

War in Iraq, Non; War Against Pano, Oui!

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by James Ostrowski

I support the preservation of historically and architecturally significant buildings. I strongly dislike most modern architecture. I have personally supported these values with my own money. I have paid rent to have an office in the grand old Ellicott Square Building in downtown Buffalo for fifteen years. I have been to Fallingwater and twice to Monticello. I support the restoration of Buffalo's Central Terminal. I guess I'm an incurable romantic too.

Alas, I realize I am not the boss of the world. I realize I can't and shouldn't force others to support my goals and values. I realize that there are six billion other people out there with their own separate lives, goals, values, and destinies. They do not exist to serve me. They are each, as our best philosophers teach us, ends in themselves. Therefore, in pursuit of my aesthetic, cultural and social values, I choose to use only voluntary means – persuasion, education, and contract.

There is another type of preservationist, however. They do not share my abhorrence of force and violence, however denominated or rationalized. They go beyond persuasion, education, and boycott – a perfectly acceptable voluntary means of persuasion in my view – and seek war on those who disagree with them. Many of these same people, I suspect, would call themselves anti-war, oppose the War in Iraq (as I do), or are members of the Western New York Peace Center. Yet, they have declared war on Pano, the Buffalo restaurateur who seeks to demolish an old house he owns next to his Elmwood Avenue restaurant.

These architectural warmongers would have the City of Buffalo bar the demolition and, if Pano is recalcitrant, would have him arrested for contempt of court; if he resisted arrest, they would have him shot – to death if necessary. (Not to muddy-up the waters of this article, but, hey, I thought you liberals didn't like guns.) So, yes, my "peacenik" preservationists, you do support the use of aggressive force in pursuit of your architectural values.

If you loved this building so much, where were you when it was up for sale? Why didn't you buy it? Why haven't you purchased from the owner the right to veto any major alternations of its structure or appearance?

Throughout history, if you had asked people why they use violence, they might have collectively answered: it was easier than accomplishing our goals

through non-violent means. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot could each have given that same obvious answer.

But Jim, you're mistaken. It's not really violence if government does it. This is one of the great fallacies of our time, that numerosity excuses atrocity. To quote Victor Hugo, "homicide is homicide; bloodshed is bloodshed; it serves nothing to call one's self Caesar or Napoleon." Is everything Bush does in Iraq sacrosanct because he was elected and because the Congress authorized his folly?

But Jim, how do we preserve our architectural heritage without threatening property owners with (lawful) violence and bullets. O ye of little imagination!

Okay, I'll tell you. Free legal advice. Do a survey of Buffalo. Identify all architecturally significant buildings. Form a corporation. Raise money. Have the corporation buy up alteration rights from the present owners. That way, these buildings will be protected forever.

What, you're too lazy to do that? You don't want to spend your own precious money? You don't even want to host a fundraiser? Well, then, my pseudo-preservationist friends, let me suggest that all your huffing and puffing is phony. How valuable are your values if you are not willing to do a damn thing to advance them other than to call a cop? To paraphrase comedian Bill Maher – calling a cop is the least you can do – the very least!