

VALERIA CASALI

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Valeria Casali é pesquisadora no Politecnico di Milano. Ela possui doutorado em Arquitetura, História e Projeto pelo Politecnico di Torino (2023). Sua dissertação, “As Trajetórias Transatlânticas de Ada Louise Huxtable. As Narrativas de uma Crítica de Arquitetura, 1949-1973”, aborda a história da crítica arquitetônica do século XX com uma perspectiva de gênero, processos de transferência de conhecimento e as conexões entre a Guerra Fria, a cultura do design e os estudos de mídia. Seu trabalho, apoiado por bolsas do Getty Research Institute e da Society of Architectural Historians, entre outros, foi apresentado em eventos e publicações internacionais. Formada como arquiteta entre o Politecnico di Milano, RWTH Aachen e McGill University, ela é assistente de ensino em cursos de história e estúdios de design no Politecnico di Milano e Torino, além de colaborar com a Editoriale Domus.

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Resumo

Partindo da hipótese de que, ao se distanciar da relação estreita com os mundos profissionais e acadêmicos da arquitetura e ser inserida na arena do debate público, a crítica de arquitetura transforma o crítico em uma figura de mediação, o que acontece quando essa distância – tanto cultural quanto física – aumenta? Como a mobilidade impacta o deslocamento do conhecimento entre diferentes contextos, disciplinas e interlocutores, caracterizados por variados graus de especialização e níveis de compreensão? Os estudiosos definem alternadamente o deslocamento do conhecimento como diálogo, relação, transferência, interferência ou troca. Este artigo, e o projeto de pesquisa mais amplo ao qual ele se refere, entende esse fenômeno como um processo multifacetado de tradução. Traduzir um texto escrito ou oral de um idioma para outro pressupõe a presença de alguém que, conhecendo os detalhes da língua e do contexto cultural de origem, atua ativamente como uma ponte e o torna acessível. Também está implícita a presença de um público que depende da capacidade do tradutor. Assim, conhecer o tema sobre o qual se escreve é tão crucial quanto conhecer para quem os textos são escritos – quem se deseja atingir e convencer, como e onde serão divulgados. Quando entendida como uma operação de tradução, a mediação realizada pelo crítico de arquitetura implica um esforço de conversão não linear que seleciona, desconstrói, reformula e circula narrativas entre diferentes espaços culturais, superando a distância por meio de diversos expedientes narrativos. Este artigo explora a dimensão transnacional da crítica de arquitetura através das viagens e escritos de Ada Louise Huxtable para o *New York Times*, vinculados ao contexto britânico – uma conexão que se manifestou em múltiplas visitas e reportagens jornalísticas. Embora seus escritos documentem e se concentrem na arquitetura e no urbanismo britânicos em si, este artigo relaciona sua crítica arquitetônica e urbana no exterior com o amplo contexto sociopolítico norte-americano no qual foi introduzida. Além de contextualizar essas experiências ao longo do tempo, o artigo destaca temas recorrentes na crítica internacional de Huxtable, como políticas de desenvolvimento, preservação, qualidade arquitetônica e o papel de atores públicos e privados. A partir de um artigo de 1968 no *New York Times*, intitulado *London Puts Brakes on Private Development in Historic Areas*, esta pesquisa propõe que experiências desconhecidas podem ser negociadas e transformadas em insights valiosos que alimentam um discurso crítico predominantemente local. Essa reflexão integra um projeto de pesquisa mais amplo que expõe a construção não linear de uma crítica arquitetônica transnacional, questionando os limites e o campo de competência do crítico. Também contribui para os estudos em andamento sobre o legado de Huxtable e sobre a história da crítica de arquitetura, suas plataformas, atores e formas.

Palavras-chave: Crítica arquitetônica. Intercâmbios anglo-americanos. Debate público. Viagens transatlânticas. Deslocamento de conhecimento.

