

METROPOLITAN CHAPTER OF THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY IN AMERICA

Spring 2010

LANDMARKS COMMISSION HOLDS PUBLIC HEARING ON SOHO-CAST IRON HISTORIC DISTRICT



photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

We are happy to report that there was a large turnout on October 27, 2009, at the landmark hearing for the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District Extension held at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Testimony in support of

designation was given by representatives of State Senator Daniel Squadron, State Assemblywoman Deborah Glick and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer. Councilman Alan Gerson appeared in person and offered eloquent testimony in support.

Other supporters of designation included Community Board 2, Historic Districts Council, NYC Landmarks Conservancy, Municipal Art Society (testimony read by Chapter board member Melissa Baldock), SoHo Alliance, Friends of SoHo (represented by board member Alta Indelman), SoHo residents and architectural historians. Several past and present Board members, Hilda Regier, Mary Cope, Stephen Gottlieb and Joyce Mendelsohn, read letters from those who could not attend the hearing, including Margot Gayle's two daughters, Carol Gayle and Gretchen Gayle Ellsworth.

Predictably, there was opposition from the Real Estate Board of New York and some of the property owners from within the proposed Extension. It is possible that the Landmarks Preservation Commission could designate a SoHo Extension that is smaller than what is currently proposed, leaving out some of the buildings and streetscapes. However, the Preservation Committee will continue to work on strategies for timely designation of the entire proposed Extension, and will arrange a meeting with Margaret Chin, successor to Alan Gerson as Councilmember, to discuss the issues in detail. ☺

THE EDUCATION INITIATIVE EVOLVES

In his review of the new book on grass-roots activist and writer Jane Jacobs, *The Genius of Common Sense*, Bernard Poulin exclaims that Jacobs's "books should be must-reads in all high schools..."

Introducing New York City high school students to Jacobs's ideas of what makes a neighborhood viable is precisely what the evolving Education Initiative of the Metropolitan Chapter of the VSA aims to do. For the past several months, this VSA board member (Lesley Doyel) has been working with faculty and administrators at the New York City LAB School for Collaborative Studies, primarily high school dean Mark Berkowitz, and with VSA board member Joyce Mendelsohn in an advisory role. Together we have been planning how to integrate a unit on historic preservation and adaptive reuse that includes the work of such pivotal preservationists as Jacobs and Margot Gayle directly into the history curriculum at the eleventh grade level.

Established in 1987, the New York City LAB School for Collaborative Studies is a public middle and high school with a curriculum that centers on the notion that students work best in groups. (Full disclosure: my daughter is currently a junior there and has benefited from this approach.) Located on West 17th Street, the school stands in the middle of the Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, an area rich in diversity and New York history. Once the country estate of Clement Clarke Moore, author of the famed Christmas poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, Chelsea has also played a vital

role in New York City's economic development stemming from the shipping and commerce that took place along its expanse of waterfront and in the light industry and manufacturing buildings of the newly designated West Chelsea Historic District. The neighborhood is equally important as an early example of residential urban planning evident in the numerous nineteenth-century row houses lining many of its side streets.

Each year, during the eleventh grade, LAB students investigate the neighborhood's heritage through a mapping project, exploring communities through history in terms of geography, economics, commerce, and population demography and growth. Since the LAB School is located in Chelsea, the Education Initiative has proposed six sites (please see illustrated map) that are exciting examples of historic preservation and adaptive reuse, and that illustrate the vital importance that Historic Districts play in maintaining the integrity of the past, especially in this period of seemingly too often unbridled real estate development.

