

CHICAGO CONSORTIUM FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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White paper



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Mel Rovner and Emily Talen

University of Chicago

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Summary

This White Paper lays out the purpose and proposed activities of the Chicago Consortium for Historic Preservation (CCHP). The purpose of CCHP is to connect preservation-aligned academics – researchers and instructors – in support of historic preservation in Chicago.

The goal is straightforward: to more effectively support the work of preservationists in Chicago, including *Preservation Chicago* and *Landmarks Illinois*, the City of Chicago's Historic Preservation Division, and the numerous neighborhood associations and community groups engaged in preservation efforts. Part of this support involves providing a space for critical reflection.

We propose that this support could be in two forms. First, through the establishment of a digital, web-based, searchable archive devoted to sharing research, scholarship, and pedagogical resources specific to Chicago; and second, through the establishment of an annual preservation forum devoted to scholarship, as well as critical reflection, on historic preservation work in Chicago.

Currently, no such consortium exists, even informally. Chicago-based academics who teach historic preservation do regularly engage with preservationists, but each institution pursues their own coursework and research efforts independently. Many of the courses being taught involve students doing field-based research on the architectural, cultural and historical significance of buildings and neighborhoods, but without any kind of connecting organizational alliance among universities it is difficult to understand where the research needs are and how students and faculty can be better positioned to meet the critical

surveying and research tasks of preservationists (who often work with minimal staff).

There is thus a need to bring academics together to better understand how they might better support the research needs of preservationists. Historic preservation is complex and involves a rich set of conundrums that are every day playing out in Chicago, sometimes dramatically. We hope to foster an advanced level of discourse in two ways: through the maintenance of a rich repository of resources and an annual convening that provides a venue for regular debate and discussion.

I. Survey Results

During the months of January and February, 2025, Melissa Rovner, post-doc at the University of Chicago, conducted interviews of academically-affiliated researchers and instructors in the Chicago region. The results of this survey are summarized below.

Methodology and Participant Profile

We interviewed 24 faculty (see Section IV below) across Chicagoland higher education institutions to examine current approaches to teaching and researching historic preservation, cultural heritage, and place-based history. Interviewees included both specialists within dedicated historic preservation programs at [SAIC](#) and [UIUC](#), and scholars from diverse disciplines whose work intersects with preservation concerns, such as those from programs in [Public History at Loyola](#), [History of Art & Architecture at DePaul](#), [Sociology & Anthropology at Lake Forest College](#), [Architecture History at IIT](#), and [Urban Planning at UIC](#). This disciplinary breadth demonstrates that historic preservation methodologies now extend well beyond their traditional boundaries, informing work in fields ranging from anthropology and art history to urban planning and GIS.

The summary below focuses specifically on key take-aways and challenges.

Preservation Pedagogy and Resource Challenges

Historic preservation pedagogy encompasses diverse approaches across Chicagoland institutions. Core coursework includes site and context documentation, materials and construction research, designing for adaptive

reuse, regulatory frameworks, and historic resource management—each with varying levels of community engagement. *Faculty consistently identified significant resource challenges affecting their teaching and research, particularly outdated digital infrastructure and limited access to archival materials on lesser-known histories, sites, buildings, and architects.*

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO, formerly IHPA) and National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) provide some digitized resources through the Historic Architectural and Archaeology Resources Geographic Information System ([HARGIS](#)). However, interviewees noted that *HARGIS is outdated, contains errors and omissions, and lacks sufficient financial and personnel resources for proper maintenance.* These observations raise broader questions about the sustainability of digital humanities infrastructure supporting historic preservation research and education.

Despite these challenges, preservation specialists are working to dismantle traditional silos between design and history in architecture schools through practice-based projects that connect students with endangered buildings and cultural landscapes. "[A Living Room for Bronzeville](#)," for example, represents a multifaceted approach that includes a book, exhibition, website, and short film devoted to uncovering the broader history of IIT as situated within Chicago's South Side. Nevertheless, scholars consistently reported *persistent barriers to accessing historical sites and buildings, limited interest in historic preservation among design students, and concerns about extractive research practices in underserved communities.*

Recognition of Preservation Evolution

Contemporary preservation practice in Chicago is evolving beyond physical conservation to encompass storytelling, intangible heritage, and community advocacy. Interviewees identified several tensions within the field, including the *perceived weaponization of historic preservation in YIMBY/NIMBY debates and outdated public conceptions that fail to recognize the field's evolution.* Many practitioners advocate for repositioning preservation as a partner to affordable housing initiatives and as a deterrent to climate change, challenging narratives that frame preservation as an obstacle to progress.

