

The Beacon Hill Historic District: Pioneer of the 1950s with Lessons for Today

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Abstract: This essay provides a history of the movement to designate Beacon Hill as a local historic district in the 1950s and 1960s, beginning with background on the original planning and development of Beacon Hill, its eclipse as other neighborhoods grew in importance, and its revival in the twentieth century. It also sets this movement in the context of Progressivism, zoning, and urban renewal, ultimately exploring four aspects of the movement that relate to preservation today: (1) organization and tactics; (2) elitism, gentrification, and the economic argument for historic preservation; (3) the use of governmental power to regulate private property; and (4) neighborhood-wide planning.

Understanding that in order to look forward, it is necessary to look backward, this paper takes up the designation of Boston's Beacon Hill Historic District in 1955 as both a fascinating chapter of preservation history and an object lesson in a number of key issues that still engage preservationists today. This movement took root in what may seem a hostile environment – a decade commonly associated with conformity and consensus, suburbia and urban renewal, obsolescence and progress. While in some respects the movement incorporated notions typical of the 1950s, especially concerning consensus, class, and hierarchy, in other ways it embraced ideas significantly counterintuitive to prevailing understanding of that decade. Following what precedents there were and bucking contrary ideologies, activists on Beacon Hill persuaded their neighbors and city and state officials that the heretofore little-used technique of historic-district designation should be employed in the context of a big northern city. In so doing, they created the first historic district north of the Mason-Dixon Line, surmounted challenges to the district's regulations and its expansion, and led the way for the more widespread historic preservation movement that followed during the 1960s and 70s.

The literature on this topic is scant. One longtime authority on the history of preservation in the U. S. ends the narrative in 1949.¹ A more recent survey mentions the Beacon Hill movement in passing.² Analytical and critical scholarship on Boston preservation focuses on earlier moments in history.³ A planning history of Boston briefly mentions the Beacon Hill effort;⁴ while another study situates the movement in the history of the neighborhood.⁵

Yet the effort taken to understand the Beacon Hill preservation movement illuminates techniques and insights relevant to preservationists today, especially in the following four areas:

¹ Hosmer, Jr., *Preservation Comes of Age*.

² Murtagh, *Keeping Time*, 24, 106, 108, 111.

³ Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times"*; Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England*.

⁴ Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon a Hill*, 183.

⁵ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 106-109.

(1) organization and tactics; (2) elitism, gentrification, and the economic argument for historic preservation; (3) the use of the government's police power; and (4) city-wide preservation planning. The first part of the paper discusses the history of Beacon Hill, its evolution as a neighborhood, and the movement to create an historic district there. The second part of the paper, discusses some lessons that preservationists may profitably keep in mind today.

Founded in 1630, Boston began on a peninsula and grew steadily. Development hugged the harbor, leaving Beacon Hill mostly open, the site of a few large estates, like Thomas Hancock's built during the 1730s. By the mid-1790s, a new State House was rising on the Hill, and a group of entrepreneurs was developing the South Slope, intending to make it into a stylish neighborhood.⁶ Parallel with this elite area, the North Slope grew as a significant neighborhood for African Americans. A meeting house, school, and other buildings soon served this population.⁷

Yet by the middle of the nineteenth century, considerable change was afoot in Boston. Older residential areas grew increasingly commercial as manufacturing rose in importance. Filling in the Back Bay allowed a new neighborhood to develop there, where houses had twenty-year covenants restricting them to residential use.⁸ No zoning protected residents from incompatible uses near their homes, and many began moving to the new areas.⁹

In this context, Boston – and Beacon Hill – experienced its first preservation controversy. In 1859, the heirs of John Hancock offered the family house for sale to the Commonwealth. While the governor recommended that it serve as an executive mansion, the legislature balked at the idea. After four years, the family sold the land to private interests while offering the house

⁶ Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch*, 101; Carl J. Weinhardt, Jr., *The Domestic Architecture of Beacon Hill, 1800-1850*, not paginated; Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 14.

⁷ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 3-18; Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times,"* 20.

⁸ Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times,"* 65-83.