All sites are well within walking distance of LAB. They include the Chelsea Historic District, first established in 1970; the newly designated West Chelsea Historic District (2008); Chelsea Piers, a sports complex redeveloped in the early to mid-90s; the High Line, a length of the former elevated freight railroad now redesigned as a planted greenway; Chelsea Market, originally the Nabisco plant (and birthplace of the Oreo cookie) and now a successful shopping concourse; and Lamartine Place, another newly designated Historic District composed of

continued on next page



photo: Kate Milford

Save the Date:

*Tuesday, May 11, 2010 for our
Annual Meeting, to be held at the
Museum at Eldridge Street in the historic
Eldridge Street Synagogue
on the Lower East Side*

TIM KNOX'S *SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM, LONDON*



While London has many wonderful museums, from the venerable V&A to the vast British Museum, one of the oldest and definitely most fascinating is Sir John Soane's Museum. Sir John Soane (1753-1837) was one of England's most respected neo-classical architects; his principles of space, design and display taught to generations of students. And while many of his buildings such as the Bank of England remain architectural icons, his most enduring legacy is his own home in London. Beginning in 1792 Soane demolished and then rebuilt three neighboring row houses in central London on Lincoln's Inn Fields. Within them he arranged an astonishing array of architectural casts and models, books and artwork, opening his home after lectures so that students could view them. Equally remarkably, in 1833 Soane negotiated an Act of Parliament to preserve his house and collections for the benefit of "amateurs and students" in architecture, painting and sculpture and it has remained little changed since his death in 1837. Rooms are filled with plaster casts and sculptures, paintings, sketches and watercolors and thousands of curiosities from the sarcophagus of Egyptian king Seti I to medieval columns and stonework. Entering the museum transports visitors back to the mid-nineteenth century and the delight and wonderment that arose from the study of classic art and culture.

Tim Knox, former Head Curator of the National Trust in the UK and the museum's director since 2005 has now written the first, comprehensive book covering the museum since Soane's own account in 1835. Knox succinctly traces Soane's life and career, his founding of the museum, as well as his psychology of design. Alluringly beautiful photographs by well-known British photographer Derry Moore allow us to glimpse the magic and charm that have permeated Soane's rooms for the past 150 years. A must-have for all collectors and students of the nineteenth century. Merrell Publishers, 2008, \$49.95.

~ by Brian Coleman

THE HARD FACTS ABOUT CONCRETE

Concrete is not new. It's been around since the Romans when they used a mix of quicklime, ash and pumice (along with animal fat and blood as additives) to make more complex and sturdier structures, which is why so many Roman buildings have survived until today. Aqueducts and bridges, even the dome of the Pantheon were all made of concrete. The material wasn't limited to the Romans – the Egyptians, too, used concrete in construction including their pyramids. Then its secret was lost until 1756 when British engineer John Smeaton rediscovered its use. Portland cement, an exceptionally strong variety, was invented in the 1840's in England and concrete has remained a popular construction material since. Today approximately one cubic meter of concrete is made each year for every person living on earth.

A manmade material meant to resemble stone, concrete is made by mixing cement (a fine powder of clay and limestone) with aggregate and water, which sets and binds the materials together. By the late nineteenth century concrete was a common building product in this country, considered a quick, cheap and easy alternative to more expensive stone and brick. Homes were built of readymade, hollow, concrete blocks or do-it-yourselfers could buy a machine from Sears and make blocks in their own backyard. Concrete was touted as the product of the future – Thomas Edison boasted he could manufacture everything from concrete houses to pianos (neither were successful) and Frank Lloyd



Mercer's Fonthill. Photo: Suzanne Wray

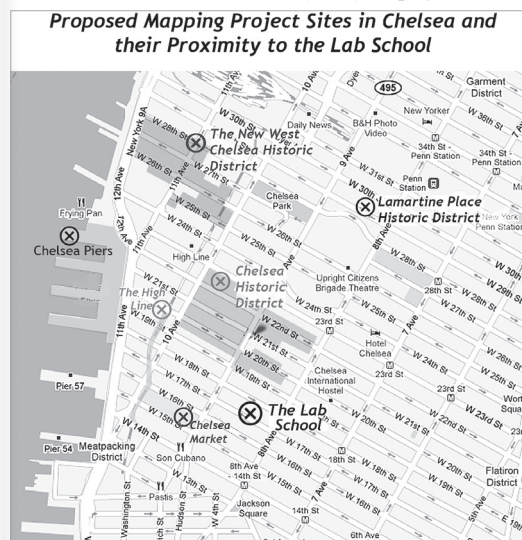
Wright was quite fond of concrete, using it in many projects such as his famous Fallingwater. Henry Mercer used poured-in-place concrete to make his Pennsylvania home, Fonthill, and the nearby Mercer Museum fireproof, lighting a bonfire on its roof when completed to demonstrate its safety. Recommended reading: "Cheap, Quick & Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870 – 1930" by Pamela H. Simpson, 1999 University of Tennessee Press.