Recent methodological advances include a shift toward values-based assessment approaches that move beyond material integrity to consider cultural significance. Community-driven landmarking initiatives like the North Kenwood

Oakland Project demonstrate the field's potential when aligned with local priorities. Meanwhile, emerging scholarship on equity, sustainability, and racial justice is reshaping theoretical frameworks for preservation practice and education.

Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinary approaches offer promising pathways for expanding preservation's scope and impact in the Chicagoland region. Scholars in history, anthropology, and archival studies incorporate built environment analysis into their teaching through walking tours, neighborhood studies, and oral histories. Current research initiatives on Chicago's historic sites span diverse topics and methodologies: Documentation and preservation of Chicago's waterfront and Lake Shore Drive; Excavation of World's Columbian Exposition spaces and buried histories surrounding IIT; Archival support for Chicago women's artist collectives; Gathering oral histories of Latino Chicago; and Collaboration with local preservation commissions. However, they frequently note *challenges in conveying historical context when physical remains are absent, as with Cabrini Green and much of Chicago's public housing history.*

In addition, despite the many cross-disciplinary and innovative approaches, interviewees consistently identified a general *lack of visibility for preservation concerns among competing urban priorities like housing affordability and anti-gentrification initiatives*. They emphasized the importance of consulting multiple stakeholders in preservation planning and implementation to ensure that preservation efforts align with community needs and priorities.

Conclusion and Implications

Our survey results reveal a field in transition, with preservation education and practice in Chicagoland expanding beyond traditional architectural concerns to embrace cultural landscapes, intangible heritage, and collaborative community engagement. Digital resources and innovative pedagogical approaches offer promising avenues for documenting, interpreting, and sharing cultural heritage, but sustainability challenges and institutional barriers remain significant.

Our hope is that a collaborative (CCHP), devoted to the research and instruction side of Chicagoland historic preservation, might be one step toward addressing some of these challenges, specifically if it:

1. Facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration across traditional academic boundaries
2. Supports community-driven preservation initiatives through technical assistance and resource sharing
3. Addresses representation gaps by highlighting historically underrepresented communities, structures, and cultural landscapes
4. Improves access to preservation resources for students, faculty, practitioners, and community organizations

By responding to the specific needs and challenges identified by Chicagoland faculty and practitioners, a collaborative focused on resource sharing can help advance a more inclusive, responsive, and effective approach to historic preservation education and practice in the region.

II. Resource Sharing

A primary task of CCHP will be to establish mechanisms for sharing resources generated by researchers and instructors engaged in historic preservation work in Chicago. At the University of Chicago, we are already working to establish an online repository of resources that preservationists can tap to support their preservation efforts.

Motivation

Sharing resources is needed for several reasons. One practical reason is that when historic buildings are slated to be demolished, preservationists lack the time and resources to conduct the level of research needed to fully document a threatened building or neighborhood. Neighborhood organizations similarly lack the capacity to keep tabs on cultural and historic change and how preservation might be leveraged to advance neighborhood goals.

As in most cities, Chicago preservationists are in constant search of support for conducting basic research. There is a need to leverage university resources such as faculty-led student work on historic resource documentation. Sharing this work via a searchable digital archive will help to overcome duplicative efforts

(i.e., students researching the same properties or neighborhoods), as well as provide much needed information on where preservation research is lacking.

In addition, as preservation expands beyond its traditional focus on downtown regions and monumental civic and commercial buildings, resource-sharing initiatives become increasingly important for addressing long-standing biases in nomination and registration guidelines. [Preservation Chicago's annual list of seven most endangered](#) historic buildings, accompanied by public events and digital engagement opportunities, represents one approach to raising awareness about threatened resources. However, as noted by Patrick Grossi, Preservation Chicago's Director of Development and Policy, organizations often lack the resources to support digital humanities and mapping initiatives in sustainable or meaningful ways.