⁹ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 23-25.

and its contents as a gift to the City – to be moved offsite. The City Council explored the idea but lost heart when faced with the costs of relocation. Protesters appealed for the house’s preservation, but to no avail. It was torn down.¹⁰

After the Civil War, Boston’s population fanned out to outlying suburbs, as householders sought quieter and more spacious quarters. Street railways – first horse-drawn, later electrified – made daily commuting possible.¹¹ Meanwhile, Beacon Hill declined. Many white families on the South Slope moved to the Back Bay or the South End. African Americans on the North Slope followed suit after 1895, when redistricting eliminated their hitherto secure black Republican seat in the legislature. This prompted a migration to the South End, which by that time white residents were abandoning to move farther out. Consequently, Beacon Hill changed. Southern and Eastern Europeans joined the existing Irish population, and Jews turned the African meeting house into a synagogue. Many single-family residences became boarding houses. Artists moved in, giving the area a Bohemian reputation.¹²

During the 1890s, Massachusetts and Boston enacted height restrictions. The dome of the State House was such a significant emblem that lawmakers sought to ensure that it remain the highest landmark in the skyline. Maximum heights for Beacon Hill ranged from seventy to one hundred feet, exemplifying the use of the police power of government to achieve some control over building.¹³

By the early twentieth century, the Hill began to experience a renaissance, reflecting a resurgence in Boston’s economy, as Hub businesses competed successfully in imports,

¹⁰ Holleran, *Boston’s “Changeful Times,”* 91-94.

¹¹ Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs*, 21-29.

¹² O’Connor, *The Hub*, 231-233; Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 39-41; Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bohemia*, 3.

¹³ Holleran, *Boston’s “Changeful Times,”* 165-193.

manufacturing, transportation, and technology.¹⁴ In this context, boosters successfully marketed Beacon Hill as desirable.¹⁵ Real estate men such as William Codman rehabilitated old buildings and erected compatible new ones. But without legal constraints to demolition or new construction, property owners mostly policed themselves. As an informal forum for this and other matters, the Beacon Hill Association, founded 1922, played an important role. Both William Codman and his son John were long involved with this organization, which concerned itself with municipal services and “good government,” very much in the Progressive tradition.¹⁶

Residents soon found a reason for a strong neighborhood association. During the 1920s, the City tried to replace the neighborhood’s brick sidewalks, thus igniting a “battle of the bricks.” After protestors obstructed the work and dogged City officials and employees, the City called off the project. Additionally, Beacon Hill residents were involved in drafting and implementing Boston’s first zoning law in 1924, an ordinance unusual for its time because it included existing, in-town neighborhoods as well as newly developing ones farther afield.¹⁷

The Great Depression suspended this neighborhood renaissance. World War II brought increased employment, although national involvement in that conflict clearly took priority. By the late 1940s, however, local issues again returned to the fore. The City tried again to replace Beacon Hill’s sidewalks. As before, residents rose up in protest, drawing considerable attention to the cause. *The New York Times* made light of the conflict, playing on both the presumed old-money background of the residents and the fact that most of the activists were women.¹⁸ The

¹⁴ Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon a Hill*, 109-110.

¹⁵ Holleran, *Boston’s “Changeful Times*, 262-263; *Craftsman*. “The Regeneration of Beacon Hill.

¹⁶ Holleran, *Boston’s “Changeful Times*,” 265; for more on the connection between Progressivism and 1920s historic preservation, see Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England*; Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 51-52.

¹⁷ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 45-47; Holleran, “*Boston’s “Changeful Times*,” 264.

¹⁸ Kluckhorn, “Beacon Hill Wins the Battle of the Brick Sidewalks.”

practice of “mocking protesters as ‘little old ladies in tennis shoes’” was typical.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Boston’s rough-and-tumble Irish Catholic mayor, James Curley, conceded defeat in May 1947. “Let them have bricks,” he reportedly quipped, paraphrasing a near-mythic example of authoritarian condescension. Thus concluded the “second battle of the bricks.”²⁰

But bigger issues were brewing. The 1950s brought a new round of suburban development. Engineers completed a ring road around Boston – Route 128 – in 1956. Veterans took out federally subsidized mortgages to buy homes in the suburbs. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology even moved some of its facilities to the suburbs, obviating the need to go into the city at all. Meanwhile, Boston’s economy stagnated, and its population was falling.²¹

In response to this, Mayor John Hynes moved to redevelop large areas of the city, targeting the West End as an example of what large-scale urban renewal could do. In April 1953, he announced a plan to acquire by eminent domain most of that neighborhood to tear down 682 of 739 buildings. Residents were promised housing in the redeveloped area when it was complete; but that proved to be cold comfort.²²

Beacon Hill residents watched these proceedings carefully. One of them, John Codman, who had long since joined his father’s real estate firm, read an article in the April 1953 issue of *National Geographic*, profiling the Georgetown area of Washington, DC, whose residents had successfully lobbied for an historic district. Believing that similar protections might be good for Beacon Hill, he contacted the author and representatives from other historic districts, hoping that “a neighborhood with valued historical roots could be deliberately and permanently protected

¹⁹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 167; for the role of women in historic preservation, see Howe, “Women in Historic Preservation,” 31-61.

