

PRESERVATION FOR THE PEOPLE:  
SEVENTY YEARS OF AMERICAN YOUTH HOSTELS

Elisabeth Dubin

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John Milner, FAIA  
Adjunct Professor of Architecture  
Thesis Supervisor

---

Samuel Y. Harris, PE, FAIA  
Adjunct Professor of Architecture  
Reader

---

Frank G. Matero  
Associate Professor of Architecture  
Graduate Committee Chair

These were low-cost accommodations, simple and even austere, where boys and girls slept in separate dormitories but shared common cooking, eating, and conversational areas. They were supervised by houseparents, and the young people had a clearcut responsibility to keep the quarters clean and orderly.

The cost? About 25¢ per night.<sup>1</sup> It seemed a heaven-sent intervention to the Smiths, who soon arranged for their group to stay at the hostel at Hagen. And there they heard about the castle. Castle Altena, high on a hill above the world. That's where they were headed at this moment, and already this dismal trip was looking brighter.

Bacil B. Warren, *Young at Any Age*

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<sup>1</sup> In 1933.

In 1944, British parachutists had shelled this lovely hostel, which stood on a high sand dune overlooking the town and was being used by the Germans as an observation post; it was grievously damaged. But after the war was over, one of the parachute lads came back with the International Working Party, so that he could say to his friends of the Dutch Youth Hostel Movement:

“In 1944, we destroyed your hostel, we could do no other. Now we have come to restore it.”

Oliver Coburn, *Youth Hostel Story*

To AYH

and those who strive to make something bright  
from something empty

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**ABSTRACT**

A “youth hostel” is an inexpensive, co-educational, supervised overnight lodging open to the public. Despite the moniker, hostels have accommodated travelers of any age since the inception of the movement in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. In the early years hostel buildings were found in rural areas—they were created to allow city-bound students to spend a weekend in the natural landscape, and were invariably fashioned from unused school buildings or empty barns. When hostelling as a practice expanded from Europe to the United States in the 1930s, a national not-for-profit organization called American Youth Hostels (AYH) was formed to serve as the standard-setting and administrative center for the movement. The mission of AYH is, “...to help all, especially the young, gain a greater understanding of the world and its people through hostelling.”

This thesis investigates AYH to reveal the organization’s various approaches to preservation of adapted historic buildings. The primary question posed is this: as a not-for-profit, essentially philanthropic organization charging minimal fees for accommodations, how does AYH acquire and renovate historic buildings and why does it invariably choose this option over new construction? Three case studies present distinct building typologies, all adapted to dorm-style hostels: (1) a Victorian mansion in Sacramento, (2) a former nursing home in New York City, and (3) an obsolete lighthouse on the California coast. This paper also demonstrates that AYH values historic preservation as much as it does social reform and physical education.

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## **PREFACE**

I became interested in the phenomenon of the youth hostel while traveling abroad. In Europe young people from all over the world are accustomed to lodging in “hostels”, which typically accommodate travelers in dormitory-style bedrooms with common sitting areas and kitchens for meeting and socializing. In England, Ireland, Scotland, Switzerland, France, Italy, Israel and Greece I stayed in such hostels situated in buildings recycled and adapted from previous uses. I realized on my return to the U.S. that the hostel is alive and well in America, too. Like their counterparts in Europe, the majority of domestic hostels are located in historic buildings that have been used previously for other functions. My interest in these buildings was furthered after visiting hostels in California, Connecticut, Georgia, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

As I traveled I noticed that the adaptation of historic buildings for this use creates an architecture all its own. Those interested in developing youth hostels are aware that their clients are not patrons of four-star hotels; hostellers are frugal, adventurous, and tolerant of unusual living spaces. Small bathrooms under stairs, innovative shower designs made to fit tight spaces, variations on the bed-loft and a more liberal view towards privacy are all acceptable and, in fact, valued.

Hostels vary widely in form and quality but not in function. During the course of traveling and staying in youth hostels, I sensed the deep relationship between the hostel building itself and the traveler’s experience of an unfamiliar region. Hostelling, then, is not

simply the pursuit of “cheap sleeps”; rather, it is associated with a form of travel that intimately acquaints one with the history of a location as told through its built fabric.