Several models demonstrate effective approaches to preservation resource sharing. The National Trust Conference in New Orleans featured a statistical analysis of National Register nominations using artificial intelligence to identify patterns related to underrepresented communities. Regionally, the [Unvarnished History Consortium](#), led by Chicagoland's Naper Settlement in collaboration with local historical societies, connects communities to previously marginalized people, places, and histories. On a larger scale, the Alabama [African American Civil Rights Heritage Sites Consortium](#) brings together 20 historically significant sites with support from the Smithsonian, National Park Service, and multiple universities including Columbia, Tuskegee, and UPenn. This consortium produces multimedia resources including the Stayed on Freedom Podcast, Voices of Alabama Videos, and [interactive Storymaps](#) that document site histories and preservation methods.

Digital Approaches

As faculty across disciplines engage with the built environment in their teaching, they confront the fundamental challenge of interpreting absence—how to convey historical significance when physical remains have been erased through urban renewal, neglect, or redevelopment. These pedagogical challenges mirror broader questions in preservation theory about representation, memory, and the limitations of material-focused approaches to heritage. Today's preservation field increasingly recognizes the potential of digital technologies to engage communities and visualize historic landscapes. As these conceptual frameworks evolve to embrace more inclusive approaches, the practical tools for implementing these values must also adapt.

Digital technologies offer promising avenues for enhancing preservation advocacy work in alignment with these expanded perspectives. Interviewees cited the [NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission's local designations website](#) as a model resource, providing parcel-specific access to nomination documents, formal designation materials, and photographs. [Van de Riet and Van de Riet](#) highlight how techniques such as photogrammetry and 3D modeling—increasingly common in architectural education—can document and virtually preserve culturally significant structures that have deteriorated or been demolished. [Andrew Hurley's work on "virtual cities"](#) and Yue Lin's work on [Ghost Neighborhoods](#) demonstrates how 3D modeling can depict streets and buildings as they once existed, allowing communities to visualize historic landscapes and interrogate proposed redevelopment schemes.

These findings suggest that a sustainable digital platform could transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, fostering dialogue between preservation specialists and scholars in adjacent fields whose methodological approaches might illuminate aspects of cultural heritage overlooked in conventional preservation frameworks. It would create space for community knowledge to inform academic discourse, potentially transforming how cultural significance is determined and documented. By highlighting historically underrepresented communities, structures, and cultural landscapes, this approach could help redress long-standing imbalances in preservation's attention to elite versus vernacular heritage. Moreover, by improving access to preservation resources, it could democratize the tools of heritage documentation and advocacy, allowing more diverse stakeholders to participate in determining what aspects of Chicago's built environment merit protection.

Academic-Community Collaborations

Academic institutions have developed various models for collaborating with communities and sharing preservation resources. The [San Antonio Mission Research Consortium](#) represents a multi-university partnership between the University of Texas campuses in San Antonio and Austin, University of New Mexico, University of Arizona, and Pomona College. This consortium advocates for mission preservation while providing a platform for sharing faculty and student research. The [North Carolina Preservation Consortium](#), developed through collaboration between North Carolina State University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina Central University, hosts conferences and workshops dedicated to preserving cultural heritage across libraries, archives, museums, and historic sites.

The [Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University](#) offers a particularly robust example of community engagement. Students and faculty work directly with communities across Tennessee, conducting fieldwork, preparing National Register nominations, developing heritage plans, and creating preservation guides. Their [public database of past collaborative projects](#) serves as both a resource for communities and a model for similar initiatives. These academic-community partnerships demonstrate how universities can contribute meaningfully to preservation practice while providing students with hands-on experience in the field.

In Chicago, there are pedagogical opportunities via community-driven preservation initiatives, some of which have expanded beyond traditional architectural concerns to encompass cultural landscapes and diverse heritage. The North Kenwood Oakland Project and the Black Metropolis-Bronzeville district demonstrate how community advocacy can shape landmark designations. Local organizations including DOCOMOMO, the Bronzeville Historical Society, and the Genealogical Society of Chicago continue to contribute to broadening preservation discourse and practice in the city. Recent scholarship reflects this evolution toward more inclusive approaches. Works like Erica Avrami's [*Preservation, Sustainability, and Equity*](#) (2022), [the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission's Equity Framework](#) (2021), and the [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's Equity Action Plan](#) (2022) document a field in transition. Preservation practice increasingly embraces cultural landscapes, intangible heritage, and collaborative community engagement—shifts that are reflected in Chicago's preservation landscape.

