

New Voices, New Approaches: Young Preservationists Speak Up

Posted on: January 7th, 2014 by Special Contributor | 2 Comments

By Aria Danaparamita

Not only are younger folks deeply passionate about historic preservation, they're pursuing it in radically creative ways. I discovered this at the 2013 National Preservation Conference which I attended as a National Trust intern. I met with many young preservationists in Indianapolis—students, community activists, emerging professionals. Curious as to how they view their role in preservation, I asked them to explain what preservation means to them and how they see themselves in the broader preservation community. I found out that they are already “in” preservation, except maybe they don't see what they do as “preservation” in the traditional sense. Here's what I heard:

On Significance: Community and Place-making

The attendees that I met with commented that perhaps the most remarkable difference between traditional preservation practice and what younger folks are doing is how the two groups define what makes a site significant. During the conference, “Diversity” Conversation Starter, Ray Rast of Gonzaga University called for embracing the human “stories” beyond the physical building. But according to the younger preservationists that I spoke to at the conference, *this is the starting point*. For many of them, preservation is not simply about saving old buildings. It's about saving communities and human stories.

Buildings that they see as important may be architecturally unattractive. But they are nevertheless critical hubs for the community, whether they were sites for political gatherings, social events, or art exhibitions.

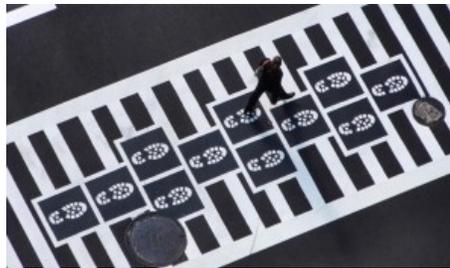
Sara Delgadillo, for example, a 28-year-old graduate student at the University of Southern California, says she entered preservation because it gave her an opportunity to “give back” to her community. Delgadillo wants to identify and help preserve sites that are important to the Latino community in the San Fernando Valley.

[Daniel Ronan](#) believes similarly. The recent graduate of the University of Oregon hopes to “translate this movement from preserving historic buildings to preserving historic places and experiences that are tangible on a daily basis to most people.”

Preservation for young people tends to be tied to social and economic justice, to what the building represents and how it has interacted with the community, urban development, immigration, climate change, and the other issues that face communities around the country.

On Methods: Breaking the Formal

Many people I spoke with noted that younger people are practicing preservation, except they may not call it that. Going beyond traditional methods we usually associate with historic preservation—conducting architectural surveys, nominating a site to the National Register—younger participants tend to engage through non-formal ways, generally through a more grassroots approach.



Hopscotch Crosswalk Colossus is an artist-designed project highlighting an intersection, a creative monument to the people who live in the Bromo Tower Arts & Entertainment District, Baltimore. | Credit: Graham Coreil-Allen

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Take for example Baltimore-based “public artist” [Graham Coreil-Allen](#). He refers to his work as “exploring and activating the psychological, historical, and physical contours of public spaces through walking tours, mapping, videos, and language.” His projects emphasize the historic significance of spaces but rely on methods such as public art, walking tours of urban spaces, and community parades.



Young people participate on a tour of eastern Baltimore, investigating the architectural and social dynamics that make mundane places like the Eastern Avenue Underpass fascinating sites. | Credit: Graham Coreil-Allen

Young preservationists have grown up in a digital world and are accustomed to engaging with the broader preservation audience through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and crowdsourcing funding platforms such as Kickstarter. Simply put, they communicate in different ways.

On Ideas: Out-thinking the Traditional

This new generation is also all about ingenuity. Young preservationists are trying out non-formal approaches, as discussed above, or simply thinking about a preservation issue from multiple perspectives. For example, it is important to work with the state historic preservation office or other institutionalized resources. However, the new wave of preservationists also tends to engage other, not so obvious, allies. That could mean rallying every local neighborhood person for a building “hug” or enlisting supporters from across the country or even internationally through the web.

The key is to constantly innovate. The preservationists that I spoke to at the conference emphasized that for them, preservation is more than just about the past; it’s thinking about the future. As Ronan says, “What I want to do is define ‘preservation’ as economic, social, and environmental *renewal*. Much more than just preserving old buildings, I am drawn to the complexity and the promise of our communities to *define their own progress* through a preservation lens.” Framing preservation in the context of environmental sustainability, for example, ensures that we are not only saving the past but nurturing our collective heritage and future.

Rather than viewing preservation as simply protecting a historic home, young preservationists see preservation as a “cause,” a “movement,” a means of effecting change. There is a bright future for preservation, especially if preservationists of all ages and experiences embrace these creative, non-formal approaches. Young people are not simply an “other” demographic. We’re excited and ready to engage. I, for one, am.

Aria Danaparamita is a former National Trust intern. She works for Voice of America, the Asian Pacific American Members of Congress History Project, and contributes to the [PreservationNation blog](#).

[Diversity, National Preservation Conference](#)

2 Responses

Laurie Matthews

January 8, 2014

Exciting to hear what the next generation is pursuing. It sounds like they’re interested in areas of preservation that do already exist, but are not within the mainstream – primarily cultural landscapes and ethnography. However, I find it interesting that no mention of either established discipline was mentioned.

Karima

January 10, 2014

Thanks for this great article. In a time where it can be easy to communicate without “connecting”, historic preservation offers an opportunity to “connect”, to reach out to others and talk about commonalities, not over the Internet, but in person, on the

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ground, in the environment. Historic preservation for young folks is not totally about preserving iconic buildings, halls, manors, and bridges. It's about discovering special places in your neighborhood and finding the people that know the stories of the old places, sharing stories, smiles and a sense of pride. It's about connecting to others through old places. I think that's what attracts young people to this field.

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