

# Preserving Our Not-So-Distant Past? Chester Liebs's Contribution to the 'Archaeology' of the Everyday

Verdiana Peron | [verdiana.peron@cultura.gov.it](mailto:verdiana.peron@cultura.gov.it)

Ministero della Cultura

## Abstract

The paper retraces part of the career of Chester Liebs (b. 1945), a multifaceted figure in twentieth-century American heritage preservation. A landscape historian, preservationist, and professor, Liebs is a photographic chronicler of U.S. cultural landscapes. Just a decade after the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (1966), he issued a call for the field to broaden its scope, which led to the founding of the still-active Society for Commercial Archeology in 1977. Drawing parallels with industrial archaeology, he argued for the patrimonial value of commercial roadside forms – fast-food outlets, motels, gas stations, neon signs – structures vanishing yet increasingly appreciated. His landmark book *Main Street to Miracle Mile* (1985) advanced the idea of preserving not only individual buildings but also the wider landscapes shaped by car culture. Drawing on dialogue with Liebs, the essay examines his work and theories, tracing the connections and forces that contributed to shaping one strand of American cultural orientations toward the legacy of the recent past.

## Keywords

Recent past, Roadside architecture, Commercial archaeology, Industrial archaeology, Landscape studies.

## Introduction

Twenty-five years after the end of what Eric Hobsbawm has defined as the «Short Twentieth Century», enough temporal distance has been gained to reflect on how, during that same period, the field of architectural preservation sought to engage with the legacy of what was then a very recent – indeed, almost contemporary – past. Systematizing events and ideas, and attempting to outline the theoretical frameworks that informed debates on the future of newly constructed architectural works, should be considered as an effort to historicize these discussions not as a separate discipline – the so-called ‘preservation of modern architecture’ – but as part of the broader history of architectural conservation. From this perspective, biography serves as a valuable analytical tool: listening to the voices of key figures helps to illuminate cultural orientations and professional practices across different contexts.

Any comprehensive historiographical study on the conservation of the recent past must take the American context into account. The US served as a primary arena for architectural experimentation throughout the 20th century, and the transformation of its landscape was particularly influenced by the advent of the automobile – an innovation which not only revolutionized patterns of travel and the perception of the environment, but also profoundly reshaped production processes and cultural models. The literature on America on the road is extensive. Foundational works for architectural design culture, such as *The View from the Road* (1964) and *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) have received broad critical recognition in Italy. By contrast, the role played by preservation still offers considerable room for exploration. Tracing the biographical profile of Chester Liebs, a key figure in this strand of study, can help to reconstruct inductively the context in which part of architectural conservation in America developed, while also interacting with contributions from other disciplines<sup>1</sup>.

### **A shift in perspective**

When cities across America were rapidly losing their downtowns and neighbourhoods due to highway construction and urban renewal, as Liebs later recalled, the 1966 Historic Preservation Act sparked a new awareness of what aspects of the past merited preservation<sup>2</sup>. From an early age, Liebs had been sensitive to the swift transformations of his surroundings and to the losses they entailed. Graduating in History from the City College of New York just two years after the law's passage, he joined a new generation of preservationists charged with carrying out the work mandated by the 1966 Act through the first systematic, state-by-state surveys of historic places across the nation<sup>3</sup>. Their task was not only to document but also to prepare nominations for review at both the state and national levels for inclusion in a newly-created National Register of Historic Places. A broad spectrum of sites could qualify for eventual listing – ranging from major individual landmarks to overlooked or deteriorated larger complexes – due to Criterion C which was particularly innovative, as it broadened the horizon of preservation. Equally novel, Criterion D recognized both below - and above - ground archaeological remains.

This comprehensive perspective on the built environment profoundly shaped Liebs's subsequent work. In his first professional appointment, at the newly established New York State Historic Trust<sup>4</sup> in 1970, he served under historical archaeologist Paul R. Huey to excavate and document Fort Orange, a 17th-century Dutch-colonial settlement then buried beneath a redundant gas station and threatened with partial destruction due to highway construction in Albany, New York<sup>5</sup>. From Huey, he learned to interpret the layers in the below-ground built environment as a text, an approach that reveals aspects of culture not recorded in written sources<sup>6</sup>.

