

Make Tribeca Whole

Lynn Ellsworth, Tribeca Trust

This essay explores how historic districts - Tribeca's in particular - create a unique sense of place, the history that preceded them, the fragility of the commons they create, and why they ought to be expanded.

Historic Districts Create a Livable, Distinctive Neighborhood

What creates the unique sense of place that we find within Tribeca's built environment? How did Tribeca end up so desirable? The answer lies in the historic districts. Without them, Tribeca's character would have vanished in the same way historic Yorkville on the Upper East Side vanished from the Upper East Side underneath a welter of stark, high-density high-rises and public-private plazas.¹

Historic district designation also made Tribeca into an international urban success story, one that illustrates how adaptive re-use of a whole neighborhood is smart development.² Of course, it wasn't only historic district designation that made Tribeca successful. Other assets played synergistic roles. For example, it helps that Tribeca is walking distance to two industries: government and finance. Second, Tribeca has always had great subway access. Third, by 1978, loft dwellers and residents of Independence Plaza had built two small but visually distinctive public gems that reflected the architectural language of the as-yet-undesignated historic district: an elementary school and a children's park. Combine the school and park with the public good represented by historic district designation and you get something more: a "world class" residential neighborhood and a recipe for how to create one.

That quality has also resulted in enormous demand for access to Tribeca. The very intensity of this demand has bred problems that threaten the long-term character of Tribeca's built environment. The problems can be laid at the door of the policy decision to "under-designate" the historic districts and leave out about a third of Tribeca. Towers and overly bulked piles now rise on the sites that were excluded even though these same new buildings erode the sense of place that put Tribeca on the map. Under-designation was clearly a mistake. How did it happen? And above all, what can we do to fix it? Is it too late? This essay speaks to these questions.

Tribeca and the "Golden Age of American Architecture"

¹ The editor of Metropolis magazine has even published a video lamenting the loss of Yorkville called "My Banal Neighborhood".

² As it did for Soho as well.

In 1945, before there was Tribeca, Battery Park City and the World Trade Center site, the area was thought of as the Lower West Side. It had several linked zones within it. There was Washington Market, Radio Row, the waterfront, Little Syria and clustering of occupations that created districts like the textile, crockery, printing, produce, egg and butter districts.

The entire architectural ensemble looked like what the historic parts of Tribeca look like today. A lot of it was brick. There was cast iron and limestone. It was medium-rise, punctuated by the occasional “early” masonry-clad skyscrapers of 10-15 stories. And it was vast, stretching all the way from Liberty Street to the West Village, reaching deep into what is now Soho and Chinatown. It was not just a food market and warehouses. It had a little bit of everything: white collar offices, garages, blacksmiths, residences, tenements, printers, small banks, small retail, publishing, and a huge variety of small-scale manufacturing. There were a lot of “poor” people living in these commercial areas too, a fact not mentioned much in the usual sources. It was diverse and thriving, a world built before the zoning code tried to separate occupations and people. If you add in the Seaport and the Battery/Wall Street zone, the entire area represented the historic core of the most successful 20th century city on the continent.

Noted architect and historian Robert Stern identifies the period when Tribeca (and most of NYC) was built – from the end of the Civil War to the onset of WWII – as the “Golden Age of American Architecture.” Walking through Tribeca today you can still see that period: original row houses, the warehouses and lofts that replaced the row houses, and the larger factories and office buildings that came even later. Each new wave – built in a common architectural language - added diversity to the streetscape. The result was the “wonder city” whose bustling diversity and beauty awed everyone, even before the great skyscrapers came up.

The lower west side was a huge center of small businesses at the confluence of the financial, shipping, government, printing, and textile district. It was dominated by middle and small guys renting in small offices, many of them linked to the agricultural world through Washington Market supply chains.

