We Need to Talk (and to Listen)

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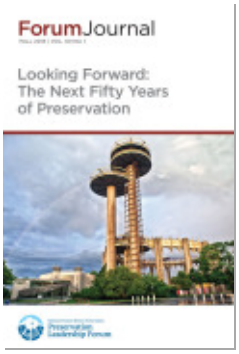

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Looking Forward: The Next Fifty Years of Preservation

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Preservation Leadership Forum

We Need to Talk (and to Listen)

THOMPSON M. MAYES

The historic preservation movement is in a time of reflection. The 50th anniversary of New York City's Landmarks Preservation Law was celebrated on April 19, 2015, and the 50th anniversary of the enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) is October 15, 2016. The half-century anniversaries of these two legal tools for preservation—one municipal, the other federal—creates an inflection point—a time to reflect about where we are and to try to see our way into the future.[1]

It is in this context that many institutions, including the National Trust; the University of Pennsylvania; the University of Massachusetts–Amherst; and Morven Park in Leesburg, Virginia; to name a few, have been bringing people together to talk about the present state—and the future—of this field we currently call historic preservation. Because of the series of essays I wrote on "Why Old Places Matter", I've been privileged to participate in several of these gatherings. Now I've been asked to share the main themes that emerged from the different discussions as a way of opening the conversation for readers of this issue of *Forum Journal*.

I've heard a few key words and phrases that I think will be helpful for readers to ponder as they read this issue: *inclusiveness, livability, sustainability, democratization, obstacles, complexity, partnerships*. From almost everyone, I've also gotten a strong sense that we need to talk—and to listen. Preservationists seem hungry not only to talk about the future of preservation and its role in our society, but also to push for change. On the one hand, there's the sense that preservation is under attack, whether from Ed Glaeser and his largely unreadable but highly influential book *Triumph of the City* to the many historic preservation commissions that face a backlash every time they try to designate a new historic district.

At the same time, pent up frustrations are spurring preservationists to demand solutions to longstanding issues within the field—to push for the reconsideration of the application of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards; to question the usefulness

of the idea of the "period of significance"; and to move past the obstacle of meeting the criteria of "integrity," which is viewed as an impediment to the designation of places significant to African-American, Hispanic, LGBTQ, Native American and other under-represented communities.

These anniversaries also present a rare, perhaps once-in-a-generation, chance to think much more openly and broadly. How would we envision the role of preservation 50 years from now? How can we open our present-day minds to a different future? How can we better utilize old places to fulfill fundamental human needs? What can we do to open people's eyes to the potential of older and historic places? Clearly we need—and want—not only to talk but to create a more effective and meaningful preservation movement.

In May 2015, through the generosity of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the National Trust convened a group of people at Kykuit, in Pocantico Hills, New York, to talk—while we listened. The invitees included a writer and journalist, affordable housing advocate, restaurateur, developer, architect, artist, academics, developers of artists' spaces, and advocates for public housing, among others. The idea was to hear from people who work with old places but who do not necessarily consider themselves to be professional preservationists.

From the moment the participants met, they shared a palpable sense of excitement about interacting with each other and talking about these issues—and they became enthusiastic about the possibilities inherent in preservation. Rather than summarize the ideas, I'd like to share quotes from the participants that capture many of the key concepts:

> "Preservation can make people's lives richer—it is a way to tell stories and resonate at the experiential level." Nathaniel Popkin, journalist, author, editor, film writer, historian and critic

> "As for users, people love the old buildings." Nadine Maleh, executive director, Institute for Public Architecture

> "We always do direct market surveys before starting a new project. When we ask, 'Do you want a new building or an old building?, people invariably choose 'old building,' in part

A May 2015 meeting, convened by the National Trust at Kykuit in New York, enabled Trust staff to hear the perspectives of people who work with old places but do not necessarily consider themselves to be preservationists. These kinds of discussions can open the preservation field to new insights and options.

because artists derive inspiration from older buildings." Greg Handberg, Artspace, Inc.

"There's a tension between preserving the architectural landscape and preserving history/memory. Are we dealing with the future or grappling with the past?" Saima Akhtar, architect and designer, postdoctoral fellow, Forum for Transregional Studies & Max Planck Institute

"'Historic preservation' is limiting. When people hear 'preservation,' they think 'preserving in time,' not 'creating a livable space.' I never use 'the P-word' when I talk to potential clients." Katie Rispoli, executive director, We Are the Next

"Bringing different stakeholders into the conversation is really important. The work you are all doing has changed, but the perception of preservation hasn't." Adam Markham, deputy director, Climate and Energy Program, Union of Concerned Scientists

"When we decide to preserve something, we are saying that thing is important. We are saying this building with the plaque is important, but other stuff is not important. We need to democratize that a bit." Nadine Maleh, executive director, Institute for Public Architecture

"By and large, when it comes to determining 'historic significance,' preservation agencies seem to find grand buildings

When historic designation guidelines favor places that have maintained their integrity, other places that truly matter to people are inevitably discounted—such as the Dew Drop Inn in New Orleans, a much-altered but longtime favorite local gathering place. Resources meaningful to underrepresented communities are especially affected by this.

PHOTO BY INFROGMATION OF NