

# Hillsborough in Time & Space

*A View From Afar*

THOMAS J. CAMPANELLA

77

THERE COMES A PASSAGE in every person's life when the fulcrum between past and future subtly shifts, when the hoard of spent years, graced with a patina of time, begins to define or even outweigh one's hope for coming things. We begin to treasure the past as we sense the limits of life, to understand our own mortality. Our nostalgia for the past is inversely proportional to our stock in the future. A child has little or no sense of history; the future is all. To an elder the past holds life's treasure.

And so too with nations and cultures. The arc of human society through time mirrors that of an individual's life—from strapping youth to the measured years of adulthood, to eventual superannuation and decline. In each stage, a society values its own history differently, from youth's dismissal of all things old, to age's often-obsessive preoccupation with artifacts of youthful days. One discards the priceless; the other prizes rubbish.

Corollary to this is the fact that a love of the past—senephilia, for lack of a better term—is a function of affluence and arrival. The poor do not,

generally, found historical societies; more urgent matters fill their days. It is only after we (individuals as well as societies) achieve a certain threshold level of material comfort and security that we can afford to steward our own history. The past also gains appeal as it recedes, the distance enabling us to overlook just how violent, hungry, filthy, unjust, miserable, and brief life yesterday often was.

The allure of history is thus, paradoxically, conditional upon forgetting much of it. Stewardship of the past is also often editorial, a snipping of the whole-cloth of history to omit unsavory bits and leave only that which flatters the editor. The fallen scraps may well reveal more about us as a people and a culture than the swatches so carefully chosen.

78

My wife and I have spent the last few years shuttling between two very different places—Hillsborough, North Carolina, and Nanjing, China, where one of us teaches architecture part of the year. We have a small apartment in a neighborhood near Nanjing University with as many residents as all of Hillsborough (Nanjing itself—a smallish city in China—has a population equal to the state of North Carolina).

Moving between Hillsborough and Nanjing is a passage between worlds, and not for the obvious reasons of language or ethnicity or even scale. It has more to do with vastly different values regarding heritage, history, preservation, and development.

Until only recently, visiting China was effectively a return to the past. Decades of Maoism had plunged the nation into a time warp, its regression dramatized by the spectacular ascent of neighbors like Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea in the 1970s. When I first visited the People's Republic in 1992, steam locomotives were still widely in use. Private automobiles were rare, and there were less than a hundred miles of modern, high-speed motorway in the entire country. Shanghai had two modern, high-rise office buildings, neither of which was very tall. Cell phones and personal computers were unheard of.

Today, of course, China is a nation literally and figuratively on the rise. No nation has ever built more than China has in the last thirty years; none has lifted more people out of poverty. Now home to the largest shopping malls, theme parks, car dealerships, and gated communities on earth, China boasts the longest bridges in the world, the biggest airport, half the world's ten tallest buildings (one of which now looms over our Nanjing apartment). Shanghai has twice as many skyscrapers as New York City. Bicycles are being displaced by luxury sedans and SUVs. By 2020 China will have more miles of highway than the United States.

To visit China today is to drink from the proverbial firehouse, to come face to face with a future no longer being principally authored by us. It is also to see ourselves as we once were—reckless, daring, determined to shake the world. The priapic skylines of Shanghai or Guangzhou are not only bar graphs of China's national ego, but proof that the drive and ambition that once defined America have found a new home. China makes us painfully aware that we are no longer a nation Emerson called “the country of the future . . . of beginnings, of projects, of vast designs and expectations.”<sup>1</sup>

China makes us old. To come home from China is to alight from a bullet train, its turbine scream ringing in your ears.

The relative youth or age of a society determines how it values its heritage; and clearly the United States and China are at vastly different points on that arc. We think of China as timeless and ancient, and in many ways it is. But it is also a culture whose historical trajectory was artificially interrupted. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong tried to wipe away all traces of the feudal past, effectively severing China's tendons to its own history. Temples and shrines were defaced; Beijing's 600-year-old walls were razed. At Zhongshan University members of the history faculty were even lynched. The Maoist denigration of history created a kind of collective amnesia in China, diminishing the “street value” of its own past.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American,” *The Dial* 4 (April 1844): 492.

China is a society newly reborn. Today's China—the nation of construction cranes and newly minted millionaires—dates back only to 1978, when Deng Xiaoping ushered in a new era of capitalist enterprise. It is a nation in the flower of youth, obsessed with the new, anxious to compensate for the scarcities and poverty of recent decades. The past in China is thus either a distant memory or too fresh and painful to be cherished. The combination does not make for a nation of preservationists.