The area that would become Tribeca had also survived a number of destructive upheavals. St. John’s Park became the Hudson Rail terminus; the terminus then became the cloverleaf to the Holland Tunnel. Elevated trains went up on the avenues and then came down in the 1920’s. The subway arrived in 1904. Throughout all these changes, a great part of the built environment endured: tenacious, gritty, medium-density (enough to support subways) and beautiful. It was successful without a doubt as a series of linked, walkable city neighborhoods. However, it had a problem. The wealthy had all left in the 1880s when Vanderbilt’s railroad terminus replaced St. John’s Park. The building of the elevated trains had chased out any stragglers among them. This meant that after the war the area had no powerful resident protectors just when a new period of destruction would begin.

The Post War Conundrum by the Hudson

At the end of World War II, although the west side piers were still booming, the infrastructure of the car and truck was on the rise. Putting those new roadways and tunnels had done quite a bit of damage to the city. For example, the residents of the lower part of Little Syria on Washington Street got booted out by eminent domain in 1945 to construct the entrance to the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel. The residents of little Syria were Christian Arabs, but seen as irrelevant to bigger plans or a Robert Moses-determined “greater good”. Not so irrelevant were the longshoremen and the Genovese crime family. Together, they had tight control of the west side wharves and they contended with the Port Authority who claimed greater lordship there. They were not so easily gotten rid of.

Historians differ on what happened next. Some say it was containerization. Shipping containers require very few workers, but lots of empty spaces as a staging ground for the equipment, or so the argument goes. The Longshoremen’s Union knew containers were a threat to their existence. They tried to resist. Some historians imply that it seemed easier for the Port Authority to move the shipping out of the West Side altogether than to contend with the West Side’s tough longshoremen and unpalatable mob families.

Either way, the Port Authority built a new “modern” container port over in New Jersey in the 1950’s. From there it sent its first container shipment out in 1956. The immediate effect was to reduce demand for unloading things at the West Side piers. It made the physical infrastructure appear as un-modern as the union and the mob who dwelt there. What should be done with piers that the Port Authority (and technology?) had rendered redundant?

No civic authority responded with strength or leadership to the shipping decline of shipping with ideas about adaptive re-use of the docks and warehouses near the river. Stranger still, nobody in power thought about capitalizing on the amazing vitality of the nearby produce market that retailed food around the country to chefs and housewives alike. Despite it’s obvious success, Washington Market was also seen as archaic as well.

Some of this lack of imagination can be explained by the era. It was still the 1950’s. Cars and trucks were taking over the cities, crippling the railroads. Workers were moving to Levittown. It seemed that all a city really needed to improve itself was wide straight avenues and better highways to let the cars in. Top-down mega-planning was also in vogue among economists and planners alike, and a new, “modern” and gigantic American architectural corporatism was on the ascent. West Village resident Jane Jacobs had not yet published her influential book, *The Death and Life of American*

Cities. Adaptive reuse of old buildings, one of her key arguments, was not yet an idea in the mainstream.

Situating the Problem of the Lower West Side

It was in this cultural and technological moment that Lower Manhattan became subject to a barrage of policy debates and an ensuing wave of real estate speculation. The debates were complicated by the fact – if not prompted by it -- that the big property developers down here had made a mess of the financial district and lower Broadway by overbuilding it in the 1920's. They had torn down an amazing number of architecturally great (and very large) buildings to put up even bigger buildings. It had been a typical speculative frenzy that was called to a halt only by the Great Depression and one that brought forth the Zoning Code.

Moreover, in their frenzy, the developers had built too high for the narrow streets of Dutch New York. The area ended up being seen as too congested, too, dark, and a little creepy. When good times returned after the war, Midtown with its superblocks and straight avenues became the prime location for corporations. How, worried downtown power men, might they make lower Manhattan attractive again for “modern” corporations? And as if midtown weren't enough competition, the suburbs were also calling. How to compete with that? The downtown men found a great hero in David Rockefeller. He had ignored the pull of midtown and the suburbs and built a new post war office tower downtown for his bank, the Chase Manhattan. Moreover, his brother was governor of the state.

The stakes were all raised when it became clear that downtown might also be able to benefit from the federal urban renewal funds. Urban renewal, aka, slum clearance, had been devastating neighborhoods all over New York and the floating of a 1942 city plan brought the lower West Side into that game, at least as a possibility.

