



**James Michael Lindgren.** *Preserving South Street Seaport: The Dream and Reality of a New York Urban Renewal District.* New York: New York University Press, 2014. 384 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4798-2557-8.

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**Published on** H-Pennsylvania (July, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Allen J. Dieterich-Ward (Shippensburg University)

## **Right or Wrong, You Can Be Just as Dead: The Story of South Street Seaport Museum**

South Street Seaport Museum has lived as many lives as the proverbial cat, but it was born feral and has remained so to this day. James Lindgren, well-regarded for two earlier books, *Preserving Historic New England* (1995) and *Preserving the Old Dominion* (1993), tracks the promise of what began in the 1960s as a grassroots movement to 1) preserve an evocative and colorful remnant of nineteenth-century New York, and 2) let troubled young people use seafaring experiences to rebuild their lives. Lindgren succeeds, here as elsewhere, in evoking the dreams and visions of the organizers, while also making clear the forces arrayed against them. The huge cast of players cycling in and out of the story unpredictably over decades offers a narrative challenge Lindgren doesn't quite meet. But like the Seaport itself, its charms visible to anyone willing to brave the smells, Lindgren fends off the policy messes long enough to let us see, and mourn for, what might have been.

The innovation that defined South Street Seaport Museum, and made it shorthand for the bright future of public history, involved combining historical, commercial, preservation, and civic work in one mission. But these mission goals rarely blended the way their promoters hoped. Each priority had value to a different group of advocates, who competed for funds and attention. The vision of all goals succeeding simultaneously mattered abstractly to public history professionals, but mattered on the ground mostly as PR when powerful interests

needed cultural cover for piratical commerce. Lindgren follows the story chronologically from the first schools run by volunteers through the high hopes, poor execution, and disappointments of the Rouse development; the promising period of flourishing and solvency under president Peter Neill; and the ultimate betrayal even of those achievements by an inept and unimaginative board.

Lindgren's narrative illustrates the sad fact that there never was a sound basis of financing for the Seaport Museum's mission work, either in preservation or programming, onshore or for the historic fleet. Enthusiasm and a sense of urgency repeatedly overrode planning. And when politics did not trump common sense, New York's unstable economy stepped in to ruin the best-laid plans anyway. In 1967, Jakob Isbrandtsen, son of a shipping magnate, made large loans to get the Seaport project off the ground, loans guaranteed by the future sale of air rights over the low-rise district. When the New York real estate market tanked, those values vanished, and most of those debts were never repaid. Then, the struggling city was only too glad to dump public responsibility for East River District rehabilitation onto the nascent Seaport Museum. Needing someone to see to the development of the port-area streets and piers, the mayor's office magnanimously made the scarcely solvent Seaport Museum responsible, but without allocating any public money to make it possible.

In a distressingly cyclical pattern, preservation and

programming by volunteers would successfully enliven some aspect of the East River district, attracting bigger dogs who would soon take charge. Generally, the business-oriented newcomers would accuse the volunteers of being fusty and slow, too concerned with authenticity, while the beleaguered volunteers routinely accused the business interests of ignorance and vile perfidy. More than once, when the big dogs got into trouble, the volunteers, museum, and neglected fleet would be thrust out in front for the cameras. Good PR on special occasions like the 1976 bicentennial and Operation Sail 2000 briefly made the volunteers feel valued, while helping keep the overall effort afloat.

Seaporters recruited the Rouse Company in the late 1970s to create a retail mall in the area, hoping that a reasonable share of revenue from successful retail development would stably fund both preservation and programming. But when the deal with Rouse was formalized in 1981, most of the revenue went to the separately incorporated South Street Seaport Corporation, originally created to outflank the city's notion that the museum should manage East River real estate development. The museum's share would make little or no difference in its future. Pressed by unfunded debt, development needs, and mission costs, and hopeful that the corporation would voluntarily share its income stream, museum leadership swallowed the rotten deal because they had no choice. Donations to the museum then dipped because the public thought the museum had sold out to "Disneyfication," and mall construction drove away visitors and school groups. When the museum booked a \$750,000 operating deficit in 1982 (80 percent of it from the legal costs of negotiating the complex contracts) none of the deal's beneficiaries stepped in to help. The South Street Seaport Corporation, profiting handsomely from the new retail, doubled its executive salaries, while the museum laid off one-third of its staff and absorbed a 54 percent budget cut.

