

## **Aaron Vickers Wunsch: December 22, 1970 to September 20, 2024**

**By Daniel Bluestone, Barbara Clark Smith, Oliver Wunsch, and Jillian Galle**

Aaron Vickers Wunsch, one of the most highly regarded historic preservation educators and preservation advocates in the United States, passed away after a long illness on Friday, September 20, 2024, at his home, Ivy Lodge, in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. An award-winning professor in the Historic Preservation Department at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design, Wunsch inspired generations of students in American architectural and landscape history, public and community history, and neighborhood, site, and building documentation. Over the course of his career, Wunsch led the way in expanding historic preservation well beyond the stuffy confines of architectural connoisseurship. For Wunsch, historic buildings and places offered a boundless resource for strengthening the fabric of community, and for forging rich links between a critical understanding of heritage, contemporary politics, and visions for the future of society, culture, economy, and place.

Wunsch was born on December 22, 1970 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His commitment to historic preservation began early. At age 15, he started working for the Cambridge Historical Commission during the summer months. By the next summer, he had written the historic register nomination for a house on his street that piqued his interest: a Federal Style building that had been moved and reconstructed as a Greek Revival house. Before high school ended, Wunsch was leading the Commission's program to help low-income families in North Cambridge repaint their homes. Years exploring abandoned buildings with his mother and industrial landscapes with his father sparked his lifelong love of the built environment.

Educated at Haverford College, the University of Virginia, and the University of California-Berkeley, Wunsch made significant scholarly contributions to the understanding of American architecture, landscape, and urbanism. It was during his time as an undergraduate at Haverford College that Wunsch developed his fascination with the architecture and history of Philadelphia. In the years after graduation, Wunsch wrote reports and landmark nominations for numerous Philadelphia-area sites while working at the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) in Washington, DC, from Quaker meeting houses to cemeteries. The experience generated many of the scholarly interests that would last his entire career. His research on the Chester Waterside Station of the Philadelphia Electric Company led to his enduring interest in the relationship between architecture and electrification, which later became the basis of his book *Palazzos of Power: Central Stations of the Philadelphia Electric Company, 1900-1930*. The book explored the significance of the convergence of modern electrical systems, the City Beautiful Movement, and the deployment of monumental architecture to fend off public crusades for municipal ownership and regulation. Also at HABS, Wunsch researched and wrote the National Historic Landmark nomination for Philadelphia's Laurel Hill Cemetery, making it the first cemetery to receive National Landmark status in the United States. It was this project that led to another major branch of Wunsch's research on the rural cemetery movement in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. His extraordinary pathbreaking work on the development of Philadelphia's rural cemeteries has rooted these landscapes in a broader discussion of changing religious practices, the rise of sentimental domesticity, and the public and private real estate operations that delivered country villa neighborhoods, picturesque suburbs, and landscaped parks. Wunsch's major book on the subject will be published posthumously.

Wunsch integrated his scholarly commitments with fierce, tireless, and nimble advocacy for historic sites. Wunsch took stewardship seriously. He felt strongly that society owes it to our ancestors to treat heritage respectfully and owes it to future generations to responsibly maintain and pass on the best of what we have inherited. He led difficult campaigns for preservation against big developers, and large wealthy institutions (including at times his own employer, the University of Pennsylvania). He was especially deft at wielding his deep dives into archives and historical sources and close explorations of the design and form of buildings to incisively establish the value of historic places. His scholarship, passion, and wry humor parried the cynicism of anti-preservationists, including the historians-for-hire who often do sloppy research, the architects chasing commissions who denigrate existing structures, construct fallacious arguments about structural integrity, and then design mediocre buildings to go on the sites of delisted, unprotected, or demolished historic buildings. A champion of grassroots and community preservation, Wunsch frequently found himself at odds with certain actions of official preservation boards and commissions that unimaginatively bowed to the pressure of politics, money and the growth machine. Wunsch enthusiastically collaborated with local residents and organizations. Although they sometimes lost a battle, they formed lasting alliances that strengthened the principled commitment to stewardship in Philadelphia and beyond.

Wunsch long played a leadership role in the Vernacular Architecture Forum, which aims to expand the canon of American architecture and lay the basis for a more vibrant preservation movement. As part of his commitment to public history and preservation Wunsch helped organize major architectural history exhibitions for venues like the Library Company of Philadelphia as well as popular architectural history walking tours. He reveled in meeting with and lecturing to local history and preservation organizations and community groups. For his public work Wunsch received numerous awards and recognitions including the 2009 Preservation Virginia's Outstanding Domestic Project Award, the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia's 2015 Public Service Award for Preservation in the Public Interest, the University City Historical Society's Michael Hardy Preservation Initiative Award (2023), and the Henry J. Magaziner Award from the Philadelphia chapter of the American Institute of Architects (2023). He held fellowships at Harvard University's Dumbarton Oaks Research Center, the Winterthur Museum Garden and Library, The Library Company, the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies.

Aaron Wunsch was an extraordinary preservationist because he thoroughly understood how buildings were put together, how they stood up, and how they failed. Beyond his advocacy of preservation stood his willingness to simply roll up his sleeves and go to work saving buildings—churches, residences, industrial buildings that he loved and admired that just needed a little labor and ingenuity to stem their deterioration. It was not unusual to find him on the roofs of failing buildings, patching leaks to stabilize them and slow down deterioration in the years prior to full-scale restoration. He could also completely disassemble and rebuild a bicycle. He was a voracious collector of books, maps, lithographs, furniture, and other artifacts of materials culture. For him understanding how things work and what they mean was the first step towards stewarding places and he never shied away from the heavy lifting. His greatest joy was exploring abandoned buildings, dumpster diving, sword fighting and reading books with his son, now 16 years old, Elias.

Wunsch is survived by his wife Jillian Galle and his son Elias Galle Wunsch of Germantown, his father A. David Wunsch of Belmont, Massachusetts, his mother, Lydia Vickers of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and his brother, Oliver Wunsch, of Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is also survived by David Wunsch's wife, Mary Morgan and Lydia Vickers' partner, Mark White, and by his sister-in-law Rose Levine and nephew, Felix Wunsch. He is also survived by his father-in-law Pete Galle and his mother-in-law Janet Galle, of Bowdoinham, Maine, and brothers-in-laws Arek Galle of Jamestown, Rhode Island, and Jacob Galle of Bowdoinham, Maine and their families. He would not want us to forget the two wonderful cats that nursed him through his four-and-a-half year battle with cancer.

In lieu of flowers, Aaron requested that memorial donations be sent to one of three organizations: The Keeping Society of Philadelphia, The University of Pennsylvania's McNeil Center for Early American Studies, or the Natural Resources Defense Council. Written tribute to Aaron can be posted here: <https://www.kudoboard.com/boards/UnVACA6r>