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TRUST NEWS

Young Preservationist Graham Coreil-Allen on Art, Place, and the "Urban Sublime"

Posted on: December 12th, 2013 by Aria Danaparamita



Through his project *New Public Sites*, Coreil-Allen invites participants to experience what he calls the urban sublime: "the aesthetic and profound sense of place in an urban space otherwise so often neglected."

Many complain that preservation is growing old and outdated. Graham Coreil-Allen is here to break that misperception. Age 31, born in Galveston, Texas before moving to Tampa, Fla., Graham is an artist currently based in Baltimore, Md. His mission: creative placemaking.

His method may not be the traditional kind of professional preservation. **Beyond the bureaucracies of landmarking or heritage listing, Graham has a more underground approach: art and social engagement.** He works primarily on [interactive, community-based projects](#) that seek to "activate" public spaces, like walking tours of urban spaces, where participants engage with the built environment and reflect on issues like urban planning, development, and -- of course -- preservation.

We chatted with him to learn more about his avant-garde style of preserving collective heritage.

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Photo courtesy Graham Coreil-Allen

Coreil-Allen leads a tour through Middle Branch Crossing in Baltimore.

What does preservation mean to you?

For me, preservation is promoting the timeless principles of pedestrian urbanism, protecting and celebrating surviving examples of meaningful sites, and fighting for the economic justice and cultural rights of all urban dwellers who continue to give these places invaluable meaning. Practicing inclusive heritage is a way to strengthen what Guthrie said best -- that this land was made for you and me.

How did you come to preservation? What/who inspired you?

When I was a kid growing up in the Tampa suburb of Temple Terrace, I always wondered why buildings downtown were denser and more authentic seeming than the detached, cookie cutter homes found in the sprawling cul-de-sacs where I lived. I went to the library and learned the history of how car-oriented planning, modernist redevelopment schemes, FHA loans and red-lining, the military industrial complex, and automation collectively reshaped the way Americans live, work, build, and destroy cities.

As a teenager I was obsessed with hating the suburbs and loving historic buildings. I was also the only person at that age I knew with a subscription to *Preservation* magazine.

Later I found my passion for historic buildings has as much to do with their immense pasts and hand-crafted details as their relationship to the street. Older buildings usually come right up to the edge of the sidewalk, thereby clearly defining [urban public space](#) -- the primary subject of my current work as an artist.

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The Fine Print

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Photo courtesy Graham Coreil-Allen

Coreil-Allen hands out maps on his Station North Avenue tour.

What do you think is the preservation community's perception of young preservationists?

Older preservationists have been very supportive of my creative approaches to exploring and activating the psychological, historical, and physical contours of public spaces through walking tours, mapping, videos, and language. Younger people more quickly grasp what I mean when I say my "interventionist" practice of Radical Pedestrianism is a form of socially engaged art. Nevertheless, I am always excited by with the level of enthusiasm routinely expressed by older folks at my events.

What are some of the more avant-garde or non-formal/traditional approaches have you've seen in preservation?

Whether you call it tactical, guerilla, DIY or participatory, there is a zeitgeist of people practicing interventionist urbanism for the common good. Some of my favorites include National Preservation Conference co-panelist [Howling Mob Society](#)'s unauthorized historical markers on the Great Railroad Strike of 1877; the crowdsourced platform for city improvement provided by [Neighborland](#); Elissa Blount-Moorhead and Rylee Eterginoso's *The Garden Party Series* at the [Weeksville Heritage Center](#); and [Braddock, Pa.](#) mayor John Fetterman's support for grassroots arts and community development.

Check out other socially engaged and interventionist projects at the [Creative Time Summit](#) and [Spontaneous Interventions](#).



Balto East Enlightened Elevation tour, October 2013.

Why do you do what you do?

Why do I use colorful lines to mark paths for wayward pedestrian, lead radical walking tours exploring our everyday public spaces, and make signs of the urban sublime? To reconnect people with places, create new meanings therein, and demand nothing less than a walkable utopia of layered wonder and care among cities, places, and people.

What do you think preservation's biggest opportunity is right now?

While I'm no expert on preservation, I do believe that the movement has an extraordinary opportunity help save and activate important sites by integrating the techniques of co-creation and creative placemaking currently being used by countless artists and doers across the globe.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation works to save America's historic places. [Join us today](#) to help protect the places that matter to you.



Aria Danaparamita

Aria Danaparamita, or Mita, is a contributor to the PreservationNation blog and recent graduate of Wesleyan University. She enjoys walks, coffee, and short stories. Follow her odd adventures on Twitter at @mitatweets.

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