

Model Stewardship

| BY RICHARD MOE |

ONE WEEKEND RECENTLY I FOUND MYSELF AT Shelburne Farms, near Burlington, Vermont—a very nice place to spend a summer day. Established in the late 19th century as the country home of William Seward Webb and his wife Lila Vanderbilt, the farm eventually encompassed 3,800 acres and won fame as a model agricultural enterprise, demonstrating innovative land-use practices and breeding prize horses. More than a century later, Shelburne Farms is still a busy and productive place. The sprawling main house is now a marvelously comfortable inn. Handsome barns and other outbuildings, most of them beautifully restored, house a wide range of educational programs that aim to instill a conservation ethic in students, educators, and the general public. Still in agricultural use, the land is protected by conservation easements, and the buildings and landscape (much of which was laid out under the guidance of Frederick Law Olmsted) constitute a national historic landmark district, designated in 2001. **LOOKING OUT OVER THE SERENE** and tidy Vermont vista of hills, fields, and trees, I could hardly have been farther removed from another place where I've spent a good deal of time recently: the devastated streets of New Orleans. A full year after Hurricane Katrina roared ashore and the levees gave way, parts of the Crescent City are anything but “serene and tidy.” To be sure, the leafy streets of the Garden District and the galleried blocks of the French Quarter look much as they did pre-Katrina, but in off-the-tourist-track historic districts such as Holy Cross and South Lakeview, residents are still struggling to put their homes and lives back together. Most of the bungalows, creole cottages, shotgun houses, and corner stores are not the sort that get full-color coverage in guidebooks and coffee-table volumes, but they are the real warp and weft of the architectural fabric. Equally important, they are home to people who love them and are working hard—with the help of local and national preservation groups and volunteers from all over the country—to make them livable again. **WHILE SHELBURNE FARMS AND NEW ORLEANS** might appear to have little in common, they're linked in a couple of significant ways. To begin with, both are essential to our understanding of who we are. How we lived; what we knew and believed and hoped for; how we shaped, and were shaped by, our environment—these and

other pieces of our national identity are embodied in the imposing barns of Vermont and the modest dwellings of New Orleans. They represent the wildly diverse *pluribus* out of which we're constantly struggling to create *unum*, and that makes them important chapters in the story of us. **IN ADDITION, BOTH PLACES OFFER** a compelling snapshot of preservation. They echo a sentiment expressed with quiet eloquence in *With Heritage So Rich*, the document that laid the foundation for the National Historic Preservation Act, whose 40th anniversary we commemorate this year: “If the preservation movement is to be successful . . . it must go beyond saving occasional historic houses and opening museums . . . It must do more than revere a few precious national shrines. It must attempt to give a sense of orientation to our society using structures and objects of the past to establish values of time and place.” That statement reminds us that preservation really matters when it enables the past to play a

THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS OF NEW ORLEANS WOULD MAKE A FASCINATING OPEN-AIR MUSEUM OF ARCHITECTURE—BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT THEY'RE MEANT TO BE. THESE HOUSES HAVE SHELTERED AND SHAPED GENERATIONS OF RESIDENTS, MOST OF WHOM JUST WANT TO GO HOME AGAIN.

vital role in the life of the present. **A CENTURY AGO, WILLIAM AND LILA WEBB** took enormous pride in Shelburne Farms as a model of stewardship of the land. Their spirit is still alive today, and so is the farm. The place would make a great museum, I'm sure—but it works even better as a living venue for teaching people about conservation. **IN THE SAME SENSE**, the historic districts of New Orleans would make a fascinating open-air museum of architecture—but that's not what they're meant to be. These houses have sheltered and shaped generations of residents, most of whom just want to go home again. They want their neighborhoods to be what they once were: familiar and alive. **FORTUNATELY, SOMEONE CARED ENOUGH** to keep Shelburne Farms intact and vibrant. The historic districts of New Orleans deserve the same kind of care. In Louisiana and Vermont and everywhere else, we need to keep our past—the mansions and the shotgun houses, the barns and the mills, the schools and the movie palaces—close at hand and full of life.

Richard Moe is President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.