On June 3, 1980, a wrecking ball crashed into Cleveland’s Hippodrome Theater. Locally known as the Hipp, the building was located along the city’s prominent Euclid Avenue corridor. It was built in 1907 and was the largest pre–World War I theater in Ohio (Figure I.1). The Cleveland Landmarks Commission and local preservation advocates fiercely tried to save the Hipp, with no success. The Landmarks Commission, which had formed in 1971 and was Ohio’s first municipal historic preservation regulatory agency, had considered designating the building a local landmark in December 1974, but took no action due to a backlog of nominations and minimal resources. At the time, the building, which housed the theater, offices, and storefront retail spaces, was vacant except for a few retail tenants.

In 1978, the commission had revisited the idea of designating the Hipp as concerns grew about possible demolition. But the building’s owner objected, and designation without owner consent was unprecedented in Cleveland. The Hipp was just a few blocks west of Cleveland’s Playhouse Square district, a cluster of theaters that advocates were working to save from demolition. Within the context of Cleveland’s escalating urban decline—an entrenched mix of population loss and deindustrialization—resources for historic preservation were minimal and preservationists thought that expanding the Playhouse Square effort to include the Hipp could jeopardize the former.¹ Both individuals and organizations were dismayed at losing the Hipp. The Landmarks Commission, the nonprofit Cleveland Restoration Society (CRS),
and the Western Reserve Society of Architectural Historians all voiced strong opposition to the building’s demolition. An official from the Cuyahoga County Office of Economic Development lamented that the situation was “a sad commentary on the condition of revitalization plans for downtown Cleveland. Due to a lack of planning and a concerted community effort, this historic and potentially profitable structure will be destroyed and replaced by a parking lot!” The Plain Dealer even quoted the head of the city’s Bureau
of Demolition saying “the Hippodrome should be saved because it is important historically to the city and economically to downtown”3 and that “it would be barbaric to tear the Hippodrome down.”4

The Hipp’s owners argued that demolishing the iconic structure was “just a routine real estate proposition that in the long run will improve the south side of Euclid Ave. and help the entire downtown.”5 To the owner, the situation was simple: there was no viable economic purpose for the outmoded building and it was best to generate revenue from a parking lot while awaiting the possibility of redevelopment.6 The Hipp’s owners, which included a local appellate court judge, argued that at least $2 million to $3 million was necessary to save the building, although they stated that if funds were available they preferred to use the money “for a new building once the theater is torn down.”7 Preservationists lacked the capacity and resources to conduct their own feasibility study, purchase an option on the building, or provide a concrete path to save the structure.8 At its May 16, 1980, meeting, the Landmarks Commission heard from the Hipp’s owners and preservation advocates. The meeting concluded with an agreement that the owners would search for funding and consider options to save the building.

Within two weeks, though, the city’s Building Department issued a demolition permit. Accusations flew that the owners had used political influence to expedite the permit before decisions could be made regarding local historic designation and listing in the National Register of Historic Places—both of which were expected in June 1980. The Hipp’s Euclid Avenue location placed it within the city’s downtown protected land district, giving the Fine Arts Advisory Board review authority. The expedited permit skipped that review, along with an assessment by the Planning Commission. The city’s legal team was swayed by the owners’ argument that the building’s mixed-use office and retail portion, which fronted Euclid Avenue, and the theater, which was at the rear of the property and technically south of the protected district boundary, were two separate buildings. Based on this technicality, the city issued the expedited demolition permit for the theater portion, and demolition began on June 3. Remaining tenants sued unsuccessfully to delay demolition, filing for a temporary restraining order on the grounds that the owners were not following city regulations during demolition. By June 19, all efforts to prevent demolition had ceased, including the Landmarks Commission’s attempt to locally designate the structure.9 The theater demolition damaged the remaining portions of the building, including the Euclid Avenue façade, storefronts, and office spaces, and ultimately the entire building came down and was replaced by a surface parking lot.

Quoted in the Plain Dealer, the head of the Landmarks Commission, John D. Cimperman, summarized preservationists’ sticky position with regard to the Hipp:
The Hippodrome had great nostalgia attached to it. We felt a loss with its demolition. Economically, the more we looked at the building, the more difficult it became to recommend its preservation.\textsuperscript{10}

The Hipp demolition left a significant void in Cleveland’s downtown landscape. In the twenty-first century, adaptive reuse projects in downtown Cleveland created a booming real estate market. Forty years after the Hipp’s demolition, in 2020, a Michigan-based developer submitted a preliminary proposal to the Cleveland City Planning Commission to construct a twenty-story apartment tower on the site and construction on the new City Club Apartments began in December 2021.\textsuperscript{11}

The story of the Hipp’s demolition, and the long interval before a new use became viable, provides a glimpse into the challenges, conditions, and opportunities facing Cleveland’s historic preservation community during the 1970s and 1980s. Demolition was an ever-present threat and a constant reality as vacancy and abandonment—stemming from increasingly entrenched urban decline—plagued neighborhoods, industrial facilities, and downtown buildings. Preservationists’ allies ebbed and flowed with every new opportunity or conflict, creating tremendous challenge in building coalitions with residents, neighborhoods, city departments, funders, and nonprofit development organizations. Propreservation arguments centered on the economic and revitalization benefits stemming from saving and repurposing older buildings. But these often paled in comparison to the larger economic forces of decline, disinvestment, and deindustrialization that plagued the city. The conditions of decline placed intense fiscal stress on Cleveland and similar cities, heightening local competition for scarce and dwindling resources. Preservationists were forced to be creative and entrepreneurial to advance their agenda, build support, and find resources for advocacy, historic resource surveys, designation and documentation, and the implementation of bricks-and-mortar projects.