A further reflection of the broader shift in the scope of preservation, and of how archaeology influenced Liebs's perspective, was the creation of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) in 1969, established through a collaboration between the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) – a pioneering federal initiative begun in 1933 – and the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology<sup>7</sup>. HAER was founded to document America's engineering and industrial legacy, recording not only historic technological sites but also their operational processes and the reasons why they warranted preservation. In the summer of 1971, Liebs joined the field team documenting the Erie Railroad, an experience that left a profound effect on him, especially because the helicopter aerial reconnaissance they employed allowed this linear landscape to be understood within a broader morphological, geographical, and historical context<sup>8</sup>. The preliminary reconnaissance team also included Robert Vogel, then Curator of Mechanical and Civil Engineering at the Smithsonian and a leading advocate of the HAER program, whom Liebs frequently credited with having a seminal impact on his career<sup>9</sup>.

Vogel was among the promoters of the October conference that led to the founding of the Society for Industrial Archeology (SIA)<sup>10</sup>. Conceived as distinct from the already active Society for Historical Archaeology, the new association drew its intellectual inspiration from the United Kingdom, where the study of industrial heritage had first developed, and aimed to foster interdisciplinary exchange while raising public awareness of the need to preserve a rapidly disappearing industrial legacy through both public and governmental advocacy. Liebs was one of the co-founders, served on the interim executive committee, and held the presidency from 1974 to 1975. Of particular note is the choice to adopt the disciplinary label of archaeology – central also to the scope of this journal – for the holistic approach it offered to the study of physical remains. As Vogel observed, physical visibility did not necessarily imply recognition: a structure might stand for decades at the very centre of a city and yet remain virtually unseen, its role in

industrial development unacknowledged<sup>11</sup>. The task of the industrial archaeologist was therefore to render such evidence legible, recovering the meaning of neglected traces of the industrial past.

Liebs's professional trajectory was also profoundly shaped by James Marston Fitch, founder and director of Columbia University's pioneering Historic Preservation graduate program, under whom he began his studies in 1969 and received a Master of Science in Historic Preservation in 1977<sup>12</sup>. In the post-World War II period, Fitch emerged as a leading reformer and critic advocating a broader conception of America's architectural heritage, and by the early 1960s, as the destructive effects of urban renewal became evident, he was at the forefront of debates on preserving the nation's built environment.

### The legacy of the automobile

Drawing on these experiences, Liebs began to turn his attention to another relatively neglected dimension of the built environment: the automobile-shaped commercial landscape<sup>13</sup>. Many early roadside prototypes were nearing extinction, threatened by changing highway routes, functional obsolescence, corporate rebranding, and rising energy costs. Liebs thought it was important for Americans to cultivate a greater sense of historical continuity, preserving enough of the past to provide context for future generations. Roadside artifacts offered crucial insight into the automobile's pervasive impact on American life, revealing how economic, industrial, and commercial forces shaped towns, communities, and consumer behaviour. With 1970s oil shortages and changing patterns of travel leaving older roadside structures at risk, Liebs recognized the urgent need to document these ephemeral structures – not for their occasionally quirky vernacular design, but for the information they conveyed – before they disappeared.

He first explored the subject in 1973 in a public lecture at New York's Cooper Union and introduced it into his Architecture and the Environment evening course at the University of Vermont (UVM), while serving as Assistant Director of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. In 1975, he joined UVM as a full-time faculty member and founded its Historic Preservation Graduate Program, one of the earliest such programs in the United States, following Columbia's pioneering initiative. A year later, in collaboration with the Robert Hull Fleming Museum, he convened the inaugural meeting on the topic, bringing together scholars from various fields who shared the conviction that the rapidly disappearing forms of the commercial landscape were no less deserving of scholarly study and preservation than more established categories of historic architecture. Out of this collective reflection emerged the decision to create a dedicated association, modelled on the recently formed SIA, with the aim of consolidating research and advocacy in this area. At its first annual meeting in Boston the following year, the Society for Commercial Archeology (SCA) – the term 'commercial archaeology' had actually been first coined by National Trust staffer Peter Smith in the early 1970s – was formally established, with Liebs serving as its inaugural president, and with architectural historian Kathlyn Hatch, architect Dan Scully, and geographer Arthur Krim among the founding members<sup>14</sup>.