Abstract

Building on the hypothesis that, as architectural criticism is removed from its close-knit relationship with the professional and academic world of architecture and placed within the arena of public debate, the architecture critic becomes a figure of mediation, what happens then when distance – cultural as much as physical – increases? How does mobility impact knowledge displacement across different contexts, disciplines, and interlocutors characterized by varying degrees of specialization and levels of comprehension? Scholars alternately define knowledge displacement as dialogue, relationship, transfer, interference, or exchange. This paper, and the broader research project it refers to, intends it as a multi-layered process of translation. Rendering a written or oral text from one language to another presupposes the presence of someone who, knowing the specifics of the language and cultural context of origin, actively acts as a bridge and makes it accessible. The presence of a public that relies on the translator’s capacity is implied, too. Knowing the subject one writes about is then as crucial as knowing for whom texts are written – who they wish to target and convince, how and where they will be popularized. Therefore, when framed and understood as a translation operation, the mediation enacted by the architecture critic implies a non-linear conversion effort that selects, deconstructs, rephrases, and circulates narratives between different cultural spaces, bridging that distance through different narrative expedients. This paper explores the transnational dimension of architectural criticism through Ada Louise Huxtable’s journeys and writings for the New York Times linked to the British context – a connection that manifested in multiple visits and newspaper reportages. However, while her writings document and focus on British architecture and planning per se, this paper relates her overseas architectural and urban criticism with the broader North American socio-political framework into which it was introduced. Besides framing these experiences over time, this paper highlights a series of recurring themes in Huxtable’s overseas critique, such as development policy, preservation, architectural quality, and the role of private and public actors. Starting from a 1968 New York Times article titled London Puts Brakes on Private Development in Historic Areas, this research posits that unfamiliar experiences can be negotiated and transformed into valuable insights that nurture a predominantly local critical discourse. This reflection belongs to a broader research project that exposes the non-linear construction of transnational architectural criticism, questioning the boundaries and perimeter of competence of the critic. It also contributes to the ongoing studies on Huxtable’s legacy and the history of architectural criticism, its platforms, actors, and forms.

Keywords: Architectural criticism. Anglo-American exchanges. Public debate. Transatlantic journeys. Knowledge displacement.

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Resumen

Partiendo de la hipótesis de que, al desvincularse de la estrecha relación con los mundos profesionales y académicos de la arquitectura e insertarse en la arena del debate público, la crítica de arquitectura convierte al crítico en una figura de mediación, ¿qué ocurre cuando esa distancia – tanto cultural como física – aumenta? ¿Cómo impacta la movilidad en el desplazamiento del conocimiento entre diferentes contextos, disciplinas e interlocutores, caracterizados por distintos grados de especialización y niveles de comprensión? Los académicos definen alternativamente el desplazamiento del conocimiento como diálogo, relación, transferencia, interferencia o intercambio. Este artículo, y el proyecto de investigación más amplio al que se refiere, entiende este fenómeno como un proceso multifacético de traducción. Traducir un texto escrito u oral de un idioma a otro presupone la presencia de alguien que, conociendo los detalles del idioma y del contexto cultural de origen, actúa activamente como un puente y lo hace accesible. También está implícita la presencia de un público que depende de la capacidad del traductor. Por lo tanto, conocer el tema sobre el que se escribe es tan crucial como conocer para quién están destinados los textos: a quién se desea dirigir y convencer, cómo y dónde se divulgarán. Cuando se entiende como una operación de traducción, la mediación realizada por el crítico de arquitectura implica un esfuerzo de conversión no lineal que selecciona, deconstruye, reformula y circula narrativas entre diferentes espacios culturales, superando la distancia mediante diversos recursos narrativos. Este artículo explora la dimensión transnacional de la crítica de arquitectura a través de los viajes y escritos de Ada Louise Huxtable para el New York Times vinculados al contexto británico, una conexión que se manifestó en múltiples visitas y reportajes periodísticos. Aunque sus escritos documentan y se centran en la arquitectura y la planificación británicas en sí, este artículo relaciona su crítica arquitectónica y urbana en el extranjero con el amplio marco sociopolítico norteamericano en el que fue introducida. Además de contextualizar estas experiencias a lo largo del tiempo, el artículo destaca una serie de temas recurrentes en la crítica internacional de Huxtable, como las políticas de desarrollo, la preservación, la calidad arquitectónica y el papel de los actores públicos y privados. Partiendo de un artículo de 1968 en el New York Times titulado *London Puts Brakes on Private Development in Historic Areas*, esta investigación propone que las experiencias desconocidas pueden negociarse y transformarse en ideas valiosas que alimenten un discurso crítico predominantemente local. Esta reflexión forma parte de un proyecto de investigación más amplio que expone la construcción no lineal de una crítica arquitectónica transnacional, cuestionando los límites y el campo de competencia del crítico. También contribuye a los estudios en curso sobre el legado de Huxtable y sobre la historia de la crítica arquitectónica, sus plataformas, actores y formas.

Palabras clave: Crítica arquitectónica. Intercambios anglo-americanos. Debate público. Viajes transatlánticos. Desplazamiento de conocimiento.

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Introduction

In the summer of 1969, a humorous report on overseas hotels appeared in the *New York Times* Travel section (Huxtable 1969a). Authored by the newspaper architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable (1921-2013)¹, it reviewed a series of hotels she visited during a long assignment in the Middle East. The critic’s recognizable character – tiny, well-coiffed, well-dressed – was drawn by American cartoonist Roy Doty while standing with her husband, industrial designer L. Garth Huxtable, in the middle of a cramped hotel hall in Istanbul, waiting for a meal at a table covered in spider webs in Dubrovnik, or in pain after bumping into some awkwardly designed piece of furniture at the Tel Aviv Hilton. This article concluded with a generous review of their visit to Claridge’s hotel in London, which was presented as heaven after what Huxtable defined in her correspondence as her “five-week Middle East odyssey”².