Historic preservation education in Chicago increasingly bridges traditional silos between design and history in architecture schools, through projects focused on adaptive reuse and urban infill. Faculty at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) use Chicago as a laboratory for this work, exemplified by Tom Leslie's students collaborating with architectural firms Pappageorge Haymes and WJE to reimagine futures for endangered Chicago School skyscrapers like the Consumers and Century buildings. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) trains students in Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation and National Register nomination development. Faculty member Charlie Pipal has engaged students with Preservation Chicago in Logan Square, documenting sites for the Chicago [Workers Cottage Initiative](#). These educational initiatives not only prepare students for professional practice but also contribute valuable documentation and research to Chicago's preservation community.

Resource sharing in historic preservation represents a critical strategy for addressing capacity limitations while expanding the field's scope to include more diverse histories and building types. Digital tools, academic-community partnerships, and innovative pedagogical approaches all contribute to this ecosystem of preservation resources.

Resource sharing is a way of advancing pedagogical economies of scale, perhaps by sharing methods for basic training on tasks such as Chicago Sanborn map retrieval and the steps involved in historical property research in Chicago. There might also be the possibility of facilitating cross-institutional student projects or shared assignments. Other topics that may be of interest include integration of new technologies in preservation education, such as the use of AI tools; field-based learning methods; experiential learning practices; and case studies involving Chicago community narratives and social histories.

III. Annual forum

We want to provide a forum to advance our understanding of the successes, failures and challenges of historic preservation in Chicago. Universities are the appropriate place to grapple with historic preservation's many complexities.

An annual forum would be an opportunity for critical reflection on preservation work, specific to Chicago. The forum would take on such themes as:

Preservation, affordability, and gentrification. How does affordability align with preservation? This is a complex, spatially-determinative topic with multiple angles. What is the latest research on loss of historic housing units and its impact on affordability—and in what neighborhoods? Where is preservation potentially obstructing affordability goals?

Preservation omissions. In Chicago, only 2% of National Register listed properties are within predominantly Latino Community Areas, only 11% in predominantly Black, and 66% in predominantly White - most of which are in the Near North and North sides, where incomes, as well as positive gentrification, have been highest. Why is this the case and what can be done to advance preservation work in under-resourced areas of Chicago?

IV. Participants and Discussion Topics

Participants

The following chart includes the 27 scholars/practitioners invited to join the Consortium and interview for our study, along with their respective titles and institutional affiliations, research and pedagogical areas of focus, and educational backgrounds.

Name	Title/Institution	Research & Pedagogical Focus	Educational Background
Josh Salzmann	Professor & History Chair, Northeastern	History of cities, Chicago waterfront	UIC, PhD History 2008
Lilia Fernandez	Professor of History, UIC	Latino Chicago, working-class history	PhD Ethnic Studies, UCSD 2005
Joanna Gardner-Hudgett	Associate Professor, History of Art DePaul	Women/feminist artist collectives of Chicago, archive accessioning	PhD Art History Rutgers 1997
Sarah Doherty	Associate Professor of History, North Park U	Public History, KKK Chicago, Oak Park/Lake Forest historical society work	PhD Public History Loyola 2012
Pamela Bannos	Professor of Instruction, Art, Theory, Practice at Northwestern	Lincoln Park Hidden Truths, Urban history from photographs	MFA Photography UIC 1987
Charlie Pipal	Adjunct Professor of Architecture/Preservation, SAIC	Immersive, place-based research/preservation, Olmsted's Riverside	AIA, MA Architecture UIUC 1990
Michelangelo Sabatino	Professor and Director of PhD in Architecture, IIT	Bronzeville, multimedia exhibition. Docomomo, architecture history	Ph.D. Fine Art, University of Toronto 2005
Rebecca Graff	Associate Professor of Anthropology Lake Forest College	Historical archeologist, city beyond the white city, teaching theory of HP	PhD Anthropology UChicago 2011

