

Repositioning the Preservation Message...and the Messenger

Session at the National Preservation Conference in Buffalo, October 19, 2011

Panelists: Mary Means, Randy Mason, Elaine Carmichael

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Mary Means, Moderator. This session is inspired by the experience of three decades of working in place-based community development and preservation and caring very much about assuring a strong future for historic preservation. I'm known for my work in Main Street revitalization and in heritage areas. It is said that the Main Street Project mainstreamed preservation by giving it relevance in the eyes of business people. For the last twenty years, heritage areas, a regional approach to managing distinctive cultural landscapes, have widened the movement through discovering common ground with recreation, natural resources, education, interpretation, and economic development interests – each finding benefit through collaboration.

Yet, here we are more than half a century into the modern preservation movement – with success all around us -- a burgeoning number of historic districts and sites, people young and old wanting to live and work in walkable environments of authentic character (that would be older town centers and historic districts) – and yet we still have to justify our existence. Too often we use the language and tone of victims. What's wrong with us? Why haven't we firmly mainstreamed preservation?

Recently, I found a germ of insight in Michael Dobbins' excellent book, *Urban Design and People*. Mike headed the city of Atlanta's planning and urban design department, and has taught urban design at Georgia Tech for years. He calls the historic preservation movement "one of the parents of urban design," in that our push for guiding change via design guidelines reached beyond single buildings into whole districts. Dobbins goes on, however, to caution about preservation advocates and guidelines, specifically the Secretary of Interior's guidelines, "the federal bible for the administration of the movement," for they "tend to create an 'either-or' framework." He warns that "the 'either-or' character may spill into other [areas], risking setting up a kind of 'them-and-us' dynamic where the preservationists are the righteous and legitimate questioners are the unwashed." Hmmm. Grains of uncomfortable truth? Righteousness is not a quality most of us find attractive in people, is it?

My colleagues Elaine Carmichael and Randy Mason and I have been talking a lot about this lately, especially since our century is presenting new opportunities for preservation, if only we can be at tables of power as policies and decisions are being made.

Today, we propose a conversation with you, not because we have the answer, but because we think it is time to raise the question. How the session will work is that each of the three of us is making some short 5-7 minute provocative remarks, then we'll devote the rest of our time together to facilitated discussion. Notes are being taken by Kate Gilmore, so we can produce

a summary.

How can we reframe our story to better resonate with people, community leaders? How are we doing it now, how can we do it better. More than story, it is about the words we use.

First up is Randy Mason, a scholar, practitioner and teacher who is considered by many to be one of our field's original thinkers.

Following Randy is Elaine Carmichael, a planner and market economist whose passion is heritage sites and museums. She is considered a leader in the economic consequences of leisure time.

Randy Mason: summary of introduction

The problem we are facing up to in this session is two-fold: articulating the relevance of preservation to those who do not identify as preservationists, and articulating this in a way that is effective and has impact. In other words, the problem is “the message” and how we communicate “the message.” So the two points I'd like to put on the table have to do with (1) thinking more carefully about the message of preservation, and (2) reflecting on how we communicate it. (I realize this sounds almost like a religious sermon, but that seems somehow appropriate to a field that has always seen itself in quasi-religious terms, preaching a gospel of conservation, on a “crusade,” and so on.)

What's the message?

Do we have the wrong message? Or are we just being unclear about it? I think we've gotten in to bad habits regarding our message, and should make better efforts to communicate without fundamentally changing our ethics. The message of preservation has gotten very polarized. People outside the field regard preservationists as “the people who say no”—against change, against good design, against new development. “Preservationist” has become an epithet. The solution to this—or, the beginning of a solution—is for preservation professionals and advocates to embrace a more nuanced message, to admit that some situations call for more careful elaboration of problems and solutions than the black and white rhetoric of “don't tear it down” versus “tear it all down.” I recently participated in an event in Philadelphia titled “Gray Area” that was organized mostly by folks from the design and architecture fields; it celebrated the notion that there are many different versions or combinations of the preservation and design attitudes and that this is a good thing (the sort of thing that makes cities interesting places to live, work, visit). The Gray Area event was billed as a provocation, but it ended up being a discussion about how much room for agreement and collaboration exists between design and preservation. So there are partners waiting in other fields for a more nuanced, critical version of preservation thinking. (For more on the event, see <http://www.pcah.us/heritage/publications-research/gray-area-provocations-on-the-future-of-preservation/>)

The reality of the last generation or so is that the preservation field has changed dramatically. The concerns, theories, solutions, and partners common in preservation work these days are much broader.

