into a sea-air-space museum. He went to the U.S. Navy and obtained the ship under a public law allowing its transfer to civilians who would memorialize the men and women who had served on board. The *Intrepid* opened in 1982 with the aid of grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and New York City, and assistance from donors and sponsors including Grumman Aerospace, Norden Systems, Northrup Corporation, General Dynamics, Sikorsky Aircraft, and United Technology.

These major defense contractors helped stuff the "museum" with past and present weaponry. Grumman Aerospace obligingly provided a twenty-minute film (narrated by Cliff Robertson) that is a cross between a recruiting poster and a sales pitch for weapons systems, notable particularly for its avoidance of all mention of the subject of war.

History—and thus war—are minimally acknowledged in another section of the *Intrepid* presentations that deals with the ship's own past. A slide show treats the ship's role in the 1940s, concentrating on the Battle of Leyte Gulf. It is the best presentation on board, as it gives viewers some sense of daily life and the contemporary military situation, and it recreates a dramatic (and actual) kamikaze attack on the ship. But even this highlight avoids probing too deeply into aspects of shipboard social relations such as segregation—not even the account of the heroic black cooks, normally kept in the kitchen, who, with the ship under attack, volunteered to man Guntub #10 and sustained major casualties. Nor does it raise any of the big questions about the war in the Pacific.

Nor is there any mention of the ship's role in a less popular war. In 1968 alone, from Yankee Station off North Vietnam, the *Intrepid*'s planes dumped twelve million tons of ordnance (presumably including napalm and cluster bombs) in the space of 106 days; it was named Ship of the Month in December.

Vietnam does put in a cameo appearance in a third area of the ship, the Hall of Honor Museum, unveiled by President Reagan in December 1983. It features an audiovisual slide presentation on military gallantry from Gettysburg to Binh Dinh, narrated by Martin Sheen. Freedom Foundation was the historical consultant. The show jumbles together images culled from America's past wars, conflating the Civil War struggle to end slavery and the World War II battles to smash fascism with invasions that suppressed the freedoms of Mexicans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Filipinos. By intercutting shots of "dedicated defenders" in action in World War I, World War II, and Vietnam, it promotes a kind of innocence by association. Despite the inclusion of what the museum director calls antiwar statements—it cites Sherman and Napoleon on the hellish nature of war—the overwhelming emotional emphasis is on the comradeship and self-sacrifice of war. Particularly infuriating to this visitor is the way it abstracts the very real and honorable courage of individuals voluntarily or involuntarily caught in a situation of war, and deploys those responses in the service of a militarist sensibility.

I asked the director about the approach to Vietnam and the absence of any larger analyses in its history of war. He told me that part of the Navy's condition for turning over the ship in the first place was that the museum accept oversight of its interpretive program by a board of retired admirals. The admirals insisted the museum be "nonpolitical." In their view, Vietnam and the controversial aspects of World War II were political, but presenting military hardware as objects, with no information about the horrors of which they are capable, was not political. But these weapons are not videocassette recorders or new model cars. They can exterminate the planet. The ends that they have served and are now serving are matters of hot public debate. A museum that set these objects in a critical historical context could make a contribution to that debate. One that turns them into objects to excite the awe of children, is, in my opinion, historicidal.

The *Intrepid*'s public history programming does more than merely foster a vaguely militarist *zeitgeist*. In the current climate, in which the Reagan administration is working hard to reverse the antimilitary attitudes of the1960s and 1970s, the *Intrepid* is an active combatant in the assault on the "Vietnam syndrome," that cluster of public memories that acts as an impediment to Central American invasions, the deployment of cruise missiles, or the development of Star Wars. This is precisely, I suspect, what led the president to award a plaque to the *Intrepid* for serving "as inspiration to both old and young for years to come."

The *Intrepid* museum plays a still more activist role (for all its putatively nonpolitical status) by promoting the militarization of its host city. In July 1983, from the deck of the *Intrepid*, the Navy announced that a surface action group of seven warships would be permanently based in Staten Island. They will probably carry more than five hundred Tomahawk sea-launch cruise missiles—one is displayed on board the *Intrepid*—each capable of carrying a nuclear warhead ten times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb, thus making New York for the first time a military target, and laying the city open to the possibility of catastrophic accident in the crowded harbor. When the lead ship of the task force, the SS *Iowa*, paid a preliminary visit to the harbor, it was the *Intrepid* that hosted the occasion.

On the other hand, audiences, as we have noted, are not passive creatures. New Yorkers have not been flocking to the ship: paid attendance in 1983 was half of what

financial survival required. Partly this is because despite the awesome (and admittedly fascinating) character of the ship itself, the exhibits are rather boring. Partly it is because the cost of tickets is two or three times that of other museums in the city. And partly it is because the Vietnam syndrome is alive and well in New York: despite the exaggerated claims of jobs the Navyport will bring, so far tens of thousands have signed a petition calling for a nuclear-free harbor.

