



BY PHILIP ALVARÉ

A friend of mine recently acquired several tons of bricks salvaged from an old schoolhouse in Catskill. Apparently the town deemed the place derelict, or at least unsuitable for continued use as an educational facility. It was demolished. He's recycled and restructured those bricks into new forms, and in so doing, preserved a piece of history and continuity with the past. But I could sense his outrage over the destruction of a fine old brick building that was the product of an industry that once bound the region together from Albany to Westchester County. Brick-making in the Hudson Valley had flourished on both sides of the river from approximately the mid-19th century to the first quarter of the 20th century, creating jobs and an economy that gave rise to a rich cultural pattern of interdependent communities and towns.

"You see," my friend said, "reinforced concrete destroyed the once booming Hudson Valley brick industry." He articulated the words "*reinforced concrete*" as if he had just said "*the enemy*." I think my friend — I'll call him Jake for the sake of anonymity — worries that every time a great old building is torn down, something greater than bricks and mortar is destroyed.

Culture can be described as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with each other, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. A brick is perhaps to human culture what a word is to language, strung together in courses, or stretchers, like phrases and sentences, constructing walls like paragraphs, chapters and volumes written about human history. Every time we destroy one of these old structures, we may also be destroying the building blocks of our shared cultural legacy.

The Dutch introduced brick-making to the Hudson Valley as early as 1630, when Peter Stuyvesant was overheard muttering something about how wooden houses wouldn't survive fire. But the industry peaked from the turn of the 19th century and into the 20th. I actually found a book by George Hutton titled "The Great Hudson River Brick Industry" that describes a flourishing network of manufacturing in Green, Columbia, Ulster, Orange,

Dutchess, Rockland and Westchester counties. Hutton mentions "geologic good fortune" as one explanation for the thriving activity: "The banks of the Hudson River supplied a nearly inexhaustible amount of clay at the edge of an easily navigable waterway," he writes. "That waterway led directly to a voracious market for a fireproof building material that could be produced and installed at a very reasonable cost."

The voracious market, of course, was New York City with its exponential increase in population and commercial growth, and concomitant fire devastations, all of which fed the blazing brick business. The year of 1905-'06, yearly production in the Hudson Valley hit an all-time high of 1.3 billion bricks. But by 1918 that number had plummeted to 211 million bricks, a mere 16 percent of the 1905-'06 total. From 1917 to 1918 alone, the number of brick manufacturers in the region dropped from 88 to 66. Main culprit: *reinforced concrete*. As cities had created the industry for bricks, they in turn destroyed it. Reinforced concrete triumphed as metropolitan centers became increasingly

vertical. Quick-drying and cheap, Portland Cement gave the brick industry heavy competition and ultimately dragged it down.

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It's hard to believe that something so basic to the development of human habitation and culture could nearly vanish overnight. A remarkably complex pattern emerges from these little rectangular ceramic units. They're a compact building unit, a module that even a child can wield, yet they produce enormous buildings, if not whole cities. Bricks are laid out in a variety of designs referred to as bonds. There's brickwork laid in English bond, Flemish bond, and herringbone patterns, just to name a few. Alternating courses of stretchers (bricks laid horizontally) and headers (bricks laid vertically) increase stability and strength. A brick is a unit of potential awaiting its destiny within a larger matrix or structure.

I think, in a way, that the demise of the brick-making industry was the demise of something integral to the structure of American culture, which seems up for grabs these days. Brick manufacturing and construction in the Hudson Valley created a cohesive synergy, the river serving as a main artery to bind lives, livelihoods, and communities — not to belabor the point — like bricks and mortar. As with other river valleys in the past (the Fertile Crescent and Nile Delta come to mind), whole cultures, if not civilizations, historically arise from geologic good fortune.

Bricks reach so far back into history, it's worth noting that the oldest shaped bricks date from 7,500 B.C. They were found in a place called Cayonü, in the Tigris-Euphrates area in the region generally referred to as the Fertile Crescent, and the upper Tigris area of Anatolia. This is practically the beginning of history. Place names like Ur, Babylon, and Jericho, and ancient cultures like Mesopotamia and Syria come to the fore. It's been said that the Sumerians made ritualistic offerings to a *brick god*.

The origins of these terra-cotta building blocks are indigenous to the places we hear about in the daily news. Recent wars in these regions have devastated ancient brick buildings that reach back to the dawn of civilization, and their destruction is more than a little discomfiting. At the risk of overstating a point: The systematic, if not wholesale, destruction of historic landmarks and architectural icons may be tantamount to the destruction of Middle Eastern, classical, and assimilated Western cultures and civilization.

While the speed and uniformity of modern construction techniques and shining towers of glass and steel may more effectively meet the voracious demands of an ever-expanding consumer marketplace, something has been lost. The little terra-cotta blocks, dug from the earth, transferred and transformed into something greater than any individual, somehow bound us together as human beings.

The simple beauty of plumb bobs, hods, trowels, strings and levels — tools of the trade for the brick industry — have existed since the beginning of human history. What's more, it's a perfectly democratic industry. Anybody can get into the brick-making trade. It's a poor man's game and requires no start-up capital. Think mud pies and patty-cakes. The very fact that the universal size and shape of a brick usually measures about 8-by-4-by-2-1/4 inches reflects structural as well as human considerations. The width of a brick was based upon the span between a man's thumb and forefinger. This dimension is clearly missing from the contemporary, high-tech, generic megalopolis.

Like Jake, I have a brick bias. I can understand his dismay, and have to admit I have an affinity for the sense of stability, history, and warmth imparted by brick buildings. I also find the thought of demolishing these fine old buildings disturbing. My bias may be due to the fact that I grew up in a brick house. I lived next door to a family who owned a brick works. I attended a university in Philadelphia, a decidedly brick city. Independence Hall in Philadelphia is probably the most significant building in American history, and it's built of brick. In addition, I lived nearly 20 years in Boston, another brick metropolis.

Brick buildings often seem to possess a certain solidity and permanence which, when covered with ivy or Virginia creeper, seem fine, or genteel. The one I am lucky enough to own, an old Federal here in Hudson, was built by a prosperous Dutch merchant. Its brickwork is Flemish bond. But brick is also perennially democratic, the essence of simplicity and plainness, made from mud, all equal, uniform, contributing to a whole greater than the sum of its parts. *E Pluribus Unum*.

Ah bricks,
ah humanity. ❖



PHILIP ALVARÉ specializes in writing about decorative, fine arts and design. For 10 years he distinguished himself as owner of BOTANICVS Antiques & Fine Arts in Hudson, NY, a gallery of late - 18th and 19th - century antiques and decorative elements for the garden. His background includes film, television and print production, where he earned a variety of credits including PBS, ABC, NBC and MGM-FOX.