Anyone with a love of old buildings will be crushed to see urban China. Seemingly everywhere, the character for “demolish”—chai (拆)—is dashed in paint on the walls of buildings about to be razed. It has become a kind of urbanistic memento mori, the mark of an insatiable modernizing beast. In its headlong rush toward modernity, China has destroyed more neighborhoods—and displaced more urban residents—than any nation in the peacetime history of the world. Urban renewal in Beijing has leveled an area of the city equal in size to most of Manhattan, wiping out neighborhoods two and three times as old as anything in the United States. In Shanghai in the 1990s, an estimated 300 million square feet of old housing was bulldozed for redevelopment. This displaced some 1.8 million people, more than the population of the Research Triangle and nearly twice the number of people uprooted by thirty years of urban renewal in the United States.

If China is an ancient society reborn, hurtling toward the future with nary a backward glance, the United States is a society in tweedy middle age, looking back with increasing wistfulness. The Chinese yearn for the very things Americans now want to be rid of—SUVs and suburban sprawl, big-box superstores, Happy Meals and KFC, life packaged for easy consumption, purged of the pain and hardship of leaner times.

Americans have enjoyed the fruits of affluence for several generations now; we are growing tired of consumerism's empty promises; we want something different. Sick of the simulated and the themed, the franchised

and the virtual, we want authenticity, an unmediated engagement with life. We yearn for the very things our grandparents had but our parents threw away—real towns where our kids can walk to school; homes made of honest materials instead of particleboard and resin; chickens and cows with flesh untainted by growth hormones; bicycles and trains and trolleys to move us around.

This longing for the authentic—for an alternative to contemporary consumer culture—also animates our increasing American preoccupation with the past. Yesterday has become a kind of imagined utopia of the genuine, a Thoreauvian world where hale folk lived deeply and sucked at the marrow of life. We want a piece of that past, to remedy our franchised and mass-produced existence. Americans are insatiable consumers of their own heritage. “Antiques Roadshow,” appropriately enough an Old-World import, is PBS’s highest rated program, attracting some 10 million viewers weekly. “This Old House” is not far behind, syndicated to over 300 stations. Arcadia Publishing has made a fortune with its sepia-tinted Images of America series of local history books. The nearly 4,500 titles, including one on Hillsborough, constitute a national scrapbook of our past.

Of course, American senophilia is itself a relatively new thing. Like China, we too had our love affair with modernity, and cast aside all things old. We bulldozed our cities and built bright Utopias for the motorcar. Heritage preservation came only in fits and starts, and some of the earliest efforts were motivated as much by fear as by altruism. The Colonial Revival movement of the early twentieth century was largely a response to the mass immigration brought by the industrial revolution. Newcomers were seen as a threat by the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority, which reacted by bolstering its claim as the nation’s “charter culture.”

Greenfield Village, red-brick Georgian architecture, and Colonial Williamsburg were all partly attempts to dial back the cultural clock, or at least remind people who wound it in the first place. It is no coincidence that this was also an era of isolationism, cross burnings, and screeds like Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916)—a pseudo-scholarly

lament on the waning power of northern European peoples. One of the bestsellers of the Jazz Age, the book influenced federal legislation to limit the influx of Jews, Italians, and other ethnic groups deemed a hazard to WASP hegemony.

Grant was also a key figure in the conservation movement. He helped establish several national parks, pioneered the concept of wildlife management, and campaigned to protect the American bison and the California redwoods. He did so not out of love for humanity, but to defend natural wonders he considered as extraordinary—and as endangered—as the Nordic race.

82 | It was not until the 1960s that historic preservation began gaining momentum in the United States. The movement, formed mostly at the grassroots level, was set off by the excesses of urban renewal and by the loss of beloved landmarks, such as New York's Pennsylvania Station. But it was also part of a larger cultural rejection of modernity, of the dehumanizing forces of progress that had come to define America during the Cold War. A generation of youth made their way back to the garden, denouncing bigness and complexity, militarism, and the materialism of American consumer culture—TV dinners and multilane highways, pesticides, the military-industrial complex, the Bomb. Like the concomitant civil rights and environmental movements, preservation activism in this period led to major federal legislation, such as the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Hillsborough was not exactly a center of counterculture activism in the 1960s, but neither was it immune to the larger currents of social change. Just as in New York and San Francisco, Hillsborough made its first real attempt to preserve its architectural heritage during that decade.