Amid growing interest in the effort to accept an «aging century»<sup>15</sup>, Liebs, in *Remember Our Not-So-Distant Past*<sup>16</sup> (1978), published in «Historic Preservation», issued a wake-up call to the scholarly community, urging a broader disciplinary scope and historical perspective in preservation. However, the core concern of Liebs's call was that historic preservation – a movement devoted to safeguarding the variety of the past – was paradoxically fostering its own national 'look-alike' style, precisely what it was meant to oppose.

Today [...] historic preservation is challenging modernism and urban renewal as a national aesthetic order. It is at this juncture that preservationists can

learn a philosophical lesson from the modern era. Leading modernist thinkers believed they were creating an enduring system. Instead, they precipitated a movement and created a style. Is the same thing happening in preservation?<sup>17</sup>

By the late 1970s, the so-called «new preservation» was rapidly evolving into an industry, marked by a surge in adaptive reuse projects and partially guided by the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, which regulated projects eligible for tax incentives under the 1976 Tax Reform Act. Yet informative and valuable evidence of the recent built environment – then deemed too recent to warrant attention – continued to be lost. In the editorial of the same journal issue, the National Trust Board of Trustees likewise supported Liebs's observations, emphasizing that a widespread misunderstanding of historical values had led to the neglect of many 20th-century commercial artifacts, and calling for a reassessment of the traditional criteria of selective conservation<sup>18</sup>. Scholarly and public interest in roadside commercial architecture continued to expand. The subject attracted the attention of photographers and photorealist painters, while several studies examining various building types were published<sup>19</sup>. In 1976, a 1930s Shell Station in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, became the first service station to be individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Nevertheless, the mere suggestion that roadside artifacts should be considered for preservation, while attracting considerable media attention, was still regarded by many preservationists as highly unconventional.

Liebs expanded his research into a Boston University summer field course, the first ever offered, in 1979. His 1980 contribution opening the *Bulletin of the Committee on Preservation of the Society of American Historians* proved especially significant, marking a shift from simply acknowledging the value of these artifacts to advancing systematic methodologies for their documentation, evaluation, and selective preservation<sup>20</sup>. In this article, Liebs addressed the challenge posed by the rolling fifty-year threshold required for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, except under extraordinary circumstances, formulating an «Out of Production Theory» grounded in the concept of technical reproducibility. Much early twentieth-century roadside architecture was composed of mass-produced components. Liebs argued that such structures should be evaluated for their cultural significance when their constituent materials were no longer produced and had to be either replicated or salvaged from demolition sites – both complex operations. With architectural products evolving rapidly, even very recent structures could become irreplaceable, rendering them significant not because of age but because they were out of production. He did not question the possibility of replacing original components with new ones of identical characteristics; rather, the critical issue was that once production ceased, replacement might become impracticable, effectively compromising the possibility of preservation. In relation to the concept, it is worth noting that shortly thereafter, in Italy, Marco Dezzi Bardeschi addressed the issue in *Conservare, non riprodurre il moderno* (1984), in which he sharply criticized one of the earliest recognized examples of Modern Movement heritage restoration in Europe, the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart (1978–1987), highlighting the inherent tensions between preservation and replication.

All these studies culminated in *Main Street to Miracle Mile* (1985), which examined the shift of commerce from city centres to highways in the 20th-century American landscape, tracing the transition from the Industrial Revolution to a commercial revolution<sup>21</sup>. For Liebs, the book was not driven by an adoration with motor-age icons, but by the aim of broadening architecture, landscape, and preservation studies – along with public interest – beyond a narrow focus on select elements of the built heritage, toward a fuller range of sites shaping the American historical narrative. Its enduring legacy lies in situating these developments within a wider historical framework, addressing a subject that had