**Historic Preservation amid Urban Decline**

This book uses Cleveland as a case study to explore historic preservation within the context of severe and escalating urban decline in the 1970s and 1980s. It uncovers the motivations, strategies, and constraints that were driving Cleveland’s historic preservation sector, led by the public-sector Cleveland Landmarks Commission, the nonprofit Cleveland Restoration Society, and a cadre of advocates. Cleveland’s preservationists viewed the city’s built environment as a tangible manifestation of its complex cultural heritage that provided a sense of identity, character, and meaning to residents, visitors, and others. The city’s preservationists worked to stave off further demolition,
reverse decline in select neighborhoods, and stabilize the city in the face of an increasingly uncertain future. By exploring the multifaceted dimensions of historic preservation in Cleveland during this era, the book sheds light on the unique challenges that preservationists faced within the context of severe, escalating, and sustained urban decline that plagued Cleveland, Detroit, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and other cities.

Cleveland’s preservationists had a number of barriers and challenges to confront, many of which were unique to or were exacerbated by the conditions of urban decline. These included a lack of financial resources; varied public support; perceptions that the city lacked historic resources; increasing vacancy, abandonment, and property deterioration; demolition; and critiques that preservation was of negligible concern compared to population loss, industrial decline, poverty, and segregation. Within this context, preservationists devised strategies and projects that corresponded to national trends for the profession but were tailored to the local built environment, neighborhood geography, and political climate. As a new entity operating with Cleveland’s long-standing and highly regarded planning and community development sector, preservationists acted entrepreneurially to generate support for their work and often modified their approaches over time through trial and error. These entrepreneurial actions included supporting and building coalitions with neighborhood activists, particularly across the city’s predominantly White west side, securing grant funding to make up for scarce public resources, and working to change laws and regulations that impeded propreservation strategies.

Cleveland’s preservationists crafted propreservation arguments that responded directly to the conditions of decline. They argued that preserving historic buildings and districts had economic benefits such as spurring revitalization, increasing property values and associated tax revenues, and renewing interest in urban living for those who had left. Historic buildings could be repurposed for modern uses, creating interesting and unique environments that would make the city attractive to residents and tourists. And sites with architectural, social, cultural, and historic value were unique and irreplaceable assets that could provide a positive basis for future investment; demolition was irreversible and destructive. At the same time, preservationists demonstrated a keen awareness about the city’s conditions and challenges, making highly tempered statements about the limits of their work, reflecting the socioeconomic and fiscal realities of a city in decline.

The history of preservation in Cleveland during the 1970s and early 1980s reveals a mix of success and failure, the lasting impacts (or lack thereof) of preservation projects, and the patient process of incremental, preservation-based revitalization within the context of urban decline. On one hand, some areas of the city were stabilized and revitalized through propreservation
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strategies such as adaptive reuse, commercial district façade improvements, and housing renovations. At the same time, though, preservationists failed to generate widespread public support for preserving the city’s vast landscape of industrial heritage, did not build strong coalitions in predominantly Black neighborhoods, and were disconnected from broader efforts to rehabilitate vast swaths of Cleveland’s aging housing stock.

Cleveland’s Growth and Decline

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cleveland boomed as an economic powerhouse of industrial production and innovation, spurring rapid population growth. The city’s location on the southern shore of Lake Erie, at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, facilitated its industrial development. In 1870, in Cleveland, John D. Rockefeller founded the Standard Oil Company, and by the early 1900s the city had thriving steel, automotive, and electric industries. Waves of immigrants, including some of the nation’s largest settlements of Eastern Europeans, along with Black residents from the south, settled in Cleveland with the hope of finding employment and improved living conditions. By 1920, Cleveland, with 796,847 residents, was the nation’s fifth largest city, behind only New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit.

The result was typical of turn-of-the-century industrial cities. Factories, office buildings, warehouses, and other commercial enterprises clustered downtown and in the industrial valley along the winding Cuyahoga River. In the northwest quadrant of downtown, the city’s Warehouse District developed with a rich mix of Italianate and Chicago School commercial buildings. The area around Public Square and extending east along Euclid Avenue was intensely developed with skyscrapers in the Chicago School, Beaux Arts, and other popular styles from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The prominent Terminal Tower, completed in 1928 on the southwest corner of Public Square, stood as the tallest building in the city until the completion of the postmodern Key Tower in 1991.

With explosive growth came civic and cultural developments that helped define Cleveland’s built environment. In 1903, the city commissioned Daniel Burnham, Arnold W. Brunner, and John Carrère to design the Group Plan civic center that included an expansive mall surrounded by monumental Beaux Arts public buildings including city hall, the Cuyahoga County Courthouse, the Federal Building, the Public Auditorium, the Cleveland Public Library, and the Board of Education building. About five miles east of downtown, the University Circle neighborhood, partially through large donations of land from prominent industrialists such as John D. Rockefeller and Jeptha Wade, developed as a hub of cultural, medical, and educational institutions. The district includes the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland Orchestra’s
Severance Hall, Cleveland Clinic, Case Western Reserve University, and Rockefeller Park.