This combination of elements made for a great policy scrum: problematic unions, frustration with mob influence, federal money, the fantasies of urban renewal, declining demand for shipping out of the Hudson River Piers; the Port Authority's hope to “modernize” the port by just moving it elsewhere; a desire to compete with the midtown office market; a silent, largely immigrant and poor residential population; the triumph of big planning and corporatism; and the seeming desiderata of adapting the city to cars and trucks. Of course, the outcome of this scrum would be framed as a technological necessity, the greatest possible public good and the only reasonable course of action.

The Washington Market Urban Renewal Plan

The first victim of this policy debate was the Washington Market building itself – and then the wider neighborhood around it. The food and produce market had been there since Dutch times. It had gotten an elegant new structure in 1880 and then another antiseptic one in 1941. It was growing so much that there were eight studies in the 1930's and 1940's discussing how to expand the produce and meat market to deal with boom times. Most stakeholders wanted to stay in the area. One idea was to build a bigger market on landfill simply by spanning two of the decaying Hudson River piers, an idea that was before its time. This debate got woven into one that excited the real estate people: building office towers to be called a "World Trade Center".

David Rockefeller was chair of the association of the most powerful downtown real estate men: the Downtown Lower Manhattan Association. They proposed in the late '50's and early 60's to simply demolish all of the area (Radio Row, Washington Market, what was left of Little Syria, etc.) and build vertical office towers, use the dirt to create an in-fill zone along the shore, and then build housing and offices on that new in-fill.

Using eminent domain over the protests and failed lawsuit of the affected small businessmen, the usual charges were brought: the Washington Market itself and the area around it was an unhealthy slum. So was Radio Row. There were poor people lurking; the mob was surely everywhere; there were mosquitoes and rats at the market; there were foreigners, the trucks needed wide straight streets; it was congested; it was archaic; it all stunk. What it needed was a dose of Corbusier-style "modernity" (Corbusier was an architect-ideologue of "modernity" who liked things to be extremely tidy).

A vast swath of a thriving urban area was thereby condemned. Much of the Seaport area was also treated similarly. The produce men were "relocated" to Hunts point. The Washington Market Building itself was quickly bulldozed and the lot sold to a real estate speculator. Whatever wasn't razed in urban renewal would be razed incrementally. Wall Street North and West would arise in their place. That was the plan.

In this way a new world was born. But first there was rubble.

Tribeca Empties, then Refills

What is now Tribeca then went into a period of adjacent stagnation and uncertainty, as the entire plan took about 20 years to implement and build out. Businesses left. Prices went down for the property owners adjacent to the urban renewal mess. Massive plans got shaped and reshaped. The public war over how to handle the deteriorating elevated West Side Highway and the idea of a new highway along the Hudson ("Westway") kept investment near West Street a risky proposition.

The area closer to City Hall and Broadway was not immune to this uncertainty, but it had different pressures, more typical ones: relentless city planning for a new “modern” civic zone, and the speculative desire of developers to declare an industry to be dead, tear down its relics and put up something bigger. For example, many of the great textile warehouses on the south side of Worth were torn down in 1964 for a possible office building. Alas, the site only ended up a big parking lot for ten years. Then in 1974 when ATT tore down even more of the aforementioned Worth Street block to build the gigantic windowless edifice known as 33 Thomas Street. It wasn’t just companies that did this. The city did the same sort of thing. Con-Ed tore down the spectacular Rothschild Building for a sub-station at West Broadway. All this happened without a peep of protest. But to be fair, not many people were living down here in the 1960’s to do any objecting.

Inevitably the uncertainty lifted. By 1974 the artists were well established in many part of Tribeca. Residents began to move into the newly finished towers there on Greenwich Street. The term Tribeca was coined. It was not exactly boom times, but the area was thriving again. It filled with lots of “live-work” business and artists, writers, independent film people, idiosyncratic retired journalists, composers, singers, landscape architects, design people, niche start-ups, shingle-on-the-door attorneys, and a host of “only-in-New York” small businesses.

