

Letter from Gustavus

Back to the Big Bang

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Historic preservation is a broad subject. As we usually think of this subject, it concerns the recent artifacts of humankind—over the last several millennia. But history, in its broadest sense, goes back much further. For the cosmologist, it begins with the Big Bang, some 10 to 20 billion years ago, at least for this phase of the history of the universe. For the earth-bound geologist it goes back 4.5 billion years. For the biologist, 3.5 billion years. For the anthropologist, perhaps 5 million years.

Our particular history today—as individuals, as a species—is interlocked with all of that that went before. Parks around the world preserve elements of that long before. They trace the evolution of earth and of life thereon, and of hundreds of cultural experiments by which our ancestors organized their lives to meet the world and survive in it—or to fail and be superceded.

Until very recently, most of those cultural arrangements—however varied in plumage—were heavier on adaptation to the world than they were on modification of it. (That does not mean that the world was not altered by earlier people; culture-group failings and supercedings were in part caused by such alterations—megafauna kill-offs, hydro-agriculture, deforestation, etc. But most of them were localized, in today's terms.)

Just yesterday the tables turned, or so it seemed. The world became our oyster. And we pried it open for what it contained. We, the last few generations, have been the beneficiaries of what economic historians call “the free lunch”—that is, the material abundance (however ill-distributed) that followed the shift from muscle power to fossil-fueled industrial power. The machine bred further inventions, R&D labs, and, in the last 50 years, the full onslaught of applied science and technology in every field—chemical, electronic, genetic, nuclear, optical, you name it.

We know now that that lunch was and is not free. We look around at a world despoiled of resources, piled and awash in de-

bris—much of it glowing in the dark. Our children and all future generations inherit that world.

How did this happen? What are the turning points of the human adventure? Where did we go right and where did we go wrong?

What are the benchmarks—in human and natural history—that we can use to conceptually reconstitute the world as it was, before these most recent degradations? Such benchmarks are our guidons for reclamation. They are the reliquaries of the world before.

History isn't bunk anymore. Nor is it a pleasant antiquarian pursuit. It is a belay for we who dangle from the precipice. If we learn to use it well.

Learning to use effectively the history in the world's national parks hinges on a vastly expanded understanding of the scope and value of that history.

Historic preservation—even in the narrow, conventional sense—must comprehend more than bricks-and-mortar and memorial landscapes. It must provide, by design, the setting for understanding the ideas and assumptions underlying the structures and events commemorated. It must provoke hard analysis of the results of those ideas and assumptions.

Preservation of the broader history that preceded buildings and battles—that is, preservation of the evolutionary stage from which we and our supporting cast sprang, and which, despite our abuses, still sustains us—becomes a sacred trust. For that stage, the less-degraded fragments of it that we save, is the map back home.

These different scales and scopes of history combined—what we did to get here; the homeland that we left—just might help us cook up a new synthesis, one that works.

Preserved places—environments natural and built—should function as new-age laboratories to help us in that task.

Keep the faith,

Bill Brown

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