Daily life for Clevelanders centered in its vast and diverse residential neighborhoods. Predominantly White, working-class neighborhoods such as Ohio City, Detroit Shoreway, Tremont, Clark-Fulton, and Old Brooklyn made up the city west of the Cuyahoga River. Immediately southeast of downtown was Central, the city’s predominantly Black neighborhood. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Cleveland’s east side neighborhoods included a number of immigrant enclaves, among them Buckeye, Little Italy, and Slavic Village. The city was also home to a large Jewish population that clustered in the Glenville and Hough neighborhoods.

Cleveland’s residential neighborhoods were built with a diverse array of housing styles and types, with many neighborhoods including a locally serving business district. Detached, single-family homes were the predominant housing type, although duplexes and small apartment buildings also dotted the city’s residential landscape. In the city’s oldest neighborhoods, such as Ohio City, there were a mix of Victorian-era mansions in the Italianate, Queen Anne, and Second Empire styles, intermixed with smaller, wood-frame workers’ cottages. In more outlying neighborhoods that developed in the early twentieth century, there were masonry homes of varying styles, including bungalows and American Four Squares. The city’s predominant vernacular style was the Cleveland Double—a two-story, typically wood-sided duplex with one unit on each level, defined by a two-level porch that ran the width of the front façade and a gabled roof. The pace of Cleveland’s growth created an intense demand for housing, accommodated through rapid construction of homes. Vast working-class neighborhoods of wood-frame housing were built at a breakneck pace between 1890 and 1920. Often, these homes were small, were built on narrow lots, and lacked insulation. When maintenance lapsed, the region’s harsh winter climate could cause devastating deterioration, particularly to the city’s vernacular housing stock.

Streetcar and commuter rail lines facilitated an initial exodus to inerring suburbs, such as Shaker Heights, Cleveland Heights, and East Cleveland on the east side and Lakewood on the west side. For those who could afford it, suburban living offered a respite from the city’s industrial production, poor environmental conditions, and urban overcrowding. Many of these 1920s-era suburbs, particularly Shaker Heights, enacted strict architectural controls, creating a landscape of Colonial, Tudor, and other European-inspired housing styles.

In the 1930s, city leaders, notably housing activist and planner Ernest J. Bohn, were concerned about living conditions and embarked on slum clearance endeavors. From 1935 to 1937, the Cleveland (later renamed Cuyahoga) Metropolitan Housing Authority, in partnership with the Public Works Ad-
ministration, built the first federally authorized and funded public housing developments in the nation. Cedar Apartments and Lakeview Terrace, in the Central and Ohio City neighborhoods, respectively, housed low-income White families, while Outhwaite Homes, also in Central, housed Black residents.

In the post-war era, Cleveland’s development mirrored that of other major U.S. cities. The city’s population peaked in 1950, at 914,808 residents, and declined over the next seventy years. Many core neighborhoods, including Slavic Village, Central, Kinsman, and University Circle, began losing residents as early as the 1920s. In these locations, urban decline has been taking place for a full century. Urban renewal and highway building cleared large swaths of the city, including eradicating nearly the entire Central neighborhood that was once the city’s historic Black community. Rather than reducing slum conditions, mid-century demolition exacerbated already overcrowded conditions in the city’s east side neighborhoods, such as Hough and Glenville, as Black households had limited housing choices and faced severe discrimination in the housing market. Middle-class Black residents began to settle in the city’s easternmost areas, often following the path of the city’s Jewish and/or immigrant communities, and sometimes in newly constructed neighborhoods. Suburbanization increased, fostered by the construction of the interstate highway system and favorable mortgage lending to White, middle- and upper-class residents.

The city faced a perpetual series of crises from the mid-1960s through the 1970s. The Hough neighborhood erupted in race riots on July 18, 1966, after a Black man was refused a glass of water at a White-owned business. The Ohio National Guard was called in on July 19, and rioting continued until July 24. In total, four people—all Black—died, thirty were injured, and three hundred were arrested. The riots caused around $1 million in property damage, mostly from arson, scarring the neighborhood’s landscape for decades to come. Two years later, the adjacent Glenville neighborhood erupted after a shoot-out between police and the Black Nationalists of New Libya, a militant group. The shoot-out resulted in seven deaths, including three members of the Black Nationalists group, three police officers, and one civilian. In the days after the shoot-out, riots erupted with looting and arson causing more than $2.5 million in damage and obliterating swaths of housing and historic business districts. In 1969, the Cuyahoga River fire catalyzed the nation’s growing environmental movement and branded the city as an industrial and environmental disaster. In the 1970s, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District’s busing strategy exacerbated White flight. By 1977, more than one-third of the city’s budget came from federal aid, and stopgap measures to raise funds, such as selling city-owned property, were common. In 1978, Cleveland defaulted when it could not repay $15.5 million in short-term notes.
By the 1970s, much of Cleveland’s housing was more than seventy years old and showed signs of aging and deferred maintenance. Neighborhoods built to house middle-income, working-class, and poorer residents were particularly vulnerable. Large swaths of detached wood-frame homes were more prone to deteriorate rapidly from a lack of regular maintenance and upkeep. The city’s harsh winter climate and intense freeze/thaw cycle put further pressure on Cleveland’s residential building stock, particularly houses that were built quickly and at low cost, often without proper insulation. By the late 1980s, the city had extreme concentrations of poverty and was continuing to lose about thirty-five hundred households per year, exacerbating issues of deferred maintenance, vacancy, and abandonment that marred the residential landscape.15