The city was also pleased to let museum volunteers do job training for urban youth on *Pioneer*, the museum's rehabilitated teaching schooner, again without city money. Though SSSM and *Pioneer* offered the most successful job training program for troubled kids in the city, even struggling to comply with city regulations, it did not receive public money. More hands in the cookie jar and continued starvation funding for museum operations eventually destroyed the sailing school. Years later, when the museum had achieved solvency and was climbing resolutely toward success once more, 9/11 destroyed its essential earned income stream, and down it went again.

The story repeats, whether the centerpiece is the rehabilitation of Schermerhorn Row, the demolition of the Green Coffee Exchange, the ouster of the Fulton Fish Market, or the renovation of historic ships. Oddly, the Seaport Museum seemed to come out of each storm with the same board members, funders, and sharks in the water. Because people rarely left, even after losing an ugly fight, the vituperative, immoderate, *ad hominem* (and occasionally *feminam*) language of most of these disputes helped institutionalize personal animosities. Personal bitterness prevented the realization of many good ideas over the years. The various folks circling the Seaport Museum seemed unwilling to accept that they lacked the knowledge, discipline, and humility essential to making a great museum. Again and again powerful and moneyed interests pushed aside those who did have what it took, grabbed too large a piece of the action without offering support for good work, and pushed the museum under.

I worked at South Street Seaport Museum as a curator and historian from 2002 to 2004, recruited by museum president Peter Neill for what turned out to be the last major effort of his tenure. Our team was charged with finishing a permanent exhibit, for which I was the third or fourth curator, to display the strong collections acquired by Neill since 1984. We prepared "World Port New York" for installation in Schermerhorn Row, to give the museum a dramatic interpretive presence and to offer New Yorkers a haunting and inspiring feeling for the maritime roots (and future) of their city. Still reeling from the economic impact of 9/11, Neill and the board nevertheless raised something north of \$20 million to equip the rustic nineteenth-century warehouse spaces for modern exhibitry.

Lindgren tells the story of what happened, but it is familiar enough: the renovations and the exhibit drowned in the same waters that had closed over the other lost glories of the museum. Overall financial starvation led to reckless improvisations, personal animosities to stupid decisions, mismanagement to vast legal expenses, and hard work to humiliation and disappointment. By 2004, the Seaport Museum had become a place where dedication and vision went to die, making it harder and harder to sustain positive momentum and to attract good leadership. Lindgren follows the meltdown right up to 2014, finding little hope for the museum, though some for the historic fleet.

Modern historic preservation, as Lindgren chronicled in his earlier books, was born of a strongly elitist and anti-modern longing in New England and Virginia

to revive mythical “American values.” In mid-twentieth-century New York, preservationists seemed to shift gears toward the future, opening up exciting possibilities. To boost the civic vitality of a city soon to face municipal bankruptcy, early Seaport volunteers fought fiercely to protect one of the grungiest, smelliest working-class enclaves anywhere. From the reek of the Fulton Fish Market to the brothels, bars, and dilapidated SROs of Sailortown, South Street Seaport Museum aimed to save gritty scenes of maritime life as a way of giving the city new heart and pride. The civic dedication, the extraordinary generosity of many, and the palpable romance of the old port district helped to sustain the venture despite fatal internal weaknesses. The older elitist style of preservation to revive values of the mythic past lived on in the effort to save tall ships, but even those became part of the civic mission through the sailing school and public concerts on the piers.

Despite being a great idea, confidently and energetically pursued, the Seaport Museum never escaped the threat of financial failure. Besieged by the development pressures incident to occupying even a shred of Manhattan real estate, the seaport also faced hostile political

leadership at key moments. Perhaps the most dangerous part of the picture was a recklessness born of the excitement of innovation itself. Even with periods of laudably heroic dedication and spates of effective leadership and generous supporters, the Seaport Museum remained the red-headed stepchild of New York’s cultural life. As Lindgren chronicles, decades of financial starvation ultimately weakened the organization, exhausted popular enthusiasm, and ate away at the preserved buildings and ships. By 2004, South Street Seaport was easy prey to vandals internal and external to the organization. Lindgren’s book carries the story all the way to 2014, leaving the Seaport Museum in the hands of yet another grassroots volunteer revitalization that may soon find itself left alone to care for the (barely) floating fleet of historic ships.

Lindgren’s thorough narrative leaves a bittersweet taste. As public historians move forward today, embracing civic missions, exploring participatory programming, and collaborating with cities to redevelop neighborhoods, all the innovations the Seaport represented seem at last to have caught a steady wind, but sadly, are sailing in other seas.

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**Citation:** Sharon Ann Holt. Review of Lindgren, James Michael, *Preserving South Street Seaport: The Dream and Reality of a New York Urban Renewal District*. H-Pennsylvania, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

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