The recalcitrance of the New York audience has brought the *Intrepid* to the brink of collapse. The organization declared bankruptcy in July 1985, but has continued to operate, bringing in funds by renting the ship out to corporations and the jet set for private parties (one, a Star Wars costume party, went until four in the morning), or as a background for advertising photos (models, draped around fuselages, do their bit to revive military chic). Despite their current bind, the *Intrepid* board and staff plan a massive expansion, and are inviting corporations to present—à la EPCOT—their own historic interpretations. The returns on this particular tug of war between producers, sponsors, and audiences are not yet in.

Is the *Intrepid* the wave of the future? My last example is of a public history presentation for which the interpretive strategy is not yet settled, and is perhaps susceptible to change: Ellis Island.

The National Park Service had long envisioned restoring Ellis Island, but not until federal legislation in 1980 allowed it to earn income by leasing its buildings to private enterprise did it forge ahead. It turned first to the Sheraton Corporation, which planned to create a hotel out of the hospital. Then in 1982, President Reagan and Secretary of the Interior James Watt established a Centennial Commission, headed by Chrysler Corporation chairman Lee Iacocca, to raise funds for the Park Service restoration by appealing to school groups and civic organizations, and by selling special advertising privileges (as was done for the Olympics, and recommended in the plan to put ads on postage stamps).

Fierce opposition from historic preservationists and an advisory board of historians to the notion of corporate types hobnobbing in splendor next to the Great Hall scuttled the original hotel plan, and while there still appears to be sentiment for constructing what has been called an Ethnic Williamsburg (at one point, Iacocca

apparently wanted to bring in Disney "imagineers" as consultants), preservationists have made serious inroads against the developmentalists.

There was much contention, also, about the interpretive strategy Ellis Island would follow. It appears that Reagan and Iacocca favored a memorialization of an "up-from-poverty" story of the model white ethnic. These "real immigrants," goes the story, escaped poverty and repression, came to the land of opportunity, and American freedom made it possible for them to climb the ladder of success through their own individual, family, and community efforts, without help from big government or the taxpayer. (This antigovernment approach, to paraphrase John L. Lewis, ill befits Lee Iacocca, a man who has supped well at the taxpayer's table.)

It should be noted that this version of the meaning of the immigrant experience legitimates the contemporary right wing's dismantling of the New Deal. It suggests that blacks and contemporary immigrants should rely on themselves. Class, it implies, is a temporary phenomenon; in time, blacks and Hispanics, too, will move to the suburbs. And if they don't, the record of prior immigrant success suggests that modern failure is a matter of insufficient grit and determination.

This interpretation, like so much recent right-wing ideology, distorts real experience while cleverly cultivating a superficial plausibility. It flatters now-comfortable ethnics by lionizing their ancestors as rugged and successful individualists. But it obscures the fact that older ethnics (and blacks) were instrumental in creating the institutions and practices currently despised by the Right—labor unions, the New Deal, unemployment insurance, social security, the growth of schools, GI benefits, highways, suburbs, and health care—all the things, that is, that made the mainstream wider, and provided the collective underpinning for individual efforts and successes.

The Ellis Island advisory committee of historians fought this approach. A prospectus the National Park Service adopted broadly outlines their alternative. This includes three interpretive themes, one on Ellis itself, another on the history of immigration in global perspective (including, especially, contemporary arrivals), and a third exploring the question of American identity (advancing the mosaic over the melting pot approach). These themes sound promising indeed, but the actual work has since been turned over to a consortium of exhibition designers, over whose work the historians will have no control, and their proposed interpretive strategy has not yet been revealed.

But let us imagine, for a moment, if we were freed from corporate and bureaucratic constraints, how we might use the opportunity the Ellis restoration affords to connect past and present by bringing our expertise to bear on problems of today.

We might, for example, set current public policy debates in historical context. Major congressional controversy is now under way (as it has been for decades) over the continuing influx of Mexican workers into the Southwest and undocumented immigrants into the country generally. These discussions, and public understanding of the issues at stake, could be illuminated by examining the history of labor migration and state policy in international perspective, perhaps through an exhibition that compared "guest workers" (Mexicans in Texas, Turks in Germany, North Africans in France, Chinese in Africa), and which was made with cooperation from curators from all those countries.