Deindustrialization escalated Cleveland’s decline, as industries closed, fled to the suburbs and the Sunbelt, or relocated overseas. For example, in 1969 the National Screw and Manufacturing Company, which had operated out of a facility on the city’s east side, relocated to a nearby suburb. The move took one thousand jobs out of Cleveland and left an abandoned building. According to the Planning Commission, the city had a net loss of 258 firms, and 12,058 jobs, from 1969 to 1973. Job losses stemming from deindustrialization escalated in the 1980s. The city lost more than eighty-six thousand manufacturing jobs from 1970 to 1985, with a quarter of all manufacturing jobs leaving in the five-year span from 1979 to 1983. By 1987, the vacancy rate of industrial space was around 25 percent, or twenty-seven million square feet. This landscape of former industrial uses included vacant factories; underutilized infrastructure, including massive railyards; and massive, but outmoded, machinery and equipment that dotted the river and lakefronts.16

A broad coalition of planners, neighborhood activists, community and economic developers, business leaders, elected officials, and others worked to counter the forces of urban decline. One of the most prominent among these figures was Norman (Norm) Krumholz, who led the city’s Planning Commission in the 1970s. Krumholz championed equity planning, with urban planners addressing the needs of Cleveland’s most disadvantaged residents. The city’s growth coalition advanced economic development through downtown redevelopment projects, business and industrial attraction, and promoting the city’s assets. Reductions in federal aid, combined with continued neighborhood decline, spurred the growth of community development corporations in the 1970s, earning Cleveland a national reputation as a leader in this regard.17 In 1987, a Plain Dealer architecture feature described Cleveland as “a complex amalgam of good and bad, aesthetic and tacky, old and new. It is a peculiar patchwork of neighborhoods and districts, some tightly knit, others pierced with holes.”18
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Legacy Cities and Entrenched Decline

This book centers on the history of historic preservation in Cleveland, as a prototypical declining city, also commonly referred to as shrinking, Rust Belt, postindustrial, or legacy cities. In this book there are two foundational conditions that define urban decline: (1) sustained population loss from peak and (2) economic contraction, typically due to deindustrialization. Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and others are legacy cities that have suffered from more than seventy years of urban decline.

In 2011, the American Assembly, a nonprofit affiliate of Columbia University, convened a group of scholars and practitioners who coined the term legacy city, an identifier that “evokes these cities’ positive heritage and assets as well as their continuing burdens and challenges.” The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, which currently leads the Legacy Cities Initiative, states that these cities were “at the center of some of America’s most historic achievements” and “endured some of its most difficult challenges.” Yet, there is a lack of attention to historic preservation in the Legacy Cities literature and a reciprocal lack of attention paid in historic preservation scholarship to the unique conditions and challenges of cities that are experiencing entrenched and sustained decline.

Recent scholarship on urban decline and legacy cities tends to have a contemporary focus—particularly in the wake of the 2008 foreclosure crisis, which hit these cities particularly hard. Research has addressed prominent topics such as economic conditions, the mechanisms behind urban shrinkage, and planning and design strategies that respond to urban decline, but this research rarely includes or focuses on historic preservation. While the literature on shrinking cities spans the U.S. and European context, in the United States there is a strong bias toward the archetype of urban decline: Detroit. Recent contributions add perspectives about other U.S. legacy cities, including Cleveland, but only a handful of scholars explore the past or contemporary role of historic preservation within the context of urban decline. In a recent edited volume, Legacy Cities: Continuity and Change amid Decline and Revival, urban scholar Rosie Tighe and I conclude that legacy cities’ “contribution to the development of the nation is unquestionable, and their resilience through the sustained and severe distress they have experienced perhaps demonstrates the ability of cities to evolve, adapt, and reinvent themselves over time.”

The Lincoln Institute identifies around one hundred cities that fit the definition of legacy city. These range from small municipalities (e.g., the Detroit suburb of Highland Park, Michigan, with a population of 10,978) to large central cities (e.g., Chicago, Illinois, population 2.7 million). Twelve large cities (population over three hundred thousand) experienced sustained population loss since their peak. Four of these—Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh,
and St. Louis—continue to experience entrenched decline in the twenty-first century (Figure I.2). In 1950, all four of these cities were among the nation’s largest. Their populations peaked that year and have declined every decade since. From 1950 to 2020, Pittsburgh lost 55 percent of its residents; Cleveland’s population declined by 59 percent, while Detroit and St. Louis each lost a staggering 65 percent of their residents. The most intense population loss occurred from 1970 to 1980. In that decade alone, St. Louis’ population declined by 27 percent, Cleveland’s by 24 percent, Detroit’s by 20 percent, and Pittsburgh’s by 18 percent. Legacy cities were not unique in suffering population loss during the 1970s, a decade that posed tremendous challenges to cities across the nation. New York City lost 10 percent of its residents during the 1970s, Seattle lost 7 percent, and Portland lost 4 percent. The difference was that these cities began to rebound by 1990 and continue to gain residents, surpassing their former peak populations. Legacy cities, such as Detroit and Cleveland, have had no such rebound.