I hypothesized that the hostel is a fitting use for certain “problem” historic buildings, e.g. obsolete prisons and school buildings that have outlived their original functions and are difficult to match with new ones. Hostel patrons are typically tolerant of a greater level of variation in service and accommodation than are general hotel patrons, so the act of remodeling a building for such a use can be more creatively accomplished. Buildings in locations somewhat off-the-beaten-path (like lighthouses, early farmsteads, or structures in national and state parks) would be under-visited as museums, yet as hostels they become popular destinations for bike tourists and car travelers.

I observed that hostelling fosters a sense of community and a feeling of good will among travelers. Those who stay in hostels often do small chores like cleaning a kitchen or vacuuming a common space; those who stay for an extended period sometimes get involved in more elaborate building maintenance tasks. This volunteer or barter-based labor force might be integrated into regular upkeep of hostel buildings, but appears as yet not to be implemented on any formal level.

Further, I noticed that the adaptation of various historic structures for use as hostels can be minimally damaging to the structure. This came to mind after visiting a former chapel where no partitions divided the space and dormitory beds were simply placed in rows in the main hall. In Littleton, Massachusetts, a former farmhouse and barn have been converted to a dormitory in which most hostellers sleep in the various gables of the building

and the rest in simply partitioned private rooms. I have seen similar hostels in carriage houses and industrial buildings where the impact on the original structure has been minimal.

Although hostel buildings vary in size and form, they are consistently compelling places. To stay in a hostel is not a neutral experience; one is rather forced to observe the structure and the particular details of the place. The study that follows is one that began years ago as a vacation and continued as a Master's Thesis at the University of Pennsylvania.

This project was made possible by the willingness of several individuals affiliated with AYH to speak to me about the topic. I offer great thanks to David Kalter, John Canon, Ta'Juanna Anderson, Eric Horowitz, Steve Haynes, and Jennifer Norris; I owe the largest debt of gratitude to Nina Janopaul whose input was essential. Thanks to Jim Garrison, Amanda Fernández, my mother and father, and all others who showed interest and helped to facilitate my work. I also thank my friends for trekking around with me to visit some of these places (hardly a joyless task for them, but the company was much appreciated). I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Ilona English Travel Fellowship, and the time and patience of my advisor, John Milner, and reader, Samuel Y. Harris. Finally, thanks to D.C.F. Parker for inspiration.

## INTRODUCTION

Around the world, a “youth hostel” is understood to be an inexpensive, dormitory-style accommodation for travelers who require neither the luxury nor the privacy of a typical hotel. Over the course of the twentieth century the youth hostel concept has developed from the early grass-roots efforts of a few German idealists to an organized worldwide network of lodgings offering consistent minimum standards of comfort and safety. Hostel systems have allowed youth not only to travel on a reduced budget, but also to meet other hostellers and establish friendships among strangers. This study shows that in the process of fostering travel opportunities for those of modest means, hostel developers have provided countless opportunities for historic preservation along the way.

### *Existing Research*

That there is little in the way of detailed treatment of the history of hostelling is a lament echoed by those few who have undertaken the task since the inception of the movement. Those that have examined hostelling history as a rigorous academic topic have done so only in the years immediately following the importation of the idea to America. These include L.H. Weir in 1937 and both John Berry Biesanz and James O’Donald Mays in 1941. All three engaged the topic from a sociologist’s point of view rather than from that of an architect or historian. An exception, Bacil B. Warren’s *Young at Any Age: American Youth Hostels’ First Fifty Years*, was written in 1985. Warren’s entertaining narrative is immensely

detailed in every aspect of AYH history, yet the volume paints its author as an impassioned supporter of American hostelling rather than as an unbiased historian.

Nonetheless, enough information is available from several sources to track the history of the hostelling movement during the twentieth century. As a word of explanation, there has been disagreement as to the proper spelling of the terms “hosteler” versus “hosteller” and “hosteling” versus “hostelling.” Biesanz and Warren chose the former pair in their writings, while Weir impressively avoids use of all four of these spellings. Currently, the international federation to which most hostelling countries subscribe is called “Hostelling International” and adopts the two-l spelling, as do the American and British organizations. The Oxford English Dictionary offers some clarification; “hosteler” refers both to one who receives guests at an inn and to the student who lives in a hostel, while the term “hosteller” is used in conjunction with “youth-hostelling.” Since this study involves the American branch of Hostelling International, officially titled “Hostelling International—American Youth Hostels”, this paper uses the double-l spellings throughout. In addition, this study often abbreviates “Hostelling International—American Youth Hostels (HI-AYH)” to just “American Youth Hostels” or simply to “AYH.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Use of the term AYH is also practical since the organization has operated under slightly different official titles since its inception. “American Youth Hostels” became “American Youth Hostels, Inc.”, and then “Hostelling International—American Youth Hostels”. During the writing of this thesis, the name changed yet again to “Hostelling International—USA” in January of 2003. Since the majority of the writing in this project references the organization as “AYH”, the abbreviation is used throughout despite the change to “HI-USA”.

