

Ahead of the Wrecking Ball: Ronald Ramsey and the Preservation of Charleston

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In order to fully understand the value of a building or artifact, one must document it utilizing standard historic-preservation methods. In a nutshell, the idea is that you must know what you have before you know whether it's worth protecting. This is the first step toward understanding the importance of a building. The documentation process can take many different forms: a measured drawing, a photograph, a survey profile. Combining that record with historic research leads you to understand how the building was used, who lived or conducted business there, and how the property has evolved over time. Then you can begin to assess its significance, and in the preservation world, the concept of significance is really important. Believe it or not, not *all* old buildings are significant in the eyes of the preservationist. This research, when combined with the documentation, begins to breathe depth and context into your perception of the building so that you and the broader community can connect with it in a truly meaningful way.

That is how preservation professionals go about this business. Other, normal people just appreciate old buildings for a wide variety of legitimate, though perhaps more romantic, reasons: aesthetics, nostalgia, memory. That response to buildings is important, too, but it's less methodical and objective and, ultimately, less defensible. This is because, at the end of the day, historic preservation is about protection, and protection typically requires the crafting of an argument. You have to make the case for why a particular building is more special than another in a language that is somewhat bereft of emotion, and this argument has to be convincing to a broad audience that usually includes the property owner, governmental entities, and the massive economic forces that tend to render a building obsolete before its proper time. If you can't convince the powers that be, and the building is indeed destroyed, the documentation becomes an extremely valuable resource for archival posterity. Even better, salvaging actual elements of the building—windows, siding, decorative elements, hardware—is an important effort as well. Better to recycle parts than to lose the entire building to the dumpster.

Enter Ronald Wayne Ramsey, a staunch Charleston preservationist but one who has certainly bucked the system, operating outside of the established preservation apparatus of Charleston, which is quite formal and hallowed. He came to preservation out of an instinctual passion for our built environment. Ronald's father was a health inspector for Charleston County. A newspaper article from 1948 shows the elder Mr. Ramsey inspecting a slum clearance project on Coming Street in downtown Charleston. One can imagine young Ronald accompanying his father on work visits, inspecting old buildings and ramshackle "slums" to

make sure that they passed sanitation standards. Perhaps the artist's passion for preservation was born out of seeing some of these buildings torn down.

Ronald, who has been documenting the historic architecture of Charleston for decades, has an incredibly keen eye for what is significant. Operating at both the high and low ends of the spectrum, he has drawn railroad buildings, laundry facilities, single houses, and civic landmarks with the same enthusiasm and proficiency. The preservation movement has only recently caught up with him in its appreciation for simple, vernacular architecture. The early twentieth-century industrial buildings of the Charleston Upper Peninsula were in his sights well before any professional advocates began discussing their value, and we have yet to catch up with him in his campaign to raise awareness about worker's housing in the Neck area of North Charleston. Ramsey was also dumpster diving and salvaging fragments of historic buildings way before it was the hip thing to do, well before *reclaimed* became synonymous with boutique and expensive. Ronald is part of a local continuum of survey, documentation, and advocacy that began in earnest during the Charleston Renaissance period of the 1920s. (It is interesting to note that the first federal preservation program, the Historic American Buildings Survey, commonly referred to as HABS, did not begin until 1933). Charleston artists, concerned about the slow march of progress that had begun to chug along for the first time since before the Civil War, started capturing the unique beauty of the city's architecture and urban fabric through watercolor, etchings, and pencil drawings. The names are familiar: Alfred Hutton, Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, Elizabeth O'Neill Verner. Their artwork is imbued with a plaintive romanticism that is endearing and beautiful, yet somewhat parochial. An early effort that was much more concerned with actual documentation and historic appreciation is the 1917 book *The Dwelling Houses of Charleston, South Carolina* by Alice R. Huger Smith and her father, D. E. Huger Smith. In it the artists valiantly attempted to capture the architecture of Charleston through a unique blend of media: research text, photography, penciled renderings, and architectural plans and elevations. This comprehensive snapshot of Charleston's most important residences remains a landmark achievement of documentation and education. Famed local architect Albert Simons's role in producing the measured drawings for that book likely led him to continue his efforts by producing in 1927 *The Early Architecture of Charleston* with his partner Samuel Lapham, Jr. Their focus for this book project extended beyond residential architecture to include drawings and photographs of churches and civic buildings as well. Their composite approach to documentation encompassed building sketches, site plans, photographs, and measured drawings of ironwork and interior elevations. The draftsmen maintained a keen focus on the interiors of important buildings, recording details such as sections, molding profiles, and ornamental motifs.

This artful presentation of such building details so popular at the time was most notably disseminated by the *White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs*, which existed in various guises from 1915 to 1942 and was then resuscitated in 2006 to become an important documentary canon of historic American architecture. The series' arrangement of images laid the groundwork for some of Ronald Ramsey's most compelling work, wherein he combines a fascinating array of drawings, newspaper clippings, photographs, and text into a creative collage. By juxtaposing elevations with building details, signage, and even social history, we gain a more complete picture of why the building was significant. Architecture is important, but the lives and activities that inhabited old buildings is an equally important dimension. By humanizing the buildings, Ramsey is creating a more accessible element for people to connect with. Connection equals engagement and engagement results in protection. This is the ultimate preservation formula.

Another magnum opus that catalogues Charleston's unparalleled blend of architecture is *This Is Charleston: A Survey of the Architectural Heritage of a Unique American City*. This endeavor was the first attempt at conducting a systematic photographic inventory and then assigning a categorical value to each of Charleston's buildings. These assignments of rank ranged from "Nationally Important" to "Worthy of Mention." The project began in 1941 as an exhibition at what was then known as the Gibbes Art Gallery. It generated such interest in the community that a book was ultimately published in 1944 to serve as a lasting catalogue of Charleston's most significant structures. As the author, Samuel Gaillard Stoney, so eloquently states, "If you use these photographs properly, you will find that however they fail otherwise, they help to tell the story of Charleston as no words could; and that, after all, is what illustrations are supposed to do."

As art is an act of storytelling, so is historic preservation. Capturing the imagination of the community, and generating a desire to fight for the protection of a building, is essential to any preservation effort. Unfortunately, the academic, formal approach to documentation that is ensconced in the HABS program and evident in the earlier survey efforts mentioned above, presents a cold and clinical veneer devoid of humanity. Ramsey's work, on the other hand, practically gurgles with personality and expressive color. The viewer may characterize some of the art as childlike, but closer inspection of many of the drawings reveals an incredible level of detail. You can't help but speculate: how does he do it? Does he use measuring tape and a scale? Does he draw in the field or does he work from photographs? In the end, it does not matter, and the mystery of his process actually adds to its wonder.

Our duty as a community of preservationists is to translate Ramsey's body of work into a greater awareness of Charleston's built environment, which can then foment action. These drawings tell an important story, one of beauty and utility, of past lives, and of the rhythm of this beloved peninsula.

In *This Is Charleston*, Sam Stoney said it best: "The problem of preservation is largely one of appreciation. You get from a thing interest on what you bring to it. On the other hand, a study of what you have at hand is a direct help to good life, and the Charlestonian who neglects his opportunities to see and know and understand his own city renounces a birthright unsurpassed on this side of the Atlantic." Open your eyes and appreciate the buildings around you; they deserve your focus.