Initiatives like Main Street, the embrace of cultural landscape ideas, the acknowledged importance of diversity, the idea that preservation constitutes a unique strategy for economic development—these all expanded historic preservation beyond its traditional home ground of historical and curatorial tasks. One lesson we can certainly draw from looking at our field historically—even over the last 25 years—is that our field will keep changing, and to guide that change we must think strategically about who we partner with, whose ideas we pay attention to, and how we can define success in ways other than saying “no” to change over and over again.

How to message?

How we talk about preservation matters. The word “preservation” has become part of the problem. It suggests an aversion to change, a desire to keep things as they are. The field has evolved well past this simple, knee-jerk version of preservation, yet the word still connotes a simplistic, “say no” attitude. Wouldn’t “conservation”—conservation of built heritage—be more accurate in tone and intention? It is worth noting that the rest of the world talks about historic preservation with the opposite terminology from what we use in the U.S.: here, we talk about our whole, broad field of caring for the inherited built environment as “preservation,” and term the technical, science/craft-based part of the enterprise “conservation.” In the rest of the world, “conservation” is the term applied to the whole enterprise, while “preservation” refers to the expert-driven, technical work on materials and buildings. I’m not sure exactly why our terms have developed this way. What is stopping us from talking about our field in the same way the rest of the world does? (“Conservation” is also more in line with environmental/natural-resource conservation, a field with which there is strong alignment, as well as an abiding sense that we in historic preservation struggle to catch up with their popularity and impact.)

In recent years, there are a few ways in which the historic preservation field (both in the US and internationally) has very adventurously explored new ways of crafting messages about the value of our work. They should be celebrated and explored with renewed vigor. One is the use of economics. As a social science that employs mathematical tools to understand human behavior, economics brings great value simply by provoking those of us in the cultural and humanistic fields about how we justify our work and explain the rationale for the public value we create. Economics, being the language of business, also lures us in to thinking about preservation as an enterprise that should think about resource use, and about profit and loss, and not only about our ethical, artistic and moralistic beliefs. I think the introduction of economic thinking in preservation has been very beneficial, even if it brings its own problems (no time for them here!). A second way of exploring new ways of communicating about historic preservation is just in its infancy—using digital media. Digital culture and technology have already begun revolutionizing some parts of the preservation field (how we record buildings and sites, for instance), but the depth of its impact has yet to be plumbed, I think, regarding more fundamental change in how the preservation field makes itself relevant to contemporary society. I won’t speculate on what these effects will be (hopefully a renewed attachment to place, not further estrangement from it), but I feel sure that the new modes of communication, social relation, business enterprise, etc. fomented by the ubiquity of digital technology in everyday life can revolutionize how preservation formulates and conveys its message.

Summary of Introduction: Elaine Van S. Carmichael, AICP

1. The Good News: Heritage preservation has become mainstream. People recognize that our communities' most beloved and distinctive spaces reflect historic preservationists' good works. Rehabbed structures command the highest rents with tenants often willing to tolerate inconveniences (e.g., lack of parking, small floor plates, no loading docks) for their character and cachet.
2. The Bad News: Although the 15 million sympathetic Americans NTHP's market analysis identifies, per Stephanie Meeks' presentation yesterday, sounds like a lot of people, it means more vis-à-vis the organization's potential membership than it does to rank and file preservationists working in communities around the country. Consider that:
 - Every day 20 million Americans shop at Walmart;
 - 20 percent of the households with 2 or more cars are individuals
 - 18 percent of Americans (\pm 55 million) identify as Tea Party supporters per a recent NYT poll and 4 percent (\pm 12 million) have given money and/or attended an event.
3. Despite all the good it's done, historic preservation has also alienated people, often via its moralistic and absolutist ways. The movement's detractors cite (sometimes apocryphal) stories about paint palettes or fence disputes but it boils down to differences in fundamental outlooks... about property rights, freedom of expression, being told what to do, capitalism, westward expansion, exceptionalism: what it means to be American. As a profession, we don't have to like it or think it's right, but we do need to acknowledge these conflicts and figure out a response that is more nuanced than the current approach.

Because the current approach is not nuanced and never has been: it's binary. Designated vs. Not Designated. In a District vs. Not in a District. Compliant with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards or Not. And while the absolutist "no ranking" approach made sense back in the day, insisting that all historic structures are equally worthy just seems silly and rigid: clearly they aren't and, as with everything, the reality involves many shades of grey.
4. HP has also allowed itself to become a weapon in the hands of NIMBYs, which harms us all. But our profession has also used HP as a vehicle to impose our judgment. HP should not be a back door route to design review. Nor should it be a back door route to zoning, especially when the impact is to thwart inclusionary zoning. Using HP to impede cities' efforts to provide more affordable housing just contributes to the sense that HP is a luxury and its practitioners are classists and elitists.