²⁰ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 91-95.

²¹ Claire Dempsey, class lecture, New England Cultural Landscapes, Boston University, April 26, 2010; for ‘sitcom suburbs,’ see Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, especially chapter seven; on Boston’s economy and population, see Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon a Hill*, 132, 259, 261..

²² Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 103; Kinney, “Washington’s Historic Georgetown,” 513-544.

from becoming a slum.”²³ The Beacon Hill Association embraced the idea, incorporating legally in 1955 as the Beacon Hill Civic Association in order to better lobby for the district.²⁴ Activists prepared an architectural survey of the neighborhood and mapped its historic resources.²⁵ For strategic reasons, the Association decided to focus the designation effort on the South Slope, “since many believed that including [other areas of the Hill] . . . could increase resistance and controversy.”²⁶ Consequently, in January 1955 they submitted a bill to the legislature to designate the South Slope.²⁷ Newspapers covered the issue extensively, often in favorable terms, and the story found coverage in outlets from over half a dozen states, including *The New York Times*.²⁸

The campaign proved very effective. The activists kept ahead of controversy, anticipated objections, and forestalled problems. They got as many people on board as possible, building support at all levels. The legislative committee that took up the bill saw strong support. A lone dissenter spoke but found few allies. The committee endorsed the bill, which the legislature adopted in July.²⁹

The text of the bill is a good example of a preservation ordinance. Its legislative intent is “to promote the educational, cultural, economic and general welfare.” The law defines the boundaries of the district, creates the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission, requires property

²³ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 107.

²⁴ Beacon Hill Civic Association, http://bhcivic.org/about/awards/awards_beacon2011.htm (accessed August 8, 2011); Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 161.

²⁵ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 107.

²⁶ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 107.

²⁷ Massachusetts, Petition-House, Legislative Packets, Boston: Massachusetts Archives, 1955.

²⁸ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 108; *New York Times*, “Beacon Hill Backs Law to Preserve Its Façade.”

²⁹ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 106-109; SPNEA, “Area Preservation and the Beacon Hill Bill,” 106-110; *New York Times*, “Beacon Hill Backs Law To Preserve Its Façade.”

owners to obtain the Commission's permission for certain kinds of exterior work, provides a process for appeals, and creates a system for enforcement.³⁰

When the bill became law, Mayor Hynes appointed five members to the new commission. By law, four organizations submitted names of nominees.³¹ One of them, the Greater Boston Real Estate Board, nominated John Codman, whom the Mayor appointed – and Codman's colleagues elected chair. After two organizational meetings, the Commission began reviewing applications in January 1956. The volume of business was low, and there were few controversies. During the early years, the Commission did its work quietly, with little fanfare.³²

Perhaps buoyed by this, the community applied to the legislature in 1958 to expand the district – to include the area known as the Flat of the Hill between Charles Street and the River.³³ The proposal was adopted without controversy. Meanwhile, across Cambridge Street, West End residents received notices of eviction from the City, informing them that the planned urban renewal would go forward.³⁴

By 1963, Beacon Hill activists pushed to expand the district again, this time to include the North Slope, closest to the West End. Unlike the original designation or the first extension, the North Slope proposal drew considerable criticism, especially from owners and potential developers of property on Bowdoin Street. But for advocates of designation, bringing the historic district to the edge of the urban renewal area would send a message that the integrity of Beacon Hill must be preserved. While the measure had some prominent supporters, the legislature voted down the bill in March. Yet shortly thereafter, the National Park Service announced that the South Slope would become a National Historic Landmark – a select honor for

³⁰ Massachusetts, Chapter 616 of the Acts of 1955..

³¹ Massachusetts, Sec. 3, Chapter 616 of the Acts of 1955.

³² Beacon Hill Architectural Commission, Minutes, 1957.

³³ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*; Beacon Hill Architectural Commission, Minutes, Feb. 7, 1958.