Urban decline manifests in the built environment and presents difficult challenges for historic preservation. Vacant buildings, property abandonment, deferred maintenance, underutilized and deteriorating infrastructure, and

![Figure I.2](image-url)
vacant land are all hallmarks of the legacy city landscape. Population loss and economic contraction have resulted in an excess supply of all types of buildings. At one point, Detroit housed 1.85 million people. Now, just over six hundred thousand people call the city home. As in Cleveland, there are too many houses, roads, commercial spaces, factories, warehouses, and offices. As a result, widespread demolition rises to the top of the local urban policy agenda and historic preservation becomes a tenuous proposition. Detroit demolished around 17 percent of its housing stock from 2000 to 2020. In 2020, the national residential vacancy rate was 12 percent, but in Detroit and Cleveland it was around 17 percent. With a weak market for new development, demolition results in vacant land ranging from scattered individual residential parcels to large swaths of former industrial space, much of which suffers from environmental contamination. Their weak-market conditions and lack of recent growth mean that the buildings that do remain tend to be older and potentially historic. In Cleveland, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh, around 80 percent of all housing units were built before 1960, with around half of all residential units built before 1940.

Oversupplied buildings and infrastructure, along with a declining tax base, escalate municipal fiscal distress. When there are twice as many houses as households supply significantly exceeds demand and market values and property tax revenues plummet. In 2020, the median value of owner-occupied housing in the United States was $217,500. In Cleveland it was around $70,000, while in Detroit it was a mere $49,000. The loss of business and industrial activity further drives down tax revenues, including local income and sales taxes. Legacy city governments have to maintain overbuilt infrastructure and provide a full range of urban services with increasingly scarce revenues. When resources are extremely scarce, funding for public services, including historic preservation, becomes highly competitive. The result, in Cleveland, is a poorly resourced public preservation sector that must rely on partnerships and creative funding.

Urban decline creates particularly challenging social conditions, including extreme racial segregation, concentrated poverty, and metropolitan jurisdictional fragmentation. Population loss did not occur evenly across racial and socioeconomic groups. White, middle- and upper-income residents fled legacy cities much earlier and at higher rates than minoritized and lower-income residents did. Banks and insurance companies redlined minoritized communities, spiraling large swaths of legacy cities into more severe disinvestment and abandonment and perpetuating stark segregation. About half of Cleveland’s population is Black, but neighborhoods across the city’s segregated east side are nearly 100 percent Black. Legacy cities are also extremely poor. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the national poverty rate is around 11 percent. Detroit’s poverty rate is 35 percent; Cleveland’s is 33 percent; and
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St. Louis’s and Pittsburgh’s is over 20 percent. Concentrated poverty reduces the ability of residents to qualify for rehabilitation loans and/or to pay for building maintenance. It causes struggling neighborhoods to spiral further into physical decline through deferred maintenance and a lack of private-sector resources.

Some scholars note that decline is a problematic framework, given that all cities and civilizations evolve through periods of growth and decline. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, though, decline became an entrenched and sustained force for a select subset of U.S. cities, particularly clustered in the industrial Midwest. For more than seven decades, population loss and economic restructuring have plagued cities like Cleveland. The impacts on the built environment are visible and stark. They include vacant and underutilized buildings, abandonment, and deferred maintenance. In this context, historic preservation faces an uphill battle against the forces of decline. Preservationists, beginning in the 1970s, had to act strategically to build coalitions of support, counter demolition pressure, and develop persuasive arguments about the benefits of saving—rather than demolishing—the landscape of legacy cities, including Cleveland.

Preservation as a Response to Urban Decline

This book adds a new lens to the history of historic preservation in the United States by focusing on a prototypical declining city in the industrial Midwest—a geographic space too often understudied in historic preservation scholarship. Sustained urban decline created a unique context for historic preservation in cities such as Cleveland. Dominant and popular narratives typically portray preservation as a mitigating factor against redevelopment-driven demolition. In Cleveland, though, demolition was a leading response to deterioration, vacancy, and abandonment. Often, the result was vacant land, not new construction. Escalating urban decline during the 1970s forced Cleveland’s preservationists to constantly justify their cause, seek creative partners and strategies, and accept the realities of a city with too many buildings and too few people: a city that was vanishing.

Employing historic preservation as an urban revitalization and economic development strategy was not a new concept in the 1970s. There were efforts to preserve historic structures and districts in select locations across the nation beginning in the early twentieth century. In 1931, Charleston, South Carolina, created the Old and Historic District, the nation’s first local historic district, with motivations including capitalizing on the city’s unique architectural heritage as a driver of tourism-based economic development. In the 1950s and 1960s, nonprofit preservation efforts in Charleston and Savannah used revolving funds to improve neighborhood housing—further-
ing the idea of preservation as a revitalization tool, while generating early critiques of gentrification. At the same time, some localities used preservation as an urban renewal strategy. Among the most notable of these were projects in Providence’s College Hill and Philadelphia’s Society Hill neighborhoods. Here, planners recognized the value of local historic buildings and neighborhood fabric, so they developed unique urban renewal strategies that encouraged rehabilitation while injecting new development in select locations. Preservation-based urban renewal strategies were in the minority, but they illustrated some awareness that retaining and restoring historic fabric could serve as the basis of revitalization in local communities.