Another exhibition might compare the role of international development policies in engendering mass demographic movements. It might be intriguing, for instance, to compare the role of English imperialism in generating nineteenth-century Irish migration (far more important than the potato famine, the explanation conventionally proffered to popular audiences), with the impact of contemporary U.S. and European corporate expansion, which similarly appropriates peoples' lands and drives them first to domestic shantytowns and eventually to U.S. cities. Perhaps if visitors to Ellis Island were aware of the connections between the activities of the International Monetary Fund, major multinationals, and the CIA, on one hand, and immigration on the other, it might produce some fresh thinking on the subject. Despite the complexity of these issues, by the way, such a presentation need not be dry or dull, but could be done dramatically. One could, for example, compare the migratory life of a particular Irish family with that of a contemporary Dominican peasant family that moved from the countryside, first to the ITT-leased free trade zone where they did industrial assembly work at wages of twenty-seven cents an hour, and then, after the U.S. invasion is 1965, to Washington Heights in New York City.

On another front, it might be interesting to have a comparative show on America as a home of political exiles—covering the varying welcomes accorded Germans in 1848, Russians in 1905, Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, Hungarians in 1956, Cubans in 1959, Chileans in 1973, and Haitians, Vietnamese, and Salvadoreans in the 1980s. It would be interesting to examine to whom and for what reasons America has refused

(and is refusing) entry, on political and moral grounds—even temporary entrance to address American audiences.

These are but a few of the many potentially interesting and germane public history presentations that Ellis might house. But, of course, even to suggest any of these seems a bit silly. That's because no sooner do we start accelerating down the highway of imaginative programming then . . . WHAM!, we run head on into the roadblocks of power and convention, and we crack our heads up against the windshield. Who would *fund* these exhibits? Apart from the specific political reservations that would be raised, more generally we'd be told: museums don't *do* this kind of thing. They deal only with the past.

To date, that's been quite true. Indeed almost any historical investigation that brings its analysis down to the present, as opposed to cutting it off at some safely distant point in the past, raises the possibility of becoming politically controversial (and, in large measure as a consequence, threatens to become *interesting* to mature adults.)

One way to make such material more palatable to powers-that-be, and conceivably still more interesting to general audiences, would be to present different interpretive points of view. Have *two* opposing exhibits side by side. Such a presentation would let the secret out that historians have great roaring differences among themselves, and would teach museum visitors not to accept *any* presentation as the gospel truth. Dual approaches could be expanded into debates or forums and include audience participation. If some of the living history museums would try not simply to reconstitute social relations of the nineteenth century, but rather to bring their subjects down to the present—tracing the impact of agribusiness, suburban developers, and various government policies on contemporary small farmers, for example—the museums could present representatives of farm workers, agricultural societies, chambers of commerce, the Agriculture Department, in debate on today's issues in historical perspective.

But no matter how objectively or scientifically controversial material might be presented, if museums begin to overstep their presumably apolitical boundaries, they will encounter stiff resistance. (Indeed, one implication of my overall analysis is that the larger balance of power in the 1980s is unpropitious for the critical interpretations

of the 1960s and 1970s, and may reduce some practitioners to having to do guerrilla work within their institutions even to sustain established approaches.) Does this mean nothing can be done? The road ahead is not easy, but we do have the responsibility to struggle to overcome mystification, whether by disconnection or distortion, by silence or assertion, and, in the process, to redefine what museums do.

But we might also strengthen our hand if we organize. The first step is to create a critical apparatus. A few journals (my own *Radical History Review* is one) regularly publish reviews of public history presentations. But, basically, a sustained source of analysis and commentary does not exist. Any fifth-rate monograph is assured of getting umpteen reviews, but an exhibition seen by thousands, perhaps millions, gets next to no peer scrutiny. Why not develop a critical professional journal, a sort of *New York Review of Public History,* which regularly analyzes exhibits, movies, television docudramas, and so on. It could become a place in which to hash out theoretical and political issues such as the ones I raise here, to debate alternate directions for the movement, to launch trial balloons of new exhibits. In addition to serving as a vehicle for professionals, it could be popularly accessible, with lots of full-color photos, and so forth; there is a sizable potential market in all those visitors to popular history sites. If it were well done, and well respected, and included the luminaries of the profession on its board, I think it might strengthen the hand of isolated producers. If a sponsor wanted to do a conventional show, the producer could say "well, yes, but Houston tried that last year and it got panned in the *Review.*"

By whatever means, however, it is necessary to set professional standards. We must and will have wide differences of opinion. But we should be able to agree that some silences are inexcusable, some assertions out of bounds. Even the ranks of the Voice of America and the CIA have protested at being forced to falsify or distort reality. Can we do any less when the public memory is at stake?

The process of professionalization has worked for other disciplines. Academic historians used to get hired and fired by railroad magnates until the establishment, a hundred years ago, of the American Historical Association, which set limits on the power of autocratic university managements. Obviously power is not going to go away: it will continue to shape and alter agendas. But we are not puppets. We too can make our own history.