³⁴ Massachusetts, Sec. 1A, Chapter 616 of the Acts of 1955; Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 105.

sites possessing national significance. The mayor received the award, the press covered the event, and the attitude toward landmarking shifted; and by this proximity to such prestige, the North Slope gained status. The effort to designate that area was renewed, and the legislature adopted the bill in August.³⁵

At the same time – the summer of 1963 – the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission received its first major test. At issue was an application to demolish a mid-nineteenth-century row at 70-72 Mount Vernon Street. It was in a different style than most of its neighbors, and its status – whether icon or alien – was unclear.³⁶ The applicant sought to tear it down to build an apartment building. The Commission rejected the application. Later, the applicants offered to preserve the historic exterior, while constructing modern apartments inside. The Commission approved this new proposal and scored a preservation victory – and a vindication for the Commission, whose exercise of the police power was to be respected. The decision also expressed the literal separation between the external, public area of the street, which was preserved, and the internal, private area within, which was not.³⁷

How is the Beacon Hill historic district movement relevant today? Four areas are particularly noteworthy: (1) organization and tactics; (2) elitism, gentrification, and the economic argument for historic preservation; (3) the use of the government’s police power; and (4) city-wide preservation planning.

First, in organization and tactics, this campaign proved an effective model of neighborhood organizing that would be the envy of those undertaking similar efforts today. In a story in *Old-Time New England*, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

³⁵ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 116-118.

³⁶ For more on the metaphor of icons and aliens, see Costonis, *Icons and Aliens*, xv-xvi.

³⁷ Li-Marcus, *Beacon Hill*, 119-123, Jessica Neuwirth, et al, “Abbott Lowell Cummings and the Preservation of New England,” 73-75.

cited several important points that are worth keeping in mind now: First the activists had a coherent message before going public with their plans, which enabled them to meet objections clearly and articulately. Second, they operated through and cooperated with many different organizations and experts that provided them with advice and legitimacy, including the Beacon Hill Civic Association, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Society of Architectural Historians, the Society of Planning Officials, the American Institute of Planners, the SPNEA, the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and the Mayor of Boston and city officials. Third, they prepared specific, detailed, and easy-to-read educational materials and distributed them widely, both to members of the public and to politicians. Fourth, they held meetings in people's homes and in public places before the bill was formally debated. Fifth, they solicited comment from potential opponents and took this feedback into account, ultimately revising the bill six times before it reached its final form.

SPNEA praised the process by which this proposal became law, describing it as “an unusually well-laid campaign which had secured virtually complete approval and understanding in the area to be affected before the draft of the bill was even presented to the Legislature.” John Codman and the Beacon Hill Civic Association received particular kudos for their efforts to explain to the public what historic district designation was and why it would be good for the neighborhood. The organizers also earned high marks for their responsiveness to people's concerns, at informal public meetings as well as during the formal legislative process.³⁸

Another part of their tactics deserves examination. Activists ultimately achieved historical designation of their neighborhood in phases. The South Slope led the way in 1955, with the earliest buildings, the greatest amount of historic integrity, and the most support among residents. Then came the Flat of the Hill in 1958, which shared many similar demographics as

³⁸ SPNEA, “Area Preservation and the Beacon Hill Bill,” 106-110.

the South Slope but which had more Victorian architecture, which in the 1950s was still somewhat problematic because it was not widely appreciated: Here, a case had to be built through neighborhood surveys and consultation with the National Trust to buttress the claim that it should be protected. Finally, the North Slope with its boardinghouses and working-class history joined the other two areas to complete the district – but only after neighborhood activists successfully piggybacked their efforts onto the National Historic Landmark designation of the South Slope.

Many features of the organization and tactics of this movement exemplify pragmatism. Activists were willing to embrace historic district designation, which was new to everybody concerned, and to sell it to their neighbors, knowing that the ultimate test would be whether it worked in the real world of a complex and dynamic urban environment. One student of American political history calls this “political dexterity.”³⁹

This approach to activism also relates to Progressivism, a movement connected to historic preservation generally and to Beacon Hill specifically – especially concerning elitism, gentrification, and the economic argument for historic preservation. One historian analyzing the founding of SPNEA in 1910 links preservation to the desire bring order to a rapidly changing nation seemingly destabilized by immigration and the decline of white, Anglo-Saxon elites.⁴⁰ This is consistent with other scholars who have taken Progressivism to task for its nativism and classism. Similar to this is an economic critique, asserting that the Progressive movement was essentially conservative in character, rife with “deliberate efforts of businessmen to preserve their profits and their power.” Such men, it is said, “actively sought limited government intervention . . . to bring about the profit-producing conditions that private enterprise by itself

³⁹ In conversation, Neal Knapp, Boston University.

