

Tribute

By Adele Chatfield-Taylor

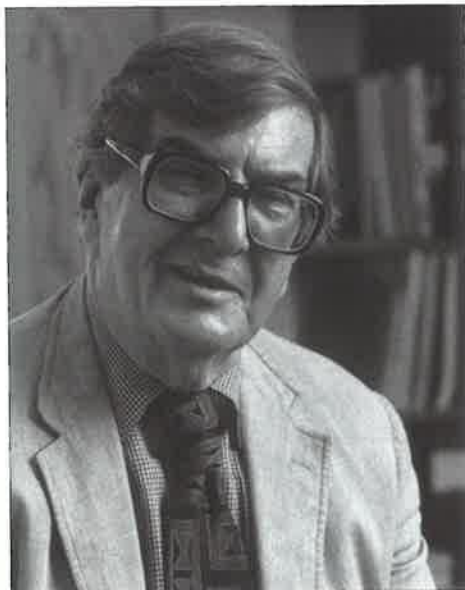
James Marston Fitch, “whose writings and teaching helped transform historic preservation from a dilettante’s pastime into a vigorous, broadly based cultural movement,” according to *The New York Times*, died on April 10, 2000, only a few days before his 91st birthday.

I met James Marston Fitch in the fall of 1967, when I enrolled in the Historic Preservation Program at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, and it was an encounter that changed my life.

In those days, the Fitch program was somewhat free-form. Learning was a matter of being in the presence of the guru rather than following a prescribed course of classes. There were only about eight of us that year, but we were a demanding bunch, being curious, energetic and a hodgepodge — architects, historians, gardeners, a builder, a museum docent, an art major — but all we wanted was to compare notes on historic preservation. Fitch was still designing the curriculum, and feeling his way. When in doubt, he would pile us into the station wagon and take us to see some American city like Charleston, Savannah, or Annapolis, that had a preservation claim to fame, and introduce us to some fascinating person, usually a woman, who had been the leader of the effort.

These outings always seemed spontaneous,

James Marston Fitch, 1909-2000.



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and we would arrive at our destinations at all hours of the day or night. This quality of picking-up-and-going always gave me the feeling that we were being initiated into an underground railroad of sorts, and the truth is we were. I will never forget getting out of the station wagon in Providence in the middle of a cold night, with new snow crunching under our feet, and meeting Antoinette Downing, who held a candle up for us and welcomed us in through the kitchen door. I have a feeling we woke her up. But she was thrilled. After all, we were with Fitch.

I believe Fitch pulled this off because he was above all an artist, and it was that quality and his originality that made him leave the sleepy, penniless, argumentative south at the worst moment of the depression and go to New York, to get lost and develop into someone unusual. It was the artist in him that made him fearless enough to break out of the mold — the mold of architecture, of writing, of meteorology, and, eventually, of modernism, too.

We learn a lot about Fitch by considering the women he married. He was old-fashioned, but he fell in love with liberated women. He asked a lot of them. He was very proud of Cleo and her achievements as a scholar and archaeologist, and he was very proud of Martica and her achievements as an art historian, writer, curator, mother and grandmother. He picked out women who were artists and his intellectual equals. But most of all they loved Jimmy.

I pray that those of us to whom Jim gave so much, will, in turn, be able to pass it on to those who come after us, and in the meantime, I would like to register my inexpressible gratitude for having known him. He will be terribly missed.

Adele Chatfield-Taylor is president of the American Academy in Rome, a center for independent study and advanced research in fine arts and humanities. She received an M.S. from Columbia University's School of Architecture, Planning, and Historic Preservation, where she was an adjunct assistant professor of architecture from 1976-1984.