Property owners on the periphery of the urban renewal zone who’d been hanging on began to cash out or build out. Unfortunately, lots of ugly development and façade-stripping happened at that point, much of it without any concern for Tribeca’s distinctive architecture and history.

Historic Districts

The situation came to a turning point in 1988. A tower was planned for Duane Street. Pioneers of the area such as Hal Bromm, Carol De Saram and Oliver Allen rallied the neighborhood to find a way to respect the architecture and sense of place. They created the Committee for Preservation of the Washington Market District. They talked a few celebrities into lending their names to the cause. They got Professor Andrew Dolkart from Columbia University to research the architecture. They mobilized the residents and did their own building-by-building research. After six years of labor they finally got the Landmarks Preservation Commission to “calendar” Tribeca as a possible historic district. A public hearing was held. People of every occupation urged the Commission to designate Tribeca as a single, expansive historic district. Even architects like Robert Stern and former landmarks commissioner Anthony Tung got into the action and urged the Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate broad, wide boundaries that would include many “non-contributory” buildings.

The Commission designated Tribeca West Historic District in May of 1991. In a flurry of hearings in December of 1992 and then again in February of 1993 they

designated Tribeca East, North, and South Historic Districts. There was celebration. After so long it felt like a big win. It had been hard work explaining to the naysayers that they could still build in-fill buildings within an historic district, that it did not change zoning or floor area ratios, and that it would not bankrupt artists who had bought buildings dirt-cheap during the time of uncertainty.

Despite the celebration, there was also frustration among some insiders. So much had been left out, a third of Tribeca in fact. Especially worrisome was the realization that the boundaries had been drawn with a great many edges. And there was also a discretionary, last-minute decision on the part of the Landmarks Preservation Commissioner of that time. He took out small parking lots here and there while leaving others in. This also did not bode well for the future. More lobbying ensued to expand the districts, with less satisfactory results. In 2002, the Commission designated a tiny extension for Tribeca South Historic District and murmured that it might also designate a scattershot of individual landmarks (which they did not do). A few years later it pooh-poohed requests for greater coverage of Tribeca North. The exhausted volunteer committee had moved on to pursue their own lives. The crisis of 9/11 had focused the neighborhood toward the office towers to the south. A few years later the banking crisis took place so there was a brief lull in real estate development.

The upshot is that Tribeca got cut up into four historic districts rather than a single large district. A third was left out. The map of the new districts zigged and zagged, leaving many strange gaps and holes. It appeared to the world that the boundaries of the districts reflected pandering to special interests. Ponte Equities, for example, wanted to keep preservation out of Tribeca North; big real estate wanted to keep Tribeca south of Chambers for itself as a new “Wall Street North”; and NY Law School wanted no part of the historic district (they wanted to build a new and modern building for themselves and finance it by selling a small lot to tower developer).

The effects of multiple edges and boundaries combined with under-designation have become clear through the passage of time. The most important effect is that it destroys the historic district over time by allowing developers to “free-ride” on the new commons of the historic districts. Free riding means profiting from the investment of others and even harming the public commons without giving back.

Historic Districts are a Public Good and a Commons

Creating a historic district such as Tribeca creates a new commons that is very much like a village green. It belongs to everyone. It is a public good, open to all. Yet with historic districts the sum is greater than the parts. This is because each building next to another makes for a walkable visual experience that is relatively harmonious across contiguous areas. Not every single building must be a masterpiece to contribute to the overall experience. It just has to fit in, usually in scale, density, materials or architectural language.

Free riding comes in the form of abusing that commons. Abuse is easy because our zoning system doesn't protect the commons, but does the opposite. It encourages over-exploitation of the commons. This happened by overbuilding the borders. Yes, it does seem perverse. Even villagers back in the day regulated how many cows each person could graze on the green! But not so in New York. Here, you are free to build overly dense, non-contextual, out-of-scale residential units right at the boundaries and holes within the historic district. As you build on those spots, you sell future residents on the idea that they will get to live in the distinctive district and enjoy the pleasures of its unique sense of place. Everyone knows that the developer is actually destroying the very continuity and contiguous experience that created the commons in the first place. Just as bad, it overcrowds the streets, the local subway stops, the sidewalks, the parks, and the public schools.