Kristin Jones	Adjunct Professor of Architecture, IIT	Studio Integra, designing for disaster relief post-fire in Hawaii	Architect, PhD IIT 2016
Brad Hunt	Professor and Chair of Public History, Loyola	Planning Chicago, Postwar City Planning, Urban History, Newberry	PhD UCB in 2000
Julia Bachrach	Former Chicago Park District Historian and Planning Supervisor	Chicago parks history, landscape architecture, historic preservation	M.S. Historic Preservation, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Carla Bruni	Independent Historic Preservation Consultant and Writer	Chicago architectural history, preservation advocacy, cultural heritage	M.S. Historic Preservation, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Tim Gilfoyle	Professor of History, Loyola University Chicago	American urban and social history, urban development, walking tours.	Ph.D. History, Columbia University
Nancy Webster	archivist, curator and adjunct professor of archival practices, Dominican	Highland Park Historical Society, Community archives, work with IL Digital Archive, CHM	MILS, Archives and History, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Margaret Rung	Professor of History, Roosevelt University	American economic and political history, Chicago history	Ph.D. History from Johns Hopkins University
Gunny Harboe	Founder and Principal of Harboe Architects	Architectural preservation, restoration of modernist buildings, Chicago landmarks	M.Arch from MIT, M.S. Historic Preservation from Columbia University
Nicholas Lowe	Professor. John H. Bryan Chair of Historic Preservation SAIC	Historic preservation, curatorial practice, exhibition design	Higher Diploma in Fine Art (Media), University College London
Anne Sullivan	Professor of Historic Preservation, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC)	Building conservation, materials conservation, preservation technology	M.S. Historic Preservation, Columbia University
Elizabeth Blasius	Independent Historic Preservation	Chicago architecture,	M.S. Historic Preservation, School of

	Consultant, Founding Partner at Preservation Futures	preservation advocacy, cultural heritage	the Art Institute of Chicago
Suzanne Germann	Director of Grants and Research, Landmarks Illinois	Teaching Intro to preservation at Loyola	M.S. Historic Preservation, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Tom Leslie	Professor in Architecture, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	Architectural history, technology in architecture (dt Chicago High rises), modern architecture	M.Arch from Columbia University
Kathryn Holliday	Professor, School of Architecture, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	Historic preservation, American architectural history, urban development	Ph.D. in Architecture from University of Texas at Austin
Patrick Grossi	Director of Development and Policy, Preservation Chicago	Former Director of Advocacy at the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia	MA Interdisciplinary Studies, Temple University
Winifred Curran	Professor, Geography & GIS De Paul	Gender, Gentrification, urban development, teaches historical geography of Chicago	PhD Clark University
Christopher Skrabale	Executive Director of Chicago Studies and Experiential Learning and Assistant Dean of the College, UChicago	Co-creation of respectful academic projects and partnerships that help the College learn from and with the communities of the city in which it makes its home.	Former Manager of Loyola University's service-learning program. MA in Religious Studies, Catholic University.
April Jackson	Associate Professor, Urban Planning and Policy, UIC	National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities. Advocacy for racially equitable, inclusive and just communities. Neighborhood level affordable housing strategies. Planning	PhD UIC Urban Planning and Policy

		and design methods.	
Patricia Mooney-Melvin	Associate Professor of History and Graduate Program Director at Loyola University Chicago	Public History,,community-based initiatives, place-based learning, teaches courses in public history, local history, Progressive Era history, and social welfare history.	PhD University of Cincinnati

Discussion topics

- Is there interest in a regular convening of academics in Chicago?
- How to best facilitate the sharing of resources, methodologies, and data?
We are proposing a digital map portal. Is this the best way to integrate our approaches to documenting building and neighborhood histories? What are best practices for combining institutional archives, community records, and oral histories?
- How to standardize data collection and documentation practices to ensure consistency? What guidelines should be used for conducting surveys related to historic buildings and neighborhoods?
- We do not envision a static collection – the repository will need ongoing updating. How will this be incentivized? One suggestion: members-only access to the repository; the requirement for membership is the sharing of materials