~ by Brian Coleman

IN REMEMBRANCE

Milo M. Naeve, a member of the Metropolitan Chapter of the VSA, passed away on August 10, 2009. Mr. Naeve is credited with building the American Arts collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, and was responsible for the concept, planning, and installation of the Field-McCormick Galleries of American Art in that museum. In 1991, Mr. Naeve was awarded the first Lifetime Achievement Award granted by the Illinois Academy of Fine Arts for his contributions to the Arts in Illinois. Mr. Naeve was also Curator of Colonial Williamsburg, Director of the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center, and worked at the Winterthur Museum for ten years.

Education Initiative, continued from first page



nineteenth-century row houses on West 29th Street with a remarkable connection to the Underground Railroad.

Starting this spring semester, Metro VSA's Education Initiative has proposed to introduce students to preservation professionals (from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Historic Districts Council, etc.), to present information on the six proposed sites, and to organize tours to and through the sites and districts. Through this integrated approach, the students will develop a firsthand knowledge and feeling for the places themselves, past, present and future. By engaging students with the cultural and architectural history of these sites, and with the mechanisms for preservation, we hope to inform and inspire a new generation who will remain invested in historic sites and structures for years to come.

~ by Lesley Doyel

HAVE YOU MET THIS MEMBER?

Brooklyn native **Joe Svehlak** has lived most of his life in various Brooklyn neighborhoods. As a child, he grew up in a neatly kept floor-through apartment in a 1900s two-family row house. In 1970 he bought a 1909 three-flat gray brick row house with a view of New York harbor from the top-floor bay window. Then, over the next several years, he also bought an 1898 Victorian brownstone and an 1898 limestone, all in his own Sunset Park neighborhood. Now retired after a career in finance and real estate, he lives in downtown Brooklyn.

After buying his first house, Joe began doing community work in the neighborhood, starting a block association, and co-founding the Sunset Park Restoration Committee. He was chairman of the annual neighborhood house tour for several years and helped with other projects, including cleaning up the park, and fundraising to support historic research.

Maryann Ondovcsik recommended that Joe join the Metropolitan Chapter of the VSA to learn more about preservation, and he has been a member of both the Metropolitan and the national VSA for about 30

years and has also joined many other local and national preservation organizations. Joe travels to many VSA and National Trust annual meetings, and enjoys learning what people in other cities are doing.

In 2006 the Metropolitan Chapter of the VSA awarded Joe a scholarship to the summer school in London. Since then, to “give back,” he has done tours for the Metropolitan chapter to raise money for the scholarship fund and to teach others about Victorian neighborhoods. He became a New York City licensed tour guide 13 years ago and gives tours for the Municipal Art Society and many other organizations. Joe mostly leads walking tours all over the city, particularly of Downtown New York, Brooklyn neighborhoods, and Grand Central Terminal.

“For me, living in New York has been a great learning experience,” says Joe. He enjoys sharing his knowledge and love of the city with others on his tours. Watch for the mailing with Spring 2010 tours: Joe will be leading a walking tour of Boerum Hill, Brooklyn on April 10th. 🌱

AND NEW BOARD MEMBER?

Caroline Hannah has been chosen to fill the board seat recently vacated by Lindsay Parrott until elections at the annual meeting. Lectures by Kevin Stayton at the Bard Graduate Center sparked a passion for Victoriana and she wrote her master's thesis on the 19th-century New York City Pottery of James Carr. Currently an independent design historian writing a dissertation on Henry Varnum Poor's craft and design at the BGC, she also gives gallery talks on the architecture and design exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where she was a Jane and Morgan Whitney pre-doctoral fellow. She has contributed to museum publications on

topics ranging from Neoclassicism to modern craft and previously held positions at Historical Design Inc., the New-York Historical Society, and the Yale University Art Gallery. An alumna of both the London (2002) and Newport (2009) summer schools, Caroline also serves on the VSA's summer schools committee. She is a founding member of the Henry Varnum Poor Foundation, also known as Friends of Crow House, and lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side with her husband Mark Masyga, a painter and production artist/graphic designer. 🌱