By this time Hillsborough was more than 200 years old, with a biography that reads like that of Benjamin Button: an illustrious early history preceded a long period of decline and eventual economic near-abandonment. Hillsborough witnessed some of the opening acts in the American

Revolution. It was occupied by British General Cornwallis in 1781, whose troops are said to have laid the town's fieldstone sidewalks. It served as the state capital several times, and had hosted five meetings of the North Carolina General Assembly by 1784. It was in Hillsborough that North Carolinians debated ratification of the federal Constitution (delaying a vote until a Bill of Rights was added).

Though passed over as permanent state capital, Hillsborough remained the seat of Orange County and the center of a flourishing agricultural region up to the Civil War. The Colonial and Antebellum eras left a rich legacy of buildings, crowned by one of the finest Greek Revival courthouses in America. Most of this early stock survived well into the twentieth century. According to local apocrypha, Hillsborough was even a candidate for the period restoration John D. Rockefeller eventually undertook at Williamsburg.

Hillsborough in the 1960s was a typical small Southern town, fractured along lines of race and class. Blacks occupied a separate and unequal world and were largely unwelcome downtown. West Hillsborough was a scrappy mill town with its own culture and economy. Local industry was struggling with increased competition from overseas. Mills began closing or cutting back operations, ravaging the economy and forcing young people to seek greener pastures elsewhere. Others joined the national migration to the suburbs, made easy by an emerging order of highways and motoring.

With ridership plunging, Southern Railway ended passenger service in 1963, taking Hillsborough off the nation's rail grid for the first time since the Civil War. Supermarkets and shopping malls drained customers away from downtown. Construction of a new suburban high school stole away the laughter and bustle of students.

In the face of such problems, stewardship of history was forced to take a back seat to survival. Hillsborough's past was remembered with pride, but aside from a handful of structures salvaged for the Daniel

Boone theme park by local entrepreneur James J. Freeland, little was done to preserve its legacy. History had become expendable. Even Occoneechee Mountain, sacred to area Native Americans, was sacrificed for a strip mine.

The tipping point came with the destruction of the legendary Nash-Kollock School on Margaret Lane. Like Pennsylvania Station, its loss galvanized a nascent local preservation movement, and became a catalyst for a new ethic of heritage conservation in town. Leading this grassroots effort was a newcomer to town named Mary Claire Engstrom, a Missouri native and scholar of eighteenth-century English literature. As an affluent outsider, she could afford to see in Hillsborough what Hillsboroughans could not—a sullied but exquisite diamond.

84 |

Engstrom founded the Hillsborough Historical Society in 1963, and her survey for the Historic American Building Survey led to the establishment of the Hillsborough Historic District a decade later. However exhaustive, these excavations were not free of Engstrom's own biases. Of patrician stock herself—she was a Randolph on her mother's side—Engstrom was chiefly interested in Hillsborough's genteel past, in the Colonial era and the homes of the largely English early families. She and her husband lived in the grandest of these, the former residence of William Hooper, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Engstrom had little interest in the town's rich African American legacy or its extraordinary record of Native American settlement. Nevertheless, Engstrom is owed a great debt for effectively rescuing Hillsborough from itself. She even restored the town's old English name, ending more than a century of the vernacular shorthand "Hillsboro."

The establishment of the Historic District primed Hillsborough's future. Ironically, it made the past profitable: Once sacrificed in the name of progress and economic development, history would now become the town's most bankable asset. It would also be a core element of the town's identity; in promotional literature, Hillsborough is almost always modified by "historic."

The Historic District assured newcomers that the qualities that drew them to the town in the first place were bedrock safe. Hillsborough became a sanctuary from the land development maelstrom that, by the 1980s, had engulfed the Triangle and churned much of it into subdivisions and malls. It offered the very values—authenticity, history, density, walkability, a sense of community, a sense of place—that were tossed aside by corporate builders in their rush to make “home” just another commodity for easy consumption. So rare have these qualities of place become that entire upscale developments have been scratch-built to provide them; what are Southern Village or Meadowmont, after all, but clumsy attempts to manufacture the *genus loci* that Hillsborough has possessed for 250 years?

Implicit in Hillsborough’s appeal is a rejection of the dehumanizing sprawl that has come to define so much of the Piedmont in recent years and—indeed—so much of our contemporary American landscape.

---

**THOMAS J. CAMPANELLA** is a Guggenheim fellow and associate professor of urban planning at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the author of *The Concrete Dragon: China’s Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World* and *Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm*. He and his wife, Wu Wei, have restored two Antebellum houses in Hillsborough and one Mao-era apartment in Nanjing, China.