⁴⁰ Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England, passim*.

could not sustain.”⁴¹ Progressivism in this view is derided as “a movement by prosperous bourgeois gentlemen.”⁴²

The Beacon Hill preservation effort of the 1950s seems consistent with this profile, as its chief backers were, indeed, bourgeois. Culturally, *The New York Times* mocked the leaders in the Second Battle of the Bricks for being scions of families distinguished since Revolutionary times – a charge borne out in the background of John Codman. The descendent of a family going back in Boston to the eighteenth century, he attended Harvard and was brought up to succeed in his father’s real estate business. Moreover, the access that he and other activists had to power also seems to support the elite basis of this movement. In Massachusetts, the name “Beacon Hill” is sometimes used as a shorthand for government power and authority, and it seems here unmistakably connected to the neighborhood immediately outside the State House doors.

Economically, too, this movement can also be labeled as elite. Here, leaders of a comfortable neighborhood successfully petitioned their government to create an administrative structure to help buttress their property values against decline -- and perhaps even their property ownership against eminent domain. One of their primary leaders was in the real estate business, and the ordinance requires that the Real Estate Board always have a representative on the historic district commission, thus ensuring representation of property-owning interests on the board.

At the same time, focusing exclusively on these issues neglects the “central issue” for Progressives and their political heirs: “the assertion of public rights over private.”⁴³ Invoking the “general welfare,” the new law significantly hampered the ability of property owners to radically change their properties, and yet they went along with it. Additionally, while business owners

⁴¹ Kennedy, *Progressivism*, xii.

⁴² Kennedy, *Progressivism*, ix-x.

⁴³ Kennedy, *Progressivism*, xiv.

were part of the mix on Beacon Hill, residents were far more numerous; and some businessmen, like the Codmans, were both.⁴⁴ Moreover, business owners' goals were modest, focusing on preventing further decline rather than reconstructing the neighborhood wholesale. And even among property owners, agreement with the new law was not monolithic, for the act brought out conflicts among business interests, as when the developers of 70-72 Mount Vernon Street did not get their way.

Indeed, to those seeking examples of where business interests invoked the power of government to sustain “profit-producing conditions” that could not be perpetuated otherwise, a number of scholars suggest looking to the rapidly changing outer ring of suburbs – not to urban neighborhoods like Beacon Hill. For on the fringes of greenfield development, developers relied heavily on government policies, such as the mortgage-interest tax deduction, accelerated depreciation of income-producing property, and Federal highway construction to make their projects economically viable.⁴⁵

Indeed, many aspects of the Beacon Hill movement seem more broad-based. The street activism, the neighborhood meetings, the successful use of a neighborhood association, the attempts to persuade as many people as possible that the proposed measure was a good idea, the willingness to argue for a cause face to face, and the ultimate success in using the instruments of representative government – these seem to be the marks of a grassroots movement of which preservationists are justifiably proud. Moreover, the legacy of this effort seems to have circulated even more widely, as activists of varied socio-economic backgrounds in many other

⁴⁴ Weinhardt and Henry A. Millon surveyed Beacon Hill as part of the original designation movement and “found that the area is overwhelmingly residential.” Weinhardt, *The Domestic Architecture of Beacon Hill*, not paginated.

⁴⁵ This conclusion lies at the core of Hayden's argument in *Building Suburbia*.

Boston neighborhoods fought City Hall and successfully protested destructive urban renewal policies.⁴⁶

Additionally, while later generations – and critics – would see historic preservation linked to the wholesale transformation of neighborhoods via gentrification, that characterization is less applicable to the majority of Beacon Hill. “Beacon Hill maintained at all times a core of aristocratic residences and residents,” never entirely losing its genteel gloss.⁴⁷ At its lowest ebb, it was merely bohemian, not blighted. Moreover, the proposed historic district’s support from people who actually lived in the neighborhood – not simply those who owned property – suggests that stability, rather than displacement, was the goal. In any event, the economic consequences of historic preservation on Beacon Hill were less drastic and transformative than elsewhere, such as the South End.