Support for urban historic preservation gained increased momentum in the latter half of the twentieth century. National concern about the loss of historic resources escalated in the wake of demolition-based urban renewal and highway building. Local activism coalesced in the 1966 publication *With Heritage So Rich*, sponsored by the United States Conference of Mayors, which lamented the loss of historic buildings and districts, particularly in the nation’s cities. Within the year, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), creating the National Register of Historic Places, among other provisions. The National Register, a largely honorary designation that does not come with regulatory controls, legitimized local designation of historic resources. The NHPA made historic preservation a national policy goal, solidifying the idea that preservation was beneficial for localities, states, and the nation.

In the late 1960s, the creation of local historic preservation commissions increased, with the number escalating in the 1970s. In contrast to honorary listing in the National Register, municipal designation of historic resources provided localities with a regulatory mechanism to control alterations and demolitions to historic buildings and districts. Local governments, residents, and preservation advocates used local designation as a way to prevent demolition, instill and boost local pride, and spur revitalization. New York City had created its Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965, one of the first such entities with citywide authority to designate and review alterations to historic buildings. In the American Midwest, St. Louis began protecting historically significant local landmarks in 1966. Chicago created the Commission on Chicago Landmarks two years later. Within this national movement, Cleveland was ripe for local historic preservation action and was a preservation pioneer in Ohio, creating the state’s first local preservation commission in 1971. Throughout the 1970s, other midwestern cities followed suit, including Buffalo (1974), Detroit (1976), Indianapolis (1976), Cincinnati (1980), and Columbus (1980). Nonprofit organizations also took up the banner of preservation, advocating against demolition, the loss of neighborhood fab-
ric, and the destruction of iconic local landmarks. One of the earliest such organizations was the Landmarks Association of St. Louis (1958). In the Midwest, it was followed by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation (1964), the Cleveland Restoration Society (1972), and Preservation Detroit (1975).

In the 1970s, an energy crisis and recession stifled new construction, spur-ring neighborhood reinvestment and a wave of gentrification. Middle- and upper-income households took advantage of low-cost, but architecturally unique, urban housing. This back-to-the-city movement brought resources and reinvestment to historic areas, but it also generated critiques of preservation as an elitist, gentrification strategy. Prolific urban scholars, including Neil Smith and Sharon Zukin, argued that reinvestment in historic, but deteriorated, neighborhoods drove up property values, displacing low-income residents. They, along with a cadre of other urban social scientists, contributed to the perception that preservation was a causal factor in gentrification.

Writing in 1998, Neil Smith argued that “the general catalytic effect of historic preservation on gentrification is undeniable.” More recent studies questioned this connection, with scholars concluding that the restoration of historic buildings is one of the most visible signs of upward neighborhood change, but that preservation does not inevitably lead to gentrification.

Federal actions also spurred more local interest in preservation revitalization strategies. In the wake of top-down urban renewal programs, the federal government devolved control to local governments, first via the Model Cities program and then through the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. The latter established the Community Development Block Grant program, which provided funds to local governments for urban development, including historic preservation. In 1976, the federal government modified the U.S. Tax Code to encourage private-sector preservation of historic buildings. Congress modified preservation tax incentives in 1978, in 1981 when it established a highly favorable tiered system of tax credits, and in 1986 when the credits were scaled back to essentially the program that exists today. For declining cities like Cleveland and Detroit that had a vast supply of vacant warehouses, outmoded offices, and other underutilized buildings, historic tax credits and adaptive reuse (converting a building from its original use such as a warehouse into a new use such as apartments) became a linchpin of urban recovery. In 1977, the federal government created the Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) program to provide targeted assistance to distressed cities. According to a 1979 General Accounting Office report on UDAG, “communities with population out-migration, a stagnating or declining tax base, and/or a housing stock which is excessively deteriorated or abandoned are eligible for UDAG assistance.” This well-funded
program, with an initial authorization of $1.2 billion, was a boon to cities such as Cleveland. The UDAG program faced reduced presidential and congressional support in the 1980s and was unfunded by 1988—likely due to its targeted focus on a particularly distressed subset of American cities.34

Nonprofit organizations also designed programs to leverage historic resources for revitalization. One of the most prominent was the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street program, piloted in three small midwestern towns in 1977, formalized in 1980, and expanded to urban neighborhood business districts in 1986.35 The Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation created a revolving fund to support preservation and restoration in the predominantly Black and low-income Manchester neighborhood. In Cincinnati’s Mount Auburn, a grassroots organization restored historic homes and apartment buildings to provide affordable housing without displacement. The Savannah Landmark Rehabilitation Project worked to restore the city’s Victorian District without gentrification. And preservationists and planners in Richmond, Virginia, devised a strategy to provide affordable housing in Jackson Ward, a historically Black neighborhood.36

By the 1980s, historic preservation was an established profession playing a key role in urban revitalization across the nation, including legacy cities. Preservationists documented, designated, and reviewed changes to a growing array of historic buildings, districts, and other resources. They aligned, at times, with real estate developers to adaptively reuse buildings that were salvageable yet outmoded. They built coalitions of historians, architects, neighborhood developers, and others interested in saving the built environment of cities. All of these things occurred in Cleveland, as they did elsewhere, but the tensions and pressures of decline made historic preservation an ever-precarious endeavor that faced constant challenges.

