
The ss United States is among the most egregious examples of endangered cultural heritage in its namesake nation today. Built in 1952 to ferry passengers and cargo between New York and Europe, she remains the fastest ocean liner ever constructed and the largest built in the United States. The arrival of commercial jet aircraft shortly after her completion ended the evolutionary trajectory for ships of this kind, and the United States was withdrawn from service in 1969. Though listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999, today the ship lies dormant at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. One of the most significant ocean liners ever constructed, today she is also one of the very last to have escaped the scrap heap.

This thesis puts forth a strategy to preserve the historic ss United States. It establishes guidelines for a public-private partnership that can protect the cultural heritage value of this historic structure and capitalize on its potential as a quality of life enhancement for a revitalized post-industrial waterfront ideally in New York, where she existed as part of the city’s cultural landscape. If arrangements ultimately cannot be made to bring the ship to New York, many of these guidelines are applicable towards her preservation in another port city. The thesis begins with an explanation of the vessel’s eminent historical significance, and moves on to explore case studies of large-scale maritime heritage conservation initiatives around the world to take stock of what has lead to the success or failure of these projects in terms of planning, funding and design.

Based on these considerations, private sector non-profit leadership can galvanize a public-private partnership that will set the stage for the vessel’s refurbishment to serve an appropriate new program that will be sensitively conceived to enjoy the support of the community it will serve. The result will be the safeguarding of cultural heritage in a way that provides financial support for its long-term stewardship, and constitutes a significant waterfront enhancement that honors America’s industrial and maritime heritage.