often been treated in overly general terms or through individual building-type case studies, and providing a foundation for future research and interpretation – an achievement recognized by John B. Jackson, a key figure in the field of landscape studies, and a reference point for Liebs himself<sup>22</sup>. In her «New York Times» review of the book, Denise Scott Brown observed that Liebs, approaching the roadside as an archaeologist, was continuing the work of earlier scholarship to incorporate the everyday landscape into the architectural tradition<sup>23</sup>. Following the spatial sequence – from city centre to the often overlooked «Taxpayer Strip», and onward to the urban fringe and open countryside – Liebs developed a critical typology for interpreting the arrangement of roadside commerce across the urban-to-rural continuum. Building upon this analytical framework, he traced the evolution of wayside commerce and examined how roadside building types adapted to changing economic conditions and emerging technologies. The next logical step was closely tied to the notion of ephemerality. In Liebs's view, the selective preservation of roadside commercial landscapes could not be left to chance, as these structures were particularly vulnerable. Protecting them proved more complex than other types of buildings: designed to be visually striking, they were especially susceptible to interventions that radically altered their exteriors, which needed constant updating to maintain appeal. Significant gaps in archival documentation compounded this challenge. Liebs went further. Each artifact represents only a single, static moment in a moving perception: buildings and signs lose their kinetic dimension when treated as isolated icons. Preserving this heritage therefore required safeguarding entire segments of a landscape shaped by the automobile and commerce. Existing conservation strategies, however, were ill-suited to this heritage in motion, prompting him to advocate for new approaches that combined contemporary techniques with methods not yet formalized within the field of historic preservation.

### A way of seeing

At the time of the publication, the subject and the researchers engaged with it were still regarded as unconventional. Nevertheless, the book received considerable critical acclaim, inspiring exhibitions such as the Henry Ford Museum's permanent installation *The Automobile in American Life*<sup>24</sup> (1987), and was followed by a marked increase in scholarship, conferences, and preservation initiatives in this field throughout the 1980s. The culmination of activities in this area is undoubtedly represented by the participatory process of study and policy planning aimed at transmitting the material and immaterial heritage of Route 66 to future generations, a program that originated in 1990. At the 1992 symposium on Historic Transportation Corridors, organized by the National Park Service in Louisiana, Liebs himself reflected on the importance of considering heritage at multiple scales—from local and regional to national and international – each requiring an appropriate protective approach<sup>25</sup>. By the 1995 Chicago conference *Preserving the Recent Past* – the first national meeting devoted to the evaluation and preservation of 20th-century resources, sponsored by the National Park Service – the field had by then been formally recognized as a legitimate area of preservation practice.

Liebs's career stands as a testament to the evolution of architectural and landscape preservation in America, while also hinting at some of the many lines of inquiry he pursued beyond the scope of this essay. Emeritus at the University of Vermont in 1996, Liebs was awarded two Fulbright fellowships to Japan and, between 1994 and 2009, conducted research and taught at several prestigious Japanese universities<sup>26</sup>. He also served as Adjunct Professor in Preservation and Regionalism at the University of New Mexico (2004–13). Additionally, he was a board member of US/ICOMOS and sat on the Board of Advisors of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In 2011, he published a book on Japanese neighbourhood bicycle culture<sup>27</sup>. His work earned widespread recognition, including a National Trust for



Historic Preservation Honor Award (1996) and a James Marston Fitch Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Council for Preservation Education (2004).

Four decades after the publication of his landmark book, Liebs's legacy continues to resonate—not only through a Society now approaching eight hundred members, but also through his written works, and the photographs he began taking in his late teens to document the American built landscape<sup>28</sup>. Yet, beyond these tangible contributions, his enduring vision lives on in the work of his former students across North America and East Asia, and lies in a distinctive way of seeing the 'everyday archaeology' around us, of uncovering its hidden stories and meanings.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Chester Liebs for his generosity in sharing information that proved invaluable to the writing of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. RICHARD WOLKOMIR, *Old McDonalds have a friend: his name is Liebs*, «Smithsonian», vol. 4, 1981, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Remembering Our Not-So-Distant Past: Some Thoughts Three Decades Later*, «Forum journal», a. XX, vol. 1, 2005, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Name later changed to New York State Division for Historic Preservation.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. CHESTER H. LIEBS, *A documentary history of early waterworks and water supply technology in the city of Albany 1793–1850*, New York State Historic Trust, 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. RICHARD WOLKOMIR, *Old McDonalds...*, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. ROBERT M. VOGEL, *The Prehistory of HAER, 1965–1968*, «Cultural Resource Management», a. XXIII, vol. 4, 2000, pp. 5–7.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. ERIC DELONY, *HAER and the Recording of Technological Heritage. Reflections on the Beginning*, «Cultural Resource Management», a. XXIII, vol. 4, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> The aerial team also included HAER's first staff member, Eric DeLony, as well as HABS/HAER architectural photographer Jack Boucher. Cfr. SOCIETY FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHEOLOGY, «Newsletter», a. XVII, vol. 3, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. SOCIETY FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHEOLOGY, «Newsletter», a. I, vol. 1, 1972; CHARLES K. HYDE, *The Birth of the SIA and Reminiscences by Some of Its Founders*, «IA. The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archaeology», a. XVII, vol. 1, 1991, pp. 3–16.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. ROBERT M. VOGEL, *On the Real Meaning of Industrial Archaeology*, «Historical Archaeology», 1969, pp. 87–93.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Introduction*, in B. Sullebarger (ed. by), *Historic Preservation: Forging a Discipline: Proceedings of a Symposium in Honor of James Marston Fitch and Twenty Years of Historic Preservation at Columbia University: Low Memorial Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, January 26, 1985*, New York, Preservation Alumni, Inc. 1989, pp. 11–12.