As urban planning scholar Eugenie Birch noted in a seminal 1984 article, there was an “uneasy alliance” between preservationists and their counterparts in planning, economic development, and community development.37 This was heightened in legacy cities, where persistent decline resulted in widespread demolition. Planners in Cleveland prioritized strategies to alleviate poverty and improve social conditions for the city’s increasingly minoritized and impoverished population. Economic developers pushed for large-scale redevelopment in downtown and industrial districts. Neighborhood conservation through community development was challenging, to put it mildly, given continued population loss and the oversupplied housing stock. In legacy cities such as Cleveland, decline persists in the early twenty-first century, and battles about what to save and what to demolish rage on. The future of the historic built environment, the heritage it represents, and the communities it houses hangs in the balance.
Preserving the Vanishing City

*Preserving the Vanishing City* contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the history of historic preservation and adds to our understanding of preservation within the context of urban decline in the industrial Midwest, an understudied region in preservation literature. Recent scholarship on the history of historic preservation has greatly enhanced academic and professional knowledge about the evolution and nuanced approaches within the field. Dominant narratives traditionally frame preservation as an elitist practice that demands pristine restorations, abides by inflexible guidelines, fosters gentrification, and prioritizes high architecture over spaces of everyday life. Recent research and practice have started to debunk those narratives. In the preface to the second edition of *Giving Preservation a History*, Randall Mason and Max Page contend that the field “‘matured’ by gaining the political power of new federal, state, and municipal policies, learned to collaborate unproblematically with market forces, and embraced the representation of minority histories in public space.”38 Existing research has also analyzed the intensely local nature of preservation, including motivations, strategies, and outcomes that respond to and reflect local contexts, economic conditions, political environments, and development pressures.39 *Preserving the Vanishing City* reinforces the notion that preservation is highly local, has a diverse range of applications, and has a mix of synergies and tensions with city planning, community development, and economic development.

The book challenges dominant narratives that frame preservation as a strategy to counter redevelopment-based demolition. The vast majority of research on the history of preservation focuses on locations with relatively stable or strong market conditions and/or on particular preservation battles in the face of redevelopment. Research on New York, New England, and the mid-Atlantic figures prominently in preservation scholarship, while there is a dearth of studies focused on cities like Cleveland.40 One of the few analyses of preservation as an urban revitalization strategy within the context of decline is Andrew Hurley’s authoritative book *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities*, which focuses on the possibilities of preservation to serve broader planning goals—including public engagement, community development, and neighborhood revitalization—without the negative effects of gentrification. Hurley’s work, centered in St. Louis, provides a strong foundation for continuing to explore preservation within the context of severe urban decline.41

Existing narratives about the history of historic preservation suggest that preservation is as much about the future as it is about the past, as exemplified in Randall Mason’s *The Once and Future New York: Historic Preserva-
This was certainly the case in Cleveland, where preservationists focused not just on saving historic, architectural, and cultural landmarks, but also on how to use the historic built environment as a resource and asset in crafting a better future for the city.

*Preserving the Vanishing City* first introduces readers to the rise of the historic preservation profession in Cleveland, and then dives into six case study chapters about targeted projects and neighborhood efforts. Chapter 1 chronicles the conditions under which preservation coalesced from the 1950s through the 1970s, resulting in the creation of the Cleveland Landmarks Commission, and associated local regulatory controls, and the nonprofit Cleveland Restoration Society. Chapter 2 unpacks preservation’s complex relationship to the relics of the city’s prominent, yet problematic, industrial heritage. While the focus on industrial heritage, including factories, infrastructure, and machinery, was innovative, preservationists’ focus on documentation failed to provide clear direction for saving and repurposing industrial resources. Chapter 3 chronicles the planning and implementation of preservation-based revitalization in the Warehouse District, one of the city’s oldest downtown districts. It took preservationists and allied advocates nearly a decade to build momentum in the Warehouse District, overcoming challenges including local zoning, scarce funding, and a state building code that prohibited adaptive reuse.

The remaining chapters focus on neighborhood and housing preservation. Chapter 4 addresses preservation-based revitalization in Ohio City, the primary location of a 1970s-era back-to-the-city gentrification effort in Cleveland. Propreservation activists embarked on “do-it-yourself,” or DIY, housing restorations, advocated for commercial district revitalization, and secured local historic district designations, demonstrating the interplay between formal preservation institutions and neighborhood organizing. Chapter 5 expands the neighborhood preservation narrative by chronicling preservation efforts in three other west side communities: Detroit Shoreway, Old Brooklyn, and Tremont. These stories shed light on the ways in which community-based organizations employed preservation to advance neighborhood stabilization and revitalization, with mixed success. Chapter 6 tackles the complex dynamics of race, White ethnic immigrant heritage, and preservation with a focus on the east side’s Buckeye neighborhood. Cleveland’s preservationists struggled to navigate the complexities of rapid racial change that were taking place in neighborhoods such as Buckeye, once the nation’s largest Hungarian enclave, and ultimately failed to build strong coalitions with the city’s Black community during the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, Chapter 7 expands the narrative by exploring public- and nonprofit-led housing rehabilitation efforts that removed the “historic” from historic preservation. In response to high vacancy rates, concentrations of poverty, and redlining, organizations
developed initiatives ranging from DIY home improvement workshops and tool-lending programs to purchase-rehabilitation-resale programs with the goal of saving the city’s housing—primarily for remaining residents. Only in isolated instances were these efforts tied in to the city’s preservation movement, illustrating the tenuous disconnect between preservation and community development.

