

# FIRST WORD

BY JOHN KNOERL

## Through the Lens of Science

**BACK IN THE SUMMER OF 1969** I worked for the now defunct Buffalo Awning and Tent Company on Broadway and Hickory, in the city that hosts this year's National Preservation Conference. I did installations all over town, a job that gave me a thorough knowledge of Buffalo's geography and streets. As I traveled around with my ladder, screwdriver, and drill, it was obvious that the city was declining and my attitude at the time was that there wasn't much worth saving.

**MORE THAN 40 YEARS LATER.** I'm roaming Buffalo's streets again. My tools are quite different, and so is my view. This time, I'm seeing the city as a preservationist, using remote sensing imagery, databases, and GIS to look down from a satellite in far off space, right now at a masterwork designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. These tools have brought new insight to my perspective on the city. **MY ATTITUDE IN 1969 WAS TYPICAL OF**

anyone who grew up in the suburbs. In post-World War II Buffalo, major demographic changes were taking place. Returning veterans were leaving their old neighborhoods and moving to the suburbs. My parents were among them, moving from south Buffalo, a German-Irish enclave, to nearby Cheektowaga. Everything there was new. Nothing was old. This affected our ideas about what was valuable and what was not. We were taught that the city was in decay, that people were leaving, that the industrial plants were closing, that crime was getting worse. The riots on the east side of Buffalo in 1967 only reinforced this attitude. **THE IRONY OF COURSE IS THAT SINCE** develop-

ers were not interested in Buffalo, many of its neighborhoods were preserved. And over the course of four summers installing awnings, I began to appreciate the city's historic character. From elaborate Queen Annes to more modest two and three-bedroom stone-clad dwellings, Buffalo retains a remarkable degree of its old charm. While some of its streets are laid out in a grid pattern, like those of other cities, others intersect with the curvature of the famous system of Olmsted-designed parks. And I discovered that the awnings I was installing were a way people expressed pride in their houses. I still recall the impressive sight of a row of houses decked out in the colorful fabric on a summer's day. **YEARS LATER, AS HEAD OF A NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

**UNIT THAT** uses GIS in preservation, my view continues to evolve as I use the technology to study trends in several New York cities. There are a number of ways GIS plays into the preservation equation. In the case of Buffalo, I was curious about what the technology could reveal about home ownership and preservation. Each year, a state real estate agency issues an updated set of GIS data showing who owns individual homes, along with the owners' addresses. When the

addresses for the two do not match, it means the home is a rental. The information also includes property values, which a researcher can follow year to year as they rise or fall. **DOES HOME OWNERSHIP MATTER IN SUSTAINING** historic properties? I believe it does. Using GIS, I have mapped more than 10,000 properties in the National Register of Historic Places—not only in Buffalo, but in Yonkers, Albany, and Rochester. These I correlated with owners' tax data available through local real estate offices. Of these cities, Buffalo has the highest percent of home ownership, at 72 percent, while Albany, at 38 percent, has the lowest. This difference is also reflected in the number of historic buildings lost since they were listed. Albany has lost 10 percent, while Buffalo has lost only 2. Doubtless other factors are at work in determining whether a historic building is lost, but home ownership seems to play a role.

**THERE HAS BEEN AN ARGUMENT GOING ON FOR YEARS** about preservation tax credits for homeowners. There is concern that such legislation only benefits the wealthy, or limits the number and type of properties that

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would be eligible. The argument has been largely fueled by anecdotal information. Now, for the first time, there is a comprehensive set of data. **THERE ARE TYPICALLY SEVERAL VERSIONS OF** a tax credit bill up for debate at any given time in the state legislature. Now, GIS can provide a picture of how a plan will play out in an entire city. We can actually show what the benefits of a given law would be, whether limited to 10,000 households, or a more politically defensible 100,000. And, beyond modeling a piece of legislation, it can track the effect once passed. Whether the goal is to encourage home ownership, increase property values, foster preservation, or all three, the bill's effect can be monitored year to year, and when the time comes to evaluate the success, you have a track record developed through GIS. **IN SHORT, SCIENCE TAKES THE POLITICAL WIND OUT** of the equation. And that is important in a city like Buffalo, where preservation seems to be booming, a place that, like my attitude about my native city, seems to have come full circle.

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