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Levels of Membership: Lifetime \$1,000 (no longer offered); Patron \$150 annually; Sponsor \$75 annually

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*Acknowledgement in newsletter,
annual meeting presentation and website*

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- ☐ VSA Summer School Scholarships \$ _____
☐ Margot Gayle Fund for Preservation of Victorian Heritage \$ _____

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METROPOLITAN CHAPTER OF
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METROPOLITAN CHAPTER CALENDAR

LECTURE SERIES

All lectures are held at The New York New Church, 114 East 35th St., between Park and Lexington Avenues. Admission is FREE; no reservations required.

TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 6PM
American Expatriate Women in Gilded Age London
by Jane Gabin, PhD

TUESDAY, APRIL 13, 6 PM
*Mechanical Marvels: Musical Boxes, Dancing
Machines, and Automated Orchestras*
by Ellen M. Snyder-Grenier

TUESDAY, MAY 18, 6PM
*Inventing Entertainment: Sound and Film
in the Age of Edison* by Paul B. Israel

TOURS & SPECIAL EVENTS

Members will receive detailed itinerary and registration information by mail. Nonmembers may contact (212) 886-3742 for information.

SATURDAY, APRIL 10

Boerum Hill, Brooklyn walking tour. Join tour guide and Brooklyn native Joe Svehlak on a trip through the former Dutch farmstead of Simon Boerum, now a vibrant neighborhood on the edge of downtown with a large number of pre-Civil War rowhouses and Victorian era religious, civic, residential, and commercial buildings. Today, the neighborhood is a diverse mixture of Arabic stores, antique shops, trendy restaurants, galleries, and more.

SATURDAY, MAY 8

Bus tour to a number of houses designed or altered by architect **Alexander Jackson Davis** in the **Hudson, New York** area. This trip will visit houses normally open to the public as well as private houses accessible by arrangement with the owners. Lunch will be provided in Hudson and

there will be time to visit some of the shops on Warren Street.

SATURDAY, JUNE 5

Bus tour to **Poughkeepsie, New York**. Stops will include the Vassar College Art Museum, with an outstanding collection of 19th century American paintings, Samuel F. B. Morse's Locust Grove, and other sites.

SATURDAY, JUNE 12

Green-Wood Cemetery walking and trolley tour. Jeff Richman, Green-Wood's historian and author of *Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery: New York's Buried Treasure* will guide us through the 478-acre garden cemetery, founded in 1838. The tour will include a narrated trolley ride through the spectacular romantic landscape, the final rest-

ing place of Louis Comfort Tiffany, Boss Tweed, Horace Greeley, the site of the Revolutionary War Battle of Brooklyn, and home to magnificent monuments and funerary architecture.

PREPAID RESERVATIONS ARE REQUIRED FOR ALL TOURS AND SPECIAL EVENTS.

Meeting places will be provided in the confirmation of registration. Participants in our educational tours must be in excellent health and be able to participate safely in the activities involved. Sites visited may have many challenging stairs; if you have any doubt about your ability to participate fully due to health conditions or disabilities, please contact events@metrosva.org or (212) 886-3742. The Metropolitan Chapter reserves the right to decline to accept or retain any person as a member of our tours at any time.

IN REMEMBRANCE

Robert C. Kaufmann, art librarian and long-time board member of the Metropolitan Chapter of the VSA, passed away on November 1, 2009. Many of you will remember his lecture last year, *The Horror of the Unadorned: Style and the Technology of Wallpaper Production in the Victorian Era*. From 1985 until shortly before his death, he worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the libraries of the Costume Institute, department of European Sculpture Decorative Arts, and the Thomas J. Watson Library. Prior to that he served at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum's library and Yale University's Art and Architecture library. Bob participated in the rescue of art damaged by the Florence floods in 1966, which led to a lifelong love of Italy. In addition to the Victorian Society, he was active in ARLIS (Art Libraries Society of North America), and SAGE (Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Elders). A memorial for Bob Kaufmann was held on January 28th, 2010 at The New York New Church. ☹