5. For HP to remain relevant, the emphasis needs to shift from preservation to placemaking. That also means shifting from preservation (or conservation) to stewardship: the management of change. That shift would force HP practitioners to take market perspectives into consideration; from a land use economics perspective, real estate isn't a fossil, it's a shark that must always keep moving—adapting and adjusting with changing demographics, market demand, etc.—to survive, let alone thrive.

If HP shifted to placemaking—beyond “partnerships” between the NTHP and other organizations—it would allow the profession to take off-site considerations on board as part of how qualifying structures are evaluated. HP could then participate in the community conversation about a structure's contributions to the fabric of the built environment, character, social/economic history, present day market realities, etc. That would help HP to make several key shifts in its relationship to the process... from talking about sustainability to seeking resilience, from focusing on facts to identifying stories that are meaningful to a given neighborhood or community, and from advocating for buildings to advocating for the relationship between buildings and people.

Clearly making this shift means abandoning the “no ranking” approach to assessing historic structures. Moreover, if the profession goes this route it will mean working hard to find ways to make the new criteria—whatever they are—objective and, especially, perceived as such. The rewards are huge: a seat at the table that addresses how places use distinctiveness to compete for economic activity and place-based investments, including where to live, visit, retire, open a business, hold a convention, etc.

6. Taking this approach also means changing the system from the NPS role and Secretary of the Interior standards down to the local level, including addressing the SPHO function.
7. All of this—especially abandoning the ranking approach, avoiding HP's use as a weapon and participating in placemaking-based strategies—takes on increasing salience as more and more buildings become eligible. For example, structures built in 1962—so eligible in just a few months—include the first Walmart, Kmart and Target stores. What should HP's response be?
8. In closing, placemaking offers HP a chance to stay relevant because it broadens the conversation from history to heritage, with all of the implications for addressing other aspects of material culture that implies: buildings, yes, but also place, settlement, economy and community over time, from the past to the present and into the future.

DISCUSSION

Katie McCullen, Kingston, NY: Elaine posed the questions: what should we do in order to recruit more people to the "cause" - maybe we don't want to be a "cause" any more.

Means: Preservation can be another form of economic development

Jeremy Wells: We are charged with valuing place- so a good place to start with is "whose values" are we looking at- those who use the place, architectural historians values, etc. We have a challenge- we need to understand those 15 million people- we need to understand their perspective and speak their language. Randy- what is higher education's role in allowing young preservationists to understand another perspective. Elaine- why isn't more work done to link value of place and age of historic buildings?

Mason: At UPenn, the problem you describe is not exactly what I encounter. Penn students want to know how to practice preservation-- but today they come to school aware the preservation is a means to an end, and not an end in and of itself. There are other benefits that preservation creates and we need to communicate this. We as educators are working to revise our curriculum in order to keep up with the changing field and with our students, who are working on outwardly focused, adventurous ideas about why preservation matters.

Carmichael: One of the topics that generates a lot of conflict is inclusionary zoning. The inclusionary zoning allows for a greater volume of development, which comes into conflict with preservation aesthetics. Real estate economics-- isn't studied as much because of who pays. Why isn't this being addressed more in academia? A gene to use numbers to tell a story doesn't seem to overlap with someone who has a gene for getting Ph.d in land use economics. Methodology and data is very imprecise at this point, so lack of knowledge and a lack of funding leads to a dearth of studies. This is the inherent flaw of impact analysis- in the wrong hands reports begin to lose plausibility.

Means: Plausibility is a big issue- sometimes the standard logic has to be rethought. An example: in tourism it's often pay-to-play: only those sites that advertise get included in tourism marketing. National and state parks are forbidden to advertise, but many heritage sites don't have the budget to do so. Yet it can be easily argued that they are an important reason people are visiting a state and staying overnight nearby, eating, drinking, shopping. Parks and heritage sites are generating revenue – room taxes, etc., but it is collected offsite. Reframing the logic would suggest the case for re-investing some of that revenue in the park or heritage site that generated it in the first place. Such a thought doesn't surface if one just focuses on the numbers.