The epilogue re-centers Cleveland as a prototypical legacy city that has suffered from more than seven decades of urban decline. Within this context, preservation faces unique challenges, including addressing the simple fact that population loss and economic contraction have left a staggering oversupply of buildings. The future of the past within the context of urban decline is precarious. Even with innovative projects, strong partnerships, and creative funding, preservationists must constantly and strategically decide what to fight for and what to let go. In this way, the book offers lessons for ongoing preservation efforts in struggling cities, which face challenges today that are very similar to what was faced five decades ago.

The stories that follow are not simply anecdotes from the past. Under the conditions of persistent decline, change is slow; and in the long arc of urban decline, the historical case studies in the following chapters remain relevant in the early twenty-first century. Debates about the future of iconic industrial machines, such as the Hulett ore unloaders described in Chapter 2, continue in the early twenty-first century. The Warehouse District is experiencing a new wave of building renovations, and for the first time in decades, new development is planned for some of the district’s many surface parking lots that have served as a daily reminder of the finality of demolition. Ohio City, discussed in Chapter 4, has rising values, creating demand for new higher-density development. Other west side neighborhoods, particularly Detroit Shoreway and Tremont, are increasingly gentrifying as well. Buckeye, the focus of Chapter 6, and other predominantly Black east side neighborhoods continue to struggle with housing deterioration, a lack of investment, and increased demolition in the wake of the 2008 foreclosure crisis. Housing rehabilitation efforts continue, with preservationists having entered the fray in the 1990s with propreservation lending and technical assistance programs.

This book cannot and does not delve into all of Cleveland’s preservation initiatives from the 1970s or early 1980s. There are key stories covered elsewhere or worthy of more inquiry. In the 1970s, activist Ray K. Shepardson led a grassroots effort that spurred the preservation of the city’s theater district, Playhouse Square. A mix of demolition, new construction, and preservation transformed the central core of downtown. In 1982, the historic Cuyahoga (c. 1893) and Williamson (c. 1900) buildings were demolished to make way for a new skyscraper to house the headquarters of Sohio (BP America). A few years later, though, preservationists successfully saved the historic Society
for Savings building (c. 1890). Many of Cleveland’s preservation activists lived in historic streetcar suburbs, spurring the early creation of landmarks commissions in Cleveland Heights (1973) and Shaker Heights (1974). While both suburbs had long traditions of rigorous architectural review, landmarks commissions gave them heightened authority to prevent demolition of designated historic resources. These, and other stories, helped shape the modern preservation profession in Cleveland and the Northeast Ohio region. Their omission from this book is not meant to diminish their importance. Rather, the case studies included best highlight the multifaceted focus, varied strategies, and success and limitations of historic preservation in Cleveland during the 1970s and 1980s.

Population loss, economic contraction, deindustrialization, and financial distress remain entrenched in cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis. In this subset of U.S. cities, property deterioration runs rampant, housing conditions remain dire, buildings suffer from a lack of basic maintenance, and there is little upgrading and modernization. Demolition often proceeds with no plan for redevelopment. More than seven decades of decline present an uncertain future for the rich heritage and unique historic built environments embedded in these cities. Furthermore, the history of decline and its manifestation in the built environment is not always a positive narrative. Industrial decline, economic contraction, population loss, and racial segregation have all left their scars on the built landscape of Cleveland, yet preservationists in the 1970s and today do not readily address the significance of these difficult parts of our past.

As an older industrial city, Cleveland had a rich and varied historic landscape that was under constant threat from deep and entrenched urban decline. The work of city planners, community developers, and economic developers to stave off and reverse decline is generally well known. Historic preservationists, though, also developed a framework that included regulatory tools, preservation planning, advocacy, and coalition-building to reverse the critical problem of decline. The creation of a national preservation movement, along with its associated tools and strategies, emerged at the right time for Cleveland. Yet, there was an open question about whether the tools developed as a response to growth-oriented urban redevelopment would work in an environment where the driving threats were disinvestment and population loss.

Cleveland’s preservationists confronted urban decline in a multitude of ways, despite the strong likelihood that, at the time, they did not have a robust understanding of the scale and persistence of that decline. They addressed a wide array of historic resources, from monumental public buildings to industrial fabric to warehouses to residential neighborhoods and their associated commercial districts. Preservation proved to be an adaptable strategy
that could be tailored to different conditions in different parts of the city. Preservation practice evolved through coalition-building and developing robust partnerships in certain, typically predominantly White, neighborhoods. When preservation was successful, which was not always the case, communities retained a relatively intact built environment, new in-town neighborhoods developed, and commercial districts garnered investment. Not all parts of the city benefited from preservation, though. This was perhaps most evident across the city’s east side, where preservationists struggled to apply their tools in neighborhoods experiencing rapid racial change and failed to build strong coalitions with minoritized communities.

Throughout the book, I try to avoid the trappings of nostalgia, although combing through historic photographs and coming face-to-face with the scale of decline and destruction in the place where I now live and work is enough to make anyone pause and consider what might have been if different decisions had been made at any number of points in time. The scale of loss in a city like Cleveland or Detroit is staggering. In the 1970s, Cleveland was vanishing. In their own way, preservationists worked to stave off further destruction. In some cases, they succeeded. In many, they did not. They could not stop all demolitions nor could they bring back what was already lost. For me, and I hope for readers, the stories of preservation in this book are simultaneously inspiring and heartbreaking. They are stories of everyday people who fought as hard as they could, often with minimal resources, to save their city by saving its built environment.