It is very hard to get justice in the situation as the game is currently played. Mostly we pester our public officials to find ways to bargain for an anemic "amenity" in exchange for the wrong that is being done. It is feeble compensation. The "amenity" (a Whole Foods, a Barnes and Noble, a public-private plaza) doesn't really make up for the multiple ways the commons deteriorates and the distinctive character of our city shrinks. We need to change the rules of the game or historic districts like Tribeca face "death by a thousand cuts"

What to do

One part of the solution is staring us all in the face: build more commons. Another is just as obvious: expand the boundaries of Tribeca's historic districts. Make Tribeca whole and stop chipping away at the very asset that made Tribeca unique to begin with. We could also make our city council create special zoning around a historic district so as to better protect the commons it has created.

The objections to expanding Tribeca's historic districts seem weak. Tribeca is already becoming overly dense so there is no need other than profiteering to bulldoze more. Second, the unprotected buildings on the borders of our historic districts are amazingly similar to other buildings already inside the historic districts. Why exclude them? You will only end up destroying the neighboring areas. Third, historic district designation does not by itself make real estate unaffordable. Bigger demographic and geographic forces are at play in Manhattan so there is no point in blaming historic districts for a shortage of affordable housing.

People don't just want raw housing units in micro-apartments that rise to infinity in the sky, they want to live in beautiful, distinctive, livable, walkable neighborhoods. And does anyone besides the Real Estate Board of NY (REBNY) really want to tear down all our historic districts and turn NY into Dubai-on-the-Hudson?

Last, the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) is hardly the bureaucratic nightmare that some aggrieved people suggest (egged on by the historic district bullying that REBNY has undertaken in Crain's and elsewhere). As a historic district resident and former president of my co-op, I have not experienced LPC's regulatory oversight as burdensome. Annoying maybe, but not a burden. The modest added time to get façade and rooftop alteration approvals seems a paltry price to pay for what we collectively get back as city dwellers

The reality is this: the LPC is an essential regulatory body that creates the great public good known as historic districts. The historic districts add immense economic and cultural value to the city. It is the historic districts that render it distinctive among places in the world as well as livable. Can LPC be a better regulatory body? Sure, but by strengthening the Commission, not tearing it down. Moreover, given the sense of hopelessness around our 1200 page zoning code, the LPC is our only lifeline to a city that we would want our children to live in. If anything, I'd like to see LPC focus more on linking historic districts and repairing wounds to the streetscape. It also needs to man-up against the roarings and gnashings and self-interested aggression of REBNY. And it must be fearless against the high priests of modernism such as Edward Glaesser or Vishaan Chakrabarti. Glaesser for example would cap LPC's regulatory authority to 5,000 buildings in the entire metro area (see *The Triumph of the City*). Chakrabarti (*A Country of Cities*) argues that historic districts stand in the way of what he thinks New York should be doing: building a dizzy, vertical, "hyperdense" city along the lines of Dubai or Beijing.

Ideologues like Glaesser or Chakrabarti aside, the reality is that only 3% of the city has any kind of landmark or historic district status, and people clamor to live in these under-supplied historic districts, Tribeca in particular. Why restrict the supply of such districts so tightly? Why not designate more of them? Why not even build more medium-density neighborhoods that will become in their own right future historic districts in other boroughs (as developers like Hudson Properties have done in the past).

It is our endangered historic districts, Tribeca among them, that make New York's built environment livable and unique in the world. Everybody has skyscrapers. Nobody has our historic districts. They are our commons and belong to all of us. We should stand up for them. Now would be a good time to do so or they – Tribeca in particular – will surely be buried under the rising glass curtain walls.

For more information or to help with the campaign to make Tribeca whole, go to www.tribecatrust.org