Clark Schoettle: Disconnect within the movement may stem from the fact that preservation is placed within NPS, and there is no spokesperson within NPS- no champion at the agency level. Plus, NPS is a mismatch with where much of preservation is happening. Today, preservation is

more about community development and economic development. Successful American cities integrate preservation into their economic development plans. But this idea remains so hard to communicate to power brokers in cities where this has yet to happen. There is a disconnect somewhere. Maybe the field is too purist. We have been misplaced in the order in which decisions are made. I am also highly concerned that the National Trust has not gotten the message of how to reposition the movement- we need to focus on preservation as a method of community development rather than focus on a collection of important buildings. (Applause)

Deborah Williams, Buffalo: I agree. There is an elitism in the preservation movement- and preservationists want you to have the same reason to value a building as they do. If you don't, your opinion is not as valued. "ists"- like buildings for their architectural values, but in order to broaden the reach of the field we need to broaden definition of who our supporters are- they can have a different reason for valuing the building and still be in support of preservation.

David Snidal: Stephanie Meeks reported the research shows there are 15 million people that we think we can engage. Support is much broader than what we are able to capture. We need to reach people on their level.

Todd Brian: In my career I have found that the economic argument is relatively simple- have numbers. If you can make more money- you usually can argue in favor. In my career I have found that people rally around a preservation cause- but once the battle is over people disappear. The struggle is how to keep people engaged when the battle is over or when a battle hasn't occurred yet. Place-making is key, so why is the National Trust narrowing its focus to significant buildings again?

Snidal: The appreciation and acknowledgement of the importance of preservation is a given in cities like Charleston, but this is not the case across the country.

Means: The idea of place making- gets back to economic development. Understanding and even seeing "the place" as having inherent competitive value is one of the ways to get people to buy into preservation.

Mike Bowman, Mayor of small community in Nebraska: I worked on a recent project that separated the combined sewer system in tandem with a major renovation of the downtown. Is economic development related to historic preservation? My philosophy is absolutely. People are looking for an identity, a place to belong to- this happens by connecting to a community. People don't identify with a big box, and it is harder to identify with modern communities- it is the historic downtowns that people identify with. Successful restoration endeavors draw people- if you build it- they will come.

Means: The urban design field – and many savvy developers -- understand that people want to be in human-scaled environments like those preservationists have kept alive in many of our historic urban cores.

Anonymous: Is it a matter of asserting ourselves more? We know cities are coming back -- it is discussed all over the news- but preservation is never identified as one of the engines for revitalization. No preservationists are claiming that they played a key role in the revival, but we should be doing this!

Means: It is important to make a case for the economic benefits of preservation, but a much larger story is that of preservation of character and authenticity. Historic preservation has assured the future of places where people and businesses now want to be. Right now, we are missing this larger angle in the story we tell about preservation.

Carmichael: I want to return to a point brought up that "only because of preservation" did urban cores revitalize and note that saying that one can get a lot done without taking the credit for it- so it isn't only preservation, but preservation in tandem with new development that has driven the revitalization.

Anonymous: We need to look more closely- I believe that preservation has played a major role in all successes. We need to be more aggressive.

Means: Do we need to be more aggressive? That seems to be defensive, maybe we need to just re-frame the story.

Carolyn Ofsterby: I have renovated 5 buildings in downtown Springfield, Illinois and have repeatedly run into the issue of cost: preservation is expensive. It is only with the help of tax increment financing and tax credits that projects are possible. In my experience I have seen indifference and apathy but not opposition.

Greg Paxton (Maine Preservation): Visibility and economics- we have never had visibility for the field and never communicated well- even though we have done well. The National Trust now has Terry Richard who has done well with communications- his bent is toward mission and not economics, and we need to probe this issue. If we take on the issue of economics and continue for 50 years, it will no longer be the issue. I would hesitate to hitch our wagon to economics because it doesn't have any heart to it.

Carmichael: Economics is just one arrow in a quiver, which is necessary when speaking to a certain audience.

Mason: There is a multiplicity of goals in our field. We should be able to pursue multiple missions under the umbrella of preservation. We need to carry our own standard, articulating the need for historical memory, for curating rare buildings and places, but this shouldn't stop us from trying to have it all- economic development, beauty, environmental sustainability, etc.

Helen Johnson (Providence area): Keeping the cause going without a crisis is very important. We need to claim the movement to ensure that we are not overlooked by Congress. We need to let Congress know the role that preservation is playing so that we don't get funding or tax

credits taken away. We also need voters to acknowledge the benefit of preservation and lobby Congress on our behalf.

Means: Think about it- there are Main Streets in every part of the country, every Congressional district. This connection between Main Street programs and Congress in part led to the success of the program in expanding the relevance of historic preservation.

Jason Tish (Madison Historic Trust): To what degree is this a language issue? We talked about the difference between conservation and preservation. The word preservation and preservationist is so laden with negative connotations. I often talk about proposals using every word but preservation. I use "sense of place" or "sense of identity," but as soon as preservation comes up, the conversation re-focuses on architecture and putting things under glass. Is this a language issue or market issue?