These cartoons – and perhaps even more the iconic *New Yorker* vignettes published between 1968 and 1971, whose captions joked on her critical stance – capture the extent of the public reputation that Ada Louise Huxtable had built for herself over nearly a decade of writing architectural criticism for the *New York Times*³. By the time she became part of the newspaper editorial board in 1973, the public knew who she was and, most importantly, what her byline stood for. As many seem to put it, her legacy lies in transforming how the public cared for the built environment during a crucial moment of urban and societal change in the United States. Her criticism was often associated with the preservation battles inflaming New York, and most of her work, in fact, intertwines with the history of 20th-century American architecture and, especially, Manhattan.

However, the report mentioned above and a number of others go well beyond the perimeter of New York. They follow a series of overseas assignments she undertook for the *New York Times* between 1965 and 1973. Against a background of ever-changing Cold War tensions, these journeys resulted in reportages focusing on the architecture of contexts as diverse as Scandinavia, the Soviet Union, and Israel, among others⁴. Among these transatlantic trajectories, that with the United Kingdom manifested on multiple occasions.

On the one hand, the bulk of Huxtable’s writings linked to the British context fit into a lively framework of international planning culture exchanges, a panorama in which study trips – alongside conferences, exhibitions, publications, meetings, and collaborations – became a popular investigation method (Wakeman 2014; Healey and Upton 2010, 1–16). These initiatives turned European new towns, satellite developments, and housing complexes into study objects, for their architectural qualities and especially for their background policy frameworks, financing, and management models (Cook 2018).

On the other, they appeared at a time when urban problems – ranging from sprawling suburbs and racial segregation to the urgent loss of historical landmarks and the “urban renewal regime” (Klemek 2012, 10) – permeated the North American public

1 Stephens 1977; Stephens 2009; Clausen 2014; Clausen and Favero 2017.

2 Letter from Ada Louise Huxtable to Walter M. Whitehill, June 13, 1969. The phrase recurs in her correspondence of the same days. ALH-GRI, 01-04.

3 “Ada Louise Huxtable already doesn’t like it” and “I’d give anything to be there when Ada Louise Huxtable gets a load of this” are the captions of two iconic *New Yorker* cartoons by Alan Dunn and Donald Reilly from 1968 and 1971, respectively. In the first, two men discuss a construction site, sitting between pillars, I-beams, and cranes. In Reilly’s, two men in suits and ties, cigar in hand – likely two building developers – stand in front of a questionable tower model as they examine it (Grover 1972).

4 These episodes were the starting point for my doctoral work, where I explored the non-linear ways in which the architectural critic, in the role of mediator, can bridge geographical and cultural distance across places, perimeters of competence, and interlocutors characterized by different degrees of specialization (Casali 2023).

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debate and stood at the core of the interests of a heterogeneous group of actors. The political value of housing and urban issues increased during Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration until they reached cabinet-level relevance when, in August 1965, Washington established the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).⁵

This research moves from the hypothesis that Huxtable’s criticism linked to the British context acquires further depth when put in relation to the framework outlined above – the socio-political background, the public debate (Jannièrè and Scrivano 2020), and the moment in North American planning history into which it was disseminated. This Anglo-American transatlantic connection, also known as the “special relationship,” has already been extended to architecture and planning (Fraser and Kerr 2007). This paper does not intend to argue that Huxtable’s writings had any special or more substantial impact than others in this framework. Instead, besides framing her journeys and writings diachronically, this paper synthetically outlines a series of recurring themes in Huxtable’s overseas criticism starting from a 1968 article entitled *London Puts Brakes on Private Development in Historic Areas*, arguing that unfamiliar experiences can be negotiated and turned into proxies for nurturing and layering meaning to a predominantly local critical discourse.

Framing Huxtable’s journeys and writings

In 1949, Huxtable traveled with her husband to Italy, Switzerland, France, and England on her first post-war overseas exploration. While her 1950 Fulbright application described this journey as a “ten-week preliminary research trip” in preparation for her Fulbright fellowship on Italian post-war architecture, this first trip could also be likened to a *grand tour* across post-war Europe (Costanzo 2008). Travel photographs of landmarks are juxtaposed with ordinary urban vistas and pristine landscapes. At the same time, captures of bombed buildings, in Italy and especially in London, record the marks, still visible, left by the war on the built environment⁶.