<sup>13</sup> The discussion draws on the following sources: Chester H. Liebs: *Landscape Historian* <<https://libguides.unm.edu/c.php?g=454788&p=3106553>> [15/9/2025]; Chester H. Liebs <<https://www.uvm.edu/cas/history/profile/chester-h-liebs>> [15/9/2025]; CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Remembering...*, op. cit., pp. 7–13; CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Reflections a Decade Later*, in *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; RICHARD WOLKOMIR, *Old McDonalds...*, op. cit., pp. 62–69.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. JEREMY EBERSOLE, *The Society for Commercial Archeology: An Almost Serious Look at Roadside Architecture* <<https://docomomo-us.org/news/the-society-for-commercial-archeology-an-almost-serious-look-at-roadside-architecture>> [15/9/2025]; *The SCA Timeline* <<https://sca-roadside.org/the-sca-timeline/>> [15/9/2025].

<sup>15</sup> CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Accepting our aging century*, «Possibilities for management of Vermont's built environment», a. 1, vol. 3, 1976, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Remember Our Not-So-Distant Past*, «Historic Preservation», a. XXX, vol. 1, 1978, pp. 30–35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 33. On the same topic, see also CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Developing a preservation philosophy*, in National Trust for Historic Preservation, *Preservation: Toward an Ethic in the 1980s*, Preservation press, 1980, pp. 162–166.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION, *Vestiges of the Recent Past*, «Historic Preservation», a. 30, vol. 1, 1978, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Liebs emphasizes the contributions of prominent scholars and historians in the field, including Warren Belasco, Daniel Vieyra, Philip Langdon, Alan Hess, Richard Gutman, Steven Izenour, John Jakle, John Baeder, and John Margolies, among others.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Forum on The Assessment of American Roadside Architecture*, «The Forum. Bulletin of the Committee on Preservation», a. 2, vol. 1, 1980, p. 1–2.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1985.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Letter from J.B. Jackson to Chester Liebs, MSS 843 BC, Box 6 Folder 13, Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, <<https://libguides.unm.edu/c.php?g=454788&p=3106554>> [15/9/2025].

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. DENISE SCOTT BROWN, *From Strip to Shining Strip*, «The New York Times», April 20, 1986, <<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/20/books/from-strip-to-shining-strip.html>> [15/9/2025].

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. CHESTER H. LIEBS, *Reconnecting People with Place. The Potential of Heritage Transportation Corridors*, «Cultural Resource Management», a. XVI, vol. 11, 1993, pp. 9–11.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. *Museum Exhibition Reviews*, in «The Journal of American History», a. LXXVI, vol. 1, 1989, pp. 221–224.

<sup>26</sup> Liebs's interest in Japan was piqued by a series of exchanges between UVM and Tokyo University of the Arts in the early 1990s. He went on to serve as Fulbright Researcher, Tokyo University of the Arts (1994–95); Visiting Professor of Area Studies, Tsukuba University (1997–98); Visiting Professor, Tokyo University of the Arts (2000–03); Fulbright Lecturer and Researcher, University of Tokyo (2005–06); Visiting Professor, University of Tokyo (2007–09).

<sup>27</sup> 世界が称賛した日本の町の秘密 [trad. *Secrets of Japanese Cities the World Admires*], translated and published in Japanese, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Liebs's archive, including a small number of his photographs, is held at the University of New Mexico. A selection was featured in Montpellier (FR) in 2017, cfr. CHIARA SALARI, *Notes sur l'asphalte, une Amérique mobile et précaire, 1950–1990*, «Transatlantica», vol. 2, 2016, <<http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8348>> [15/9/2025].