Mason: It is not as simple as just changing the name of what we do. One idea that recently came up in a class discussion at Penn suggested maybe there will be no need for a preservation field in the future because everyone just does it without calling it that. Won't that be a success and not a failure? I'm not sure what the language solution is, but we need to be ok with meeting preservation goals without calling it that.

Janet Kreeger: I like this conversation of breaking down the structure of the name of preservation. We then need to be agile enough to speak with local officials- we can use language to relate to them and promoting a preservation agenda without ever using the word preservation exactly. We should also commandeer the accomplishments of others and align it with preservation.

Anonymous: We can re-claim the word preservation- it is our own behavior and attitude that will help us re-cast the tone of the movement. The movement should be less about "no" and more about solutions and community livability. We need to leave behind the black and white, righteous attitude. Right now the NPS is looking to revise the Secretary of Interior standards, and we need to be involved in this revision.

Means: If war is too important to be left to the generals, the Standards are too important to be left to the NPS.

Lisa Craig, Chief of Preservation in Annapolis: Main Street is a message that people understand. The Trust is wrong to think about jettisoning the Main Street program- it is vital to what we do. Main Street provides a message of relevance, visibility, and more important, that of preservation as place making.

Closing Remarks:

Mason: There is a productive analogy to be drawn between the field of historic preservation and the field of environmental conservation. One thing that needs closer study is the transition

in environmental conservation movement since the movement started with endangered, charismatic species like pandas and moved toward deeper, more meaningful engagement with ecosystems and systems ecology. They have taken a more holistic approach without abandoning their “charismatic” brand. Historic preservation needs to think more holistically as well. Because we don't want to lose true landmarks, capital "L", and we are not in the business of simply trading these for economic development. We want it all.

Carmichael: We need to broaden what is ok to express among heritage preservation advocates. I loved hearing about broadening the audience. Also, we might try not to engage people once the battle is over. We might just give it a rest when there is a no apparent crisis at the moment. Rather we need to use every single instance to play with how we express the message. During the quiet periods, we should focus on conversations with leadership about future directions and future societal and place making goals. The recession has been a platform for radical policy changes because no big development was going on. Quiet times are the time to reach out and expand influence.

Means: Alas, we are out of time. Thank you all for this lively conversation, to be continued in hallways and beyond.

Salient Themes

Our reporter, Kate Gilmore heard several threads throughout the conversation:

Tell the Whole Story: What is the story that we are telling in terms of the impact and value of historic preservation? We need to make sure that we are telling the whole story, which includes identifying historic preservation as a tool of economic development as well as a tool that protects culturally significant buildings. Once we are clear on what the whole story is we need to broadcast it in order to build our constituency.

Multiplicity within the Preservation Field: At this point in the field's development we need to reject some of the strict binaries that were necessary in order to clearly articulate the objectives of the nascent movement. Today, preservation should be able to embrace the diversity in the field and the multiple iterations the practice of preservation can take. Only by embracing this multiplicity will we begin to tell the full story of preservation's role in the creation of place. Preservation plays a key role in place making, and this needs to be clearly articulated and communicated to the broader public.

How to Talk About Preservation: The field must acknowledge the difficulty of semantics. Today the word "preservationist" is laden with negative connotations, yet preservation efforts are applauded when discussed as protecting neighborhood character or heritage protection- this challenge needs to be addressed head on.

Structure of Preservation: The field is at a point where the early structure may no longer make sense. Being so closely aligned with the National Park Service may hinder preservation's

development more than it helps. This relationship and the regulations that dictate the relationship (the Secretary of the Interior's standards) must be closely examined to ensure that they enhance preservations role.

Presenters:

Mary Means is a community planning and heritage development consultant whose public interest clients include cities, counties, states, heritage areas and nonprofit groups. Prior to consulting, Means was a vice president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation where she led the team that created the Main Street program.

Dr. Randall F. Mason is an Associate Professor of City & Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, where he heads the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation. Mason has written extensively on the history of preservation and on qualitative approaches to valuing heritage. He is considered one of preservation's leading voices.

Elaine Van S. Carmichael, AICP heads Economic Stewardship, Inc. She is a planner and market economist whose clients include many museums, heritage attractions, economic development groups and tourism agencies. Prior to forming EconStew, she was a principal at Economics Research Associates.

Reporter:

Kate Gilmore is completing a dual degree in Urban Planning and Historic Preservation at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. She received her B.A. from Oberlin College in 2007.