While the itineraries of her first overseas journeys were often improvised, rhythms were loose, and the line between research and leisure became relatively blurred, her subsequent *New York Times* overseas engagements unfolded differently. Background research was undertaken before departure, and her husband’s diaries show how assignments had densely planned schedules and tight deadlines. Articles were published mainly in the Daily section or Huxtable’s architecture column while she was still abroad, and correspondence reveals how she often had little control over the final selection of accompanying photographs. Moreover, her writings engrave how subjects had to comply with the architecture critic’s agenda as much as the contingency of the press – in terms of subjects, geographies, timing, figures, and interests. However, as Huxtable transitioned to the newspaper’s editorial board after 1973, her later articles on Dublin and London appear to reflect more her personal interests than strictly adhering to press conventions (Huxtable 1978a; 1978b; 1978c; 1978d; 1978e; 1978f; 1978g; 1978h).

Although the British context is not explored as thoroughly as other locations at the center of the international public discourse, Huxtable frequently traveled to the

⁵ Among other engagements, the newborn department would soon take charge of the Model Cities program and Operation Breakthrough, two federal demonstration programs aimed at exploring alternatives to tract housing suburban developments and experimenting with the large-scale industrialization of home production (Anderson 2021; Alonso and Palmarola 2019).

⁶ The Huxtables’ overseas journeys are documented in Garth Huxtable’s photographs and one-line-a-day diaries. ALH-GRI, 409-01; GH-GRI, 48-04 to 06.

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United Kingdom between 1949 and 1978. England was an almost mandatory stop at the beginning or end of her *New York Times* assignments – up to the point that, following her last trip to England in 1978, she wrote that “to visit London a dozen different times is to see a dozen different cities as if a spotlight were being moved from place to period” (Huxtable 1978c).

In the fall of 1965, Huxtable participated in the *European Planned Community Tour* organized by Arthur Sworn Goldman & Associates and other leading corporations, businesses, and manufacturers involved in the U.S. building sector⁷. Along with Huxtable and her husband, a group of North American developers and builders engaged in redevelopment ventures throughout the country (Stevens 2016; Ammon 2016) visited new towns and housing settlements across Scotland, England, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and West Germany. The tour involved field excursions, guided visits, and discussions with local authorities and experts. They flew to Britain to see Cumbernauld, Welwyn Garden City, Stevenage, and Roehampton (Alexander 2009; Bullock 2002; Wakeman 2016). These activities resulted in articles published in the newspaper between November and December 1965 (Huxtable 1965a; 1965b; 1965c; 1965d; 1965f; 1965g; 1965h; 1965i; 1965j). While most of these writings addressed transversally new towns in England and abroad, Huxtable dedicated one full piece to Cumbernauld, Scotland, which was then developing a large, multi-level town center – a half-mile-long reinforced concrete megastructure integrating housing, retail, offices, and other facilities (Glendinning 2008; Gosseye 2019). Around the same time, she published a piece about the redevelopment project surrounding St. Paul’s Cathedral in London (Huxtable 1965e).

In 1967 and 1969, Huxtable extended her time abroad after her assignments in the Soviet Union and Israel and took a few weeks to work in London, home to an overseas bureau of the *New York Times*. During these trips, she not only published two engaging and amusing reports about the many museums and hotels she explored but also penned a sharply critical piece regarding her visit to the Hayward Gallery in London (Huxtable 1969a; 1969b; 1969c).

Moreover, in 1968, England unexpectedly became the destination for an impromptu assignment. Huxtable traveled to England upon request of the London *Times* bureau to cover a press conference unveiling the Covent Garden area redevelopment plan for them⁸. Her articles built on her 1965 insights on St. Paul’s area and discussed various redevelopment initiatives, including the Covent Garden project, the Mansion House Square Scheme, and, in particular, the implementation of the Civic Amenities Act of 1967 (1968a; 1968b; 1968c; 1968d; 1968e).

Finally, between 1970 and 1973, England, Scotland, and Ireland, alongside Berlin, Prague, and Skopje, became part of what internal newspaper memoranda referred to

⁷ Sponsors included Chrysler’s Airtemp Division, General Electric, the Owens-Corning Fiberglas Corporation, the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, the Southern California Edison Company, the Title Insurance and Trust Company, and the United States Plywood Corporation. The complete list of participants included developers active in Arizona, New Jersey, New York, and especially California; their entrepreneurial efforts would lead to large-scale, privately developed communities like Columbia, MD, Reston, VA, and Irvine, CA. The group comprised a few furniture appliance designers, architects with a significant history of business contracts with federal agencies, and a restricted group of journalists. Names ranged from Raymond Loewy’s collaborator, William Snaith, to Peter Walker of Sasaki, Walker and Associates, Inc., Robert O’Donnell of Colorado-based Harman, O’Donnell and Henninger Associates, Inc., and Howard Grad of Frank Grad & Sons. In addition to Huxtable, press representatives included Gordon Hyatt, producer of housing documentaries for CBS, Frederick Gutheim for the Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies of Washington, Look magazine housing editor John Peter, and Gurney Breckenfeld, contributing editor for Time, Inc. The tour schedule and activities were reconstructed through Garth Huxtable’s 1965 diary and the program pamphlet that circulated among participants. RW-UCI, MS-R120-4.

