

LOST:

A Historic Transportation Resource— The Sheraton-Park Lobby

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The new lobby of the Sheraton Washington.

Reaction to the renovations at the Sheraton-Washington Hotel, expressed by registrants at the recent TRB Annual Meeting, ranged from admiration to nostalgia for the "old" hotel. The following comments by Mr. Newlon, associate head of the Virginia Highway and Transportation Research Council and chairman of TRB's Subcommittee on Historic and Archaeologic Considerations in Transportation Planning, are thought-provoking, entertaining, and representative of many other opinions heard during the week. **Editor.**

One of the major goals of the TRB Subcommittee on Historic and Archaeologic Considerations in Transportation Planning has been to provide a forum in which the views of those responsible for transportation improvements and those concerned about preserving some fabric of the past can be discussed. In some cases there is ob-

viously a direct conflict. What one group views as progress, the other views as desecration. What one group views as consideration of alternatives, the other views as delay. In specific cases, each view is correct in varying degrees.

Conference sessions have been sponsored by our subcommittee at the last three Annual Meetings; during their course, 30 presentations have been made. The results from these sessions have been very positive on several levels. Attendance and interest have been high for all three years. Another encouraging observation is that this year, during session 14, a show of hands indicated that about 60 percent of the participants were from the

transportation community and about 40 percent were from the preservation community. At our first session in 1978, the ratio was about 95:5. Several presentations this year at sessions 14 and 31 clearly illustrated innovative solutions and creative compromises where there was early contact and attempts to understand opposing points of view. I feel sure that the opportunity for dialogue created within TRB has had a more positive effect than would have been possible if developments in this area had been left to be hammered out in the confrontation of public hearings and litigation.

For anyone who still has difficulty understanding what the preservationists are talking about, this year's meeting provided an object lesson:

Like most of those who have attended HRB and TRB meetings at the Sheraton-Park for more than 20 years, I felt at home. I recall that last year there was a model in the lobby that was related to some anticipated renovations, but it didn't get much attention because the lobby of the Sheraton-Park was not a place for advertising improvements. It was a place for visiting, renewing old acquaintances, and discussing ideas on the latest research effort. The lobby had been the "social center" of TRB for decades. There just wasn't time to study the model and to realize what dramatic changes were in the offing.

When I arrived Sunday evening, after dark, I was unprepared for the scene that greeted me when I turned my automobile onto Woodley Road and saw a pile of rubble where the entrance had been when I left last year. Since there was no sign to tell me it was somewhere else, my only alternative was to seek a familiar landmark. I circled to the Calvert Street entrance, which was just as it had always been, entered the elevator, and somewhat tentatively pushed the button marked "8". That's what I'd always pushed to get to the lobby, but in the past the lobby had always been on Woodley Road. When I arrived at the eighth floor I felt better. There, where it had always been, was the familiar sign "Lobby." I started off. My hopes sank a little when I arrived at a sign that said, "Detour to the Lobby." Transportation people understand the need for detours, but I was now in the role normally played by the motorist who is trying to get home by a familiar route and is confronted by a sign indicating a detour for "future comfort and safety."

After a tortuous detour marked by a bewildering array of signs and arrows (I almost missed the critical turn through the kitchen), I walked through a small opening into the 21st century! A gorgeous and pleasing large park-like atrium with greenery (green space?), soft lighting, and an air of efficiency—like a modern airline terminal. Despite this modern and efficient appearance, there was a feeling of subdued opulence and environmental amenities that was quite pleasing. A real showplace! But was this the lobby I was looking for? Was TRB really meeting here? Where was the milling crowd, the handshakes, the bewildering mass of bodies that one had to negotiate? Sometimes an hour was required to traverse the old lobby, not because the distance was so great but because the numerous old friends encountered increased

the "travel time." Even though the trip was slow, it was a pleasant one.

Registration was a breeze! Not only was my name instantly displayed on a cathode-ray tube, but I got a card so that I wouldn't have to stand in line when I checked out. But it occurred to me that I used to enjoy chatting (and complaining) with others in the checkout line.

I headed for my room, entered an elevator ablaze with lights and inflated plastic bumpers on the sides that suggested that Darth Vader might be waiting at the top. It turned out to be the wrong elevator, so I returned to the lobby and found that my room was back on Calvert Street. I decided to get a newspaper before retracing the detour route and followed the sign "Newsstand and Wardman Tower." Wardman Tower—that had a familiar sound! After traversing a construction tunnel I came to an old friend—the sun-porch connection between the old lobby and the back way out. I had found what preservationists call a "sense of place." I recalled my very first HRB meeting, when I was a graduate student and my boss, the late Tilton Shelburne, had introduced me to Professor Ivan Viest, an authority on composite bridges, the subject of my thesis. I doubt that Professor Viest remembers this, but I do because it was a thrill to discuss what little I knew with someone whose papers on the subject I had read.

Someone has said that "a city without old buildings is like a man without a memory." The lobby was gone, but the sun porch triggered this recollection of my very first meeting and my meeting with my very first "authority."

I ultimately found my room, and the meeting was successful and informative, as in the past. I deposited my speedy checkout card and the various computers functioned as designed. My bill came in several days. It was all very efficient. But I was struck throughout the week that an essential ingredient was missing—the lobby. The new lobby is so spacious it was never crowded. I suppose there were as many registrants as usual, but I saw only small groups here and there. The capacity provided was so great that it encouraged speed of movement and efficiency rather than the old camaraderies and informal contacts. This is what preservationists call a "sense of scale." It is interesting that the Shoreham lobby, which used to seem so large, continues to be a social focus and now seems intimate by comparison with the new Sheraton lobby.

One cannot criticize the new Sheraton Washington. It clearly represents "progress" and meets its intended goals, but an important part of TRB has been lost—the lobby where so many important and informal discussions were held. Many other comparisons could be made between our experiences during the 1980 meeting and views from those who sometimes criticize our projects.

An old Indian prayer asks, "Great Spirit, grant that I may not criticize my neighbor until I have walked a mile in his moccasins." This week I and many other transportation officials had an opportunity to walk in the preservationists' moccasins. Our trip was efficient and speedy, but I must admit the moccasins pinched a little.