Before leaving the subject of elitism, it is helpful to remember that the word “elite” as a term for analysis is slippery and changeable – subject to the notions of the user and his or her audience. It may be invoked by anyone who feels dissatisfied with people whom he or she perceives as influential and powerful. Moreover, dividing the world into elites on the one hand and everyone else on the other may serve the arguments of those employing this dichotomy, but it papers over a considerable amount of the complexity of many different social and economic groups in a multi-layered urban environment, most especially the great middle – who lay between the poles of this kind of analysis.

This brings us to the third set of issues that still resonate today – the use of the police power of government, or regulation – a legacy of the Progressive era. The relationship of private property to government was a key issue for the Beacon Hill activists. While earlier

⁴⁶ Kennedy, *Planning the City Upon a Hill*, 187 (Charlestown), 188 (Allston), 198-199 (South End).

⁴⁷ Holleran, *Boston’s “Changeful Times,”* 263.

preservationists, such as SPNEA founder William Sumner Appleton, esteemed private property over government action,⁴⁸ by the 1950s people who had been wary of government regulations now reconsidered their positions. With the Federal bulldozer a new reality, official recognition of the architectural significance of Beacon Hill seemed to be the counterweight needed to fend off threats.⁴⁹ An historic district could buttress the neighborhood against decline that might justify government's use of eminent domain.

The trend to local control and neighborhood planning had been building for some time. The advent of height restrictions at the turn of the century and of zoning during the 1920s enlisted, in a limited way, powers of local government to protect the city and to plan outlying areas. In 1926, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of zoning.⁵⁰ Historic district legislation marked a further stage in the empowerment of local government to deal firmly with the challenges of modern, dynamic cities.

In sum, a Federal power that was perceived as out of control helped make potentially intrusive city regulations palatable. It is a paradox, but at least in Boston urban renewal helped make historic district ordinances politically possible. The legacy of this truth is difficult: With the end of urban renewal, preservationists no longer have big government as a foil. Indeed, now, the opponents of historic preservation legislation have greatly expanded their critique of government to include local measures that had been safe as long as more threatening federal policies were still in place.

The fourth set of lessons from the Beacon Hill preservation movement of the 1950s concerns city-wide preservation planning. One aspect of the 1950s moment on the Hill seemed to push past potential objections – a willingness to think big. During the 1950s the

⁴⁸ Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times,"* 266-267.

⁴⁹ See Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer.*

⁵⁰ *Euclid v. Ambler.* In Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times,"* 265.

neighborhood-wide approach to problematizing historic preservation was still a novelty. Yet these activists embraced the discourse of the sweeping changes that threatened to overtake their neighborhood – and seized upon a new and different approach to preserve it. True, they were reacting to even more sweeping plans made by politicians, planners, and developers. But they readily adopted a strategy appropriate for their times, putting aside the earlier model of isolated, building-by-building preservation, such as the failed effort to save the Hancock House. They did not dissipate their activism and reduce the scale of its impact. Instead, they realized that it takes a broad vision to bring about significant results. They maintained a large, overarching conception that boldly articulated a place for preservation into the future.

To reiterate: Beacon Hill activists developed a pragmatic and effective grassroots advocacy movement that had clear goals, disseminated useful information, partnered with other organizations, and stayed ahead of controversy. Second, they were not distracted by accusations of elitism – an easy swipe in a populist democracy. Instead, they actively reached out to pick up allies, disarmed their opponents, and garnered a considerable amount of support; and in economics, they kept their goals modest, focusing on the preservation of long-term value. Third, in calling for greater governmental regulations, they advanced their proposal as a way to balance other, more threatening government actions. Fourth, they formulated their strategy on a scale that was commensurate with the problem at hand. They did not let their broad vision for preservation and revitalization be reduced to isolated squabbles. They maintained their focus on solving a systemic problem of urban stewardship, not just particular controversies.

These approaches succeeded in ways that would have been unthinkable in 1955. Not only did Beacon Hill protect itself from becoming a slum, it has endured as one of the most

stable neighborhoods in the city.⁵¹ Activists today who heed the insights from this earlier generation of preservation pioneers will honor their legacy and advance historic preservation generally, which Stewart Brand calls “a quiet, populist, conservative, victorious revolution.”⁵²

⁵¹ Boston Home Prices and Home Values <http://www.zillow.com/local-info/MA-Boston-home-value/>. (accessed August 15, 2011).

⁵² Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, 88.

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