⁸ Huxtable also suggested covering the exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Bauhaus, as well as retrospectives featuring Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Barbican, the South Bank Arts Centre, and Stirling’s History building in Cambridge. Telegram from Seymour Topping to Ada Louise Huxtable, October 25, 1968; Memorandum from Seymour Topping to E. Clifton Daniel, October 28, 1968. FD-NYPL, 54-03.

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as Huxtable’s “European long tour.” Although plans were set in motion, this journey faced delays and was initially postponed to 1971. After a few stops in London, it was canceled and reframed in 1978⁹.

“London, New York, Anyone?”

Ada Louise Huxtable’s article *London Puts Brakes on Private Development in Historic Areas* examined the Civic Amenities Act of 1967, which provided local authorities for establishing conservation areas, creating for the first time a national framework for the protection of areas of architectural or historic interest (Huxtable 1968)¹⁰

London Puts Brakes on Private Development in Historic Areas

Projects Now Under Planners’ Control in Eight Districts

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LONDON, Nov. 17—What is popularly called progress in American cities is about to be stopped dead in its tracks, or at least slowed to a stumbling halt, in London. A strong Government brake is being put on the private development of large parts of this city’s older, historic areas, the kind of places and names that form a history of London history, character and beauty to both residents and visitors.

Under the Civic Amenities Act of 1967, a law just getting into high gear, structures that can be protected as officially designated conservation areas. Town planning authorities, who select such conservation areas, have the right either to prohibit any demolition or new construction or to control development through necessary permissions to owners and builders.

At least eight sizable London districts have been designated as conservation areas this year. They are the major parts of Mayfair, Belgravia, Bloomsbury and St. John’s Wood and sections of Paddington, Piccadilly, Baywater and Kensington.

Future Steps Studied

A considerable part of Soho is in the process of designation now, and areas around St. James’s Palace, Whitehall, Parliament and Westminster Abbey are being studied for future action.

There is no lack of desire among private developers in London to rip down whole blocks for profitable new commercial construction. The urge is international and the need of such construction is real. It is not so easy to do in London as in New York, because permission is needed from the planning authorities here for the erection of office buildings.

But as blantly depressing expenses of new office blocks have gone up in older neighborhoods, bringing with them a singular absence of style. Landowners have become angry aware of the erosion of the past. Even with planning control damage to the traditional fabric of the city is obvious.

The building that blew the fuse was the London Hilton’s 28-story tower, which disrupted the traditional, five-story scenery of Mayfair in 1963. In the subsequent five years there has been strong public agitation for preservation of the traditional character of special neighborhoods. Popular sentiment against change is backed by the more sophisticated preservation objectives of the Georgian and Victorian Societies, which enjoy



Apartment building at rear towers above older structures such as those at left, which are characteristic of architecture on Montagu Square in London’s Portman Estates section. Civic Amenities Act now protects the older structures.

1967 Law Prevents Erosion of Past in Architecture

vation areas range from a striking series of uniform, cool, clean, white streetscapes built at the same time and offering a single style, such as Belgravia’s 18th-century classical facades, to the frequently architecturally undistinguished but lively streets of Soho that house equally irreplaceable, small shops and services. The amenity standard can include just the grouping of compatible buildings around one of London’s lush, green squares.

Under the Civic Amenities Act, a builder can no longer get approval for development such as the kind of undistinguished, unrelated apartment houses currently going up under the heavy hand at the south end of Montagu Square in the Portman Estates, which have shattered the square’s period style and scale.

Under the act, a new Soho hotel is being designed with the collaboration of the developer and his architect and the architects and planners of the City of Westminster, not only to avoid disruption of existing character, but also to reinforce the area’s intimate, diversified humanity.

The big hurdle ahead will be financial compensation to those whose development plans are refused. It will take Solomon-like decisions to determine where the funds are to be given in the light of the massive designation of conservation areas, and on those decisions historic London will stand or fall.

a remarkable status in Britain. Under the leadership of Duncan Sandys, a Minister of Housing from 1954 to 1957, the Civic Amenities Act was passed last year, adding powers of architecture and urban preservation to the functions of the earlier town planning act.

The process of creating conservation areas is not so high handed as it sounds. There are inquiries and hearings, and appeal of decision is possible.

