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Preservationist sees Trenton's beauty

Saturday, April 05, 2003

By ANNE LEVIN

TRENTON - Strolling for the first time through Trenton's capital district Thursday evening, preservationist Anthony M. Tung was struck by a simultaneous sense of joy and sadness. His elation at seeing the city's unique historic buildings was tempered by the fact that the streets were almost empty.

"Nobody told me that Trenton was so beautiful," Tung told an audience of some 280 preservationists the following day. "But I see it with a deep sadness."

The author of "Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction & Renewal of the Historic Metropolis," Tung was the keynote speaker yesterday at the 2003 Historic Preservation Conference, "A Catalyst for Growth."

Presented by Preservation New Jersey, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the state's Historic Preservation Office, the event was held at the New Jersey State Museum Auditorium.

In addition to Tung's speech, conference attendees got an update on the status of the proposed National Heritage Area in New Jersey, known as Crossroads of the American Revolution. Legislation that would officially recognize New Jersey's role in the Revolution was approved last year by the U.S. Senate, but didn't receive House approval. It is under consideration again.

"I'm confident that it will pass," Rep. Rush Holt, D-Hopewell Township, told preservationists. "This will be something that will draw Americans and probably foreigners (to New Jersey) from far and wide."

If the designation is approved, the federal government would provide \$10 million over 15 years to help preserve and display Revolutionary War sites in 14 counties, including Mercer and Hunterdon.

The conference set out to explore how historic preservation can become an important component in New Jersey's redevelopment efforts. Panels explored urban revitalization, the changing faces of communities and integrating public transit into historical communities, among other topics. Many participants toured the Mill Hill neighborhood as an example of Trenton's success in urban revitalization.

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Tung, a New Yorker who traveled to 22 cities across the world before writing his book on preserving cities, said in his speech that cities can prosper if their historic cores are protected.

"I learned that during the 20th century we adopted a culture of destruction," Tung said. "I saw an enormous amount of destruction around the world."

By allowing historically and architecturally significant buildings to deteriorate or be torn down during the last century, cities throughout the world lost 50 percent of their heritage, Tung said.

"If this attitude continues, by the end of this century we'll have destroyed 75 percent," he said.

As for Trenton, Tung was disturbed by what he saw during a 6 p.m. stroll he took after arriving at the Trenton Marriott at Lafayette Yard Thursday.

"I was the only white person on the streets. And as an American, my heart aches when I see the sadness of our racial divide," he said. "This city took me by surprise. It is stunning in its architecture and the loveliness of its streetscapes. But the palpable racial inequity that is also manifest in the cityscape is deeply troubling."

"It's not unusual in an American cityscape, and I understand that Trenton is making its way back from the riots (of the 1960s). But one would hope that at least in a state capital, this would be healed."

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