### *Goals of the Study*

To investigate theories put forth in the preface to this chapter, this study examines the hostel-as-adaptive-reuse by looking specifically at American Youth Hostels. AYH is a non-profit organization founded in 1934 that now licenses approximately 125 hostels in the U.S., most of which are considered to be “historic” structures. Each AYH building operated as a hostel under the umbrella organization has a unique story that begs the main question of this project: as a not-for-profit, essentially philanthropic organization charging minimal fees for its accommodations, how does AYH acquire and renovate historic American buildings and why does it invariably choose this option over new construction?

This study investigates AYH to clarify and define the organization’s various approaches to the conversion and maintenance of adapted historic buildings. AYH hostels operate in one of several ways: 1) the national organization may own and operate the hostel, 2) AYH may operate a hostel owned by a local group, federal or state park, or set of investors, 3) local councils, for example the Golden Gate Council discussed later in this paper, operate and own their own hostels under the umbrella of the national organization, or 4) AYH may license “network” hostels, which are typically smaller hostels owned and operated privately. So far as is possible, given that AYH is a large and fluid national organization with a less-than-static roster of affiliated hostels, this work attempts to view the individual structures as part of a single, unified organization with the understanding that the AYH philosophy and national standards affect decisions made for each building.

The project presents three AYH case studies in order to illuminate the organization’s methods of adapting historic buildings. Each study provides its own answer to the thesis

question: how is an organization that does not seek nor receive profit from development able to acquire and renovate historic buildings, and why does it choose to do so? This question is especially compelling given that a large percentage of hostel renovations take place in structures that have been long abandoned and/or were seriously derelict at some point, and which require extreme dedication and financial resources to revive them.

The case studies presented represent three different building typologies, all adapted to dorm-style hostels: the first, a Victorian mansion in Sacramento; the second, a former nursing home in New York City; and the third, a surplus lighthouse and U.S. Coast Guard station on the California coast. Together, the three examples provide a limited but revealing view of the organization's methods. This paper also demonstrates how AYH inherently values historic preservation though it is not codified as part of the organization's mission.

### *Categories of Inquiry*

In addition to the general question posed, each case study addresses five categories of inquiry:

*Site Appropriateness.* Is the hostel well used? Does this location fill a need, i.e. does it provide access to places that travelers want to go? Are conditions at the site conducive to renovation as a hostel? If zoning and/or building code issues are present, are the problems surmountable?

*Cultural and Educational Value.* The mission of AYH is stated as, "...to help all, especially the young, gain a greater understanding of the world and its people through

hostelling.” Does the use of historic American buildings as hostels provide a unique window into American history for both foreign and domestic travelers?

*Acquisition and Funding.* Has the structure been saved from demolition or disrepair? Has AYH solved a “problem use” dilemma? Do there exist partnering organizations (not-for-profit or private) that can facilitate fundraising or use tax benefits to aid the renovation? Have federal, state or local governing agencies provided assistance?

*Preservation Goals.* Does the conversion preserve and rehabilitate elements of the hostel as they relate to a historic period? If not, what elements are valued and preserved? Was the restoration well performed? Is the structure in good shape and well maintained? Does the preservation community recognize AYH’s efforts?

*Continuing Viability.* Is this an economically sustainable project? Are there provisions for ongoing maintenance? Does this use have a negative or positive impact on the physical structure? Is the hostel financially self-supporting and, if not, what are the provisions for its continued operation in the future?

So many of the AYH historic hostels are worthy of discussion in this context. The three case studies presented here were chosen because they represent distinct building typologies with divergent methods of development. Of the roughly 125 hostels associated with AYH today, many of them are on the National Register of Historic Places, on local or state registers, or have won awards for excellence in Historic Preservation. Although discretion limits this scope to three studies, it would have been both possible and fruitful to do thirty more.