



May 2, 2007 Edition > Section: [New York](#) > [Printer-Friendly Version](#)

'New Preservationists' Make Their Mark on the City

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Surrender the image of a preservationist as a crabby, older person with a park view to protect.

Preservationist Seri Worden, 30, grew up in Brandon, Fla., shopping at big-box stores such as Target and eating at strip mall chains like Bennigan's. Now, as the executive director of the Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts, she is fighting to save the Upper East Side's low- and mid-rise landscape, and to extend the neighborhood's landmark districts.

Ms. Worden is part of a cadre of under-40 professionals who came of age during a time of tremendous suburban sprawl, but grew up to lead some of this city's most high-profile preservation groups. These vocal "new preservationists" have positioned themselves at the center of many of the city's recent battles over building proposals, including those at 980 Madison Ave., the New York Historical Society on Central Park West, and the campus of the General Theological Seminary in Chelsea.

These new preservationists are regulars at community board and Landmarks Preservation Commission meetings. There, they can often be found touting the

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architectural merits of a structure built a generation before they were born, or opposing a glassy residential high-rise in a landmark district — cases some developers and change advocates have called obstructionist.

"If they're not reasonable, they can hold back certain developments and certain changes that are necessary to adjust to the 21st century," the developer who hopes to build atop an Upper East Side gallery at 980 Madison Ave., Aby Rosen, said.

All but one member of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in January said they would not support Mr. Rosen's proposal to erect a 22-story cylindrical glass tower above 980 Madison Ave., and sent the developer back to the drawing board.

Some of the new preservationists, such as Ms. Worden, say they were drawn to the field, in part, because of their aversion to the sprawling quality of their hometowns. "When I go home to Florida, you have the same strip-mall every two miles," Ms. Worden said. "There doesn't seem like there's a chance for an individual store or restaurant that isn't a chain to exist. Every time I go anywhere like that, I'm so happy I do what I do."

Others grew up in and around New York, and have been inspired by the extent of change to New York's cityscape over the decades, and the rapidity of that change — particularly amid the development boom that has given rise to a slew of luxury condominium towers.

The executive director of Landmarks West, Kate Wood, 33, said she learned the value of preservation from her parents, who were constantly working to maintain their early 20th century home in Princeton, N.J. "For me, it just seemed normal — you live in a place and you take care of it," she said.

Ms. Wood been a vocal opponent of the New York Historical Society's exterior renovation plan — approved last week by the landmarks commission. Ms. Wood repeatedly called the renovation a guise for a residential high-rise project that she said would mar Central Park West's historic skyline. Her organization was at the center of a battle to preserve the Edward Durrell Stone building at 2 Columbus Circle — but failed after a long and loud campaign that lured in the likes of author Tom Wolfe.

There are also practical reasons why so many young people are leading the city's professional preservation pack: 60-plus hour weeks and mid-five-figure salaries that infrequently exceed \$50,000, Internal Revenue Service filings show. "Every day, it's a David versus Goliath battle," the executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, Andrew Berman, said. "You really have to have fire in your belly to be willing to take on that position."

Still, the availability of jobs in preservation, even relatively low-paying ones, is emblematic of how the field of preservation — long the domain of tireless volunteers such as Christabel Gough and Whitney North Seymour Jr. — has been professionalized, and formalized. Since Columbia University first started its graduate historic preservation program 42 years ago, many other institutions of higher education have followed suit.

Younger preservationists have "grown up in a world where preservation is legitimized through legal statutes and ordinances," the administrative director of Columbia's urban planning and historic preservation programs, Janet Foster, said.

Ms. Foster said many of the new preservationists are concerned not only with preserving the city's 19th- and early 20th-century architecture, but also with "keeping representation from all periods in history, because if you weren't born until 1970, 1969 is ancient history."

Case in point is the white brick 1950 apartment house that the Friends of the Upper East Side Historic District favors designating as a landmark.

The new preservationists, and those who support their work, see their job as protecting the historic architecture that makes New York distinctive and charming. For that reason, the Brooklyn-bred director of the Historic Districts Council, Simeon Bankoff, 36, calls himself and his fellow preservationists "professional New Yorkers."

"I do think my generation has a great appreciation for the kinds of quirky buildings and beautiful buildings that make New York unique," a fellow with the Municipal Arts Society of New York City, Lisa Kersavage, 37, said. "I live in Carroll Gardens, and I see all these young people starting trendy restaurants and bars there — and they are

almost universally respectful of the buildings they move into."

Given the perceived generational interest, some preservation groups are making an effort to attract young, committed volunteers. Last week, the Waterfront Preservation Alliance of Greenpoint and Williamsburg brought together about 100 mostly young adults for a benefit at a Brooklyn bar. "I don't think having an appreciation for history knows an age boundary," a 30-year-old alliance volunteer, Alice Rich, said.

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