Planners Take Control Under the town and country planning acts enacted since 1947, British cities have immense planning powers and responsibilities. Land is bought and sold privately and freely. But permission for commercial development of the land, which has been generally programmed under London’s master plan now being revised, must be gotten from the planning authorities.

The process is frequently a compromise between the desires of the developers willing to invest hard cash and the objectives of the city. According to Frank West, director of architecture and planning for the City of Westminster, which has been designating many of London’s con-

servation areas, the individual whose property rights are involved cannot bring suit as he does in the United States.

The matter is dealt with in London administratively, not judicially, by public inquiry, with decision made by the local planning authorities. These decisions can be appealed to the Minister of Housing, whose action is final. The matter does not go through the courts at all.

There are some forms of “permitted” development that do not require Government approval, such as the extension of an existing building by 10 per cent of its floor space.

Under the town and country

planning acts, compensation must be paid to the owner who is refused his development rights. These sums come from grants made to planning bodies by the Government.

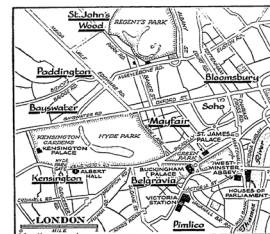
The key word to the whole preservation program is the word “amenities” in the Civic Amenities Act. As understood in England, amenities in this sense covers a civilized concept of total environmental excellence.

The term refers to the complete effect of an attractive or pleasurable neighborhood, or of an architecturally or historically important district, whether its quality is due to planning

or design excellence, the stamp of the past, or simply to a grade of life.

What is involved in these criteria is what is sacrificed constantly in New York while preservationists look for “street markets” as they look a street or neighborhood of less than landmark importance, but of genuine urban value, is demolished. These losses are irreparable in any city. The British concept of preservation as an act that is involved with, not isolated from, the living fabric of the city leaves United States policy on the subject in the dark ages.

London’s examples of conser-



The four New York Times. Major parts of Mayfair, Belgravia, Bloomsbury and St. John’s Wood, and sections of Paddington, Piccadilly, Baywater and Kensington have been designated as conservation areas.

FIGURE 1 – Ada Louise Huxtable, “London Puts Brakes on Private development in Historic Areas,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 1968.

Source: *The New York Times* Archive.

At the same time, Huxtable noted that much of London’s historical core was actually “on the boards of the city’s planners” and that, unlike American projects that often “tend to remain in the blue-sky category, [English plans] have a way of becoming a reality”

9 Memorandum from ALH to Foreign News Desk, June 29, 1970, FD-NYPL, 54-03.

10 The Civic Amenities Act is one of the most important pieces of English legislation on urban conservation, following the Architectural Preservation Act of 1913 and preceding the Archaeological Protection Act of 1984 (Pendlebury and Townshend 1999).

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(Huxtable 1968d). Three years earlier, she had already covered the redevelopment of the Paternoster Area, “the city’s most widely publicized and passionately debated hole in the ground” (Huxtable 1965e). Heavily bombed during the war, the project was central to a master plan commissioned by the City Corporation and drafted by Lord William Holford in 1956. Although the scheme sought to honor St. Paul Cathedral’s presence, its implementation between 1961 and 1967 was only partial, leading to significantly criticized overdevelopment.

Peter Murray characterized the long-standing public debate over this project as “one of the great architectural arguments of history” – a dispute that involved Prince Charles in the late 1980s, with his renowned “Luftwaffe” speech¹¹. On that occasion, Huxtable described Holford’s scheme in broad strokes, highlighting the effort to contrast new and old structures while addressing traffic issues, the irregular buildings’ layout, and open spaces. However, she deemed the partial implementation results a “genteel disaster,” a “major disappointment,” and one of the “great muffed opportunities of modern urban design” (Huxtable 1965e).

While recognizing its flaws, Huxtable argued that the Paternoster scheme was handled with a subtlety characteristic of “discreet English understatement,” as opposed to what she described as a “vulgar American-style bang” (Huxtable 1965e). In fact, her observations about London intercepted the ongoing discussion about preservation in the United States, which was one of the fundamental and recurring concerns in Huxtable’s critical engagement. She took a stance in this debate multiple times and, in 1962, weighed ongoing preservation battles in New York in *The Architectural Review* (Huxtable 1962). For the critic, the U.S. approach was nothing less than a “singular abuse of the national patrimony, conducted under Federal auspices.” Huxtable expressed concern that the postwar urban renewal program had transformed from a philosophy of “out with the old and in with the new” into a practice of “out with the people and in with the bulldozer” (Huxtable 1970b).

Her 1968 analysis of British legislation differed enormously from the ironic register she used to discuss the designation of conservation areas in France in a 1965 article on Saint-Paul-de-Vence. That piece declared that St. Paul was “ripe for urban renewal” (Huxtable 1965d). Relying on data on the historic center concerning the age of buildings, number of toilets, and population density, she claimed St. Paul’s city center was substandard, and made a series of astonishing claims that flipped her usual stances on preservation upside down. She suggested several familiar interventions, such as “to Williamsburg St. Paul” (Huxtable 1997, 15–22). She also lamented that no one could do “anything progressive,” such as demolishing some structures to pave the way for parking lots, because the French government had designated the entire historic center as a national heritage site. Although this was presented as a paradoxical and implausible operation, Huxtable intended to highlight it as the most valuable lesson from the French system.

However, one of the other points emphasized by her 1968 article on the Civic Amenities Act is that, in Britain, the establishment of conservation areas was more nuanced and less authoritarian than her readers might have assumed. Her writings often reiterated how decisions resulted from compromise and extenuating negotiations between developers’ investment interests, citizens, and municipal preservation goals.

Conservation was, in fact, a policy area in which, in England, institutions increasingly stressed the potential for formal public consultation mechanisms (Pendlebury and

¹¹ The then-Prince of Wales (now King Charles III) stated in front of the Corporation of London’s Planning and Communications Committee that “you have to give this much to the Luftwaffe. When it knocked down our buildings, it didn’t replace them with anything more offensive than rubble. We did that.” December 2, 1987 (Murray 1991; Rattenbury 2004, 136–56).

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Townshend 1999). By 1973, public involvement was such that Huxtable wrote an article entitled *Revolt in London*, where she shared her perspective on the redesign scheme for Piccadilly Circus and contrasted it with Kenneth Browne’s proposal published in the *Architectural Review* (Huxtable 1973). Or, again, the famous Covent Garden campaign, which lasted throughout the Eighties, is one of the revealing examples of the shifting power play between involved actors. In the Seventies, an architect-led group, the Covent Garden Community Association, campaigned against the demolition of Covent Garden and the implementation of a major inner-city road. Ultimately, the debate involved specialized and non-specialized journalists, critics, architects, developers, and the Prince of Wales (Rattenbury 2004, 145–46). When Huxtable shared her thoughts on the different versions of the Covent Garden project in 1968 and 1971, she noted how, in her view, it remained a contentious plan harming the neighborhood “by gentlemen’s agreement” (Huxtable 1968d; 1971a).

Although comparable to New York’s situation, Huxtable claimed that “what is popularly called progress in American cities” – private development – was being “stopped dead in its tracks, or at least slowed to a stumbling halt” in London (Huxtable 1968c). This point intercepted the question of architectural quality and the North American irreconcilable conflict between viewing private development as a potential solution to urban challenges and the federal government’s reluctance to cede control of private land.

In 1968, Huxtable commented on Mies van der Rohe’s never-to-be-built Mansion House scheme for Peter Palumbo. The project would have cleared some Victorian blocks to open a new plaza framed by a new steel-and-glass office tower, the Mansion House, and other distinguished buildings¹². Despite her reservations about the challenges that the Miesian project could face, she described his design as “chaste, elegant, sheer” and asserted that London “desperately” needed it (Huxtable 1968b). She claimed that, ironically, the city historically outlasted its urban plans, but its current architects constituted a greater risk (Huxtable 1971b). Her reflections on London’s post-war skyline likened the “postwar crop” of skyscrapers to “lonely stalks of asparagus against the sky” and repeatedly reminded her readers that, by local standards, eight-story buildings were considered tall. In this discourse, one of the recurring targets of her critique was the Centre Point at Giles Circus, designed by Richard Seifert and Partners between 1963 and 1966 (Huxtable 1968b).

However, Huxtable’s critique often directly addressed developers as much as architects. After the *European Planned Community Tour*, she had described the impressions of North American private building sector representatives after visiting new towns in the UK and Scandinavia as a “stunned mixture of admiration and skepticism” (Huxtable 1965j). For the critic, new towns at that time were “the biggest planning news in the country,” yet overseas experiences were “the antithesis of current practice in the United States”¹³. Her words highlighted how American developers often tried to replicate formal features of overseas town centers, dropping in fountained shopping malls and creating art-filled public squares, copy pasting, along with designed outdoor furnishings and patterned paving (Bloom 2001) – evoking both Stevenage and Vällingby. By 1971, her critique crossed the Atlantic in the opposite direction, targeting architects and developers she accused of “moving London closer to Miami.” Huxtable even urged her readers to wear their sunglasses, noting that “a new London is rising, and all that is missing is palm trees,” even as the city remained “pretty far from the ocean” (Huxtable 1971c).

¹² The building was never realized. In the end, a second scheme, the Stirling Wilford one, was eventually built after a controversy that lasted for about twenty years (Rattenbury 2004, 146–49).

¹³ See the exchange of memoranda between Bob Crandall, E. Clifton Daniel, and Huxtable, February 17 and 18, 1964. ECD-NYPL, 05-01.

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In particular, her piece on the Civic Amenities Act identified the 28-story London Hilton hotel tower built on Park Lane in Mayfair in 1963 and designed by an American, William B. Tabler, as a wake-up call for London and public movements dedicated to preserving and protecting historic monuments and neighborhoods – an event that one could compare, in terms of conscience awakening, to the demolition of Penn Station in New York. In 1970, in an article about the future of Paris, she coupled remarks and examples documenting real estate developers’ pivotal and yet often double-edged role with the direct question for her readers: “London, New York, anyone?” (Huxtable 1970c).

Moreover, *London Puts Brakes on Private Development in Historic Areas* stressed that the key element of the Civic Amenities Act was precisely the term “amenities”. In her previous writings, Huxtable had explained to her readers that, according to sociologists, new town residents often experienced the “new town blues” – a sense of placelessness and boredom resulting from the lack of attention given to the social and cultural aspects of planning. Therefore, they aimed to create a sense of belonging and community by introducing amenities – that is, recreational and cultural facilities such as dance halls, community centers, sports complexes, cinemas, and bowling alleys. In her same 1965 ironic article about Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Huxtable made a compelling case pondering whether the scarcity of amenities in St. Paul was causing residents to suffer an analogous “old-town blues” and argued that the underutilized open spaces surrounding the town ought to support active recreation, as is it was common in the United States (Huxtable 1965d).



FIGURE 2 – Publicity brochure of Del Webb’s Active Retirement Community, Sun City, Arizona.

Source: Private Collection.

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Amenities had, in fact, become a hallmark obsession in North American suburban tract housing expansions, albeit for different reasons. There, as Huxtable wrote, “the golf course [was] always built first” (Huxtable 1964). Since the 1950s, growing competition among developers pushed the integration of community facilities to attract potential buyers. Sales brochures for suburban developments, targeting lower-middle to upper-income buyers, showcased a fun-in-the-sun, vacation-like atmosphere and featured images of people enjoying serene green spaces, swimming pools, grilling, or playing sports. This phenomenon was evident in speculative developments like Del Webb’s active-retirement communities in Arizona and more exemplary ones like Reston, Virginia¹⁴. Private developers in the U.S. marketed their suburban projects with a recreation-oriented lifestyle that, devoid of any socio-cultural undertone, aimed at enhancing their marketability and profitability.

When Huxtable described the British 1967 Act, she explained that it concerned a more comprehensive definition of amenities than the one she had previously outlined for her readers. The amenities addressed by the English legislation included the overall appeal and atmosphere of a pleasant neighborhood or an area with architectural or historical significance. Although she listed London’s designated areas, her criticism ultimately addressed fellow New York preservationists. Huxtable argued that they often neglected streets and neighborhoods of genuine urban value to concentrate on major landmarks. However, as the former lacked official landmark status, they were often ultimately demolished. The critic, who frequently participated in the same battles, blamed the preservation movement for dismissing this nuanced and perhaps subtler urban perspective (Huxtable 1968c).

Final Considerations

Ada Louise Huxtable’s writings on first- and second-generation new towns, her incursions in the debate surrounding some crucial episodes in the urban history of London – Paternoster Square, the Covent Garden premises, or the Mansion Square House scheme, to name a few –, or her dives into development and preservation legislation and involved actors outline a solid and long-lasting interest for the British context. Although embedded in a different socio-political framework, the critic claimed these experiences were not distant and isolated but “lessons begging to be learned” (Huxtable 1965a; 1970a). Therefore, this case exposes how the architecture critic can mediate the distance between the subject of her writings and the public: knowing what one is writing about is important, but also considering who you are writing for is essential. The points raised in her 1968 article about the Civic Amenities Act expose a dimension where overseas experiences are made available to readers as proxies to put specific aspects of the more familiar American debate into question – development policy, preservation, architectural quality, and the role of private and public involved actors in the redevelopment of urban and suburban areas.

¹⁴ For early sociological studies of lifestyle in North American suburbia see especially (Dobriner 1958; Gans 1967). For a historical primer on the subject, see Hayden 2003.

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Abbreviations

FD-NYPL – Foreign Desk, The New York Times Company Records, New York Public Library

ECD-NYPL – E. Clifton Daniel Papers, The New York Times Company Records, New York Public Library

GH-GRI – Garth Huxtable Papers, Getty Research Institute

ALH-GRI – Ada Louise Huxtable Papers, Getty Research Institute

RW-UCI – Raymond L. Watson Papers, The Irvine Company Records, University of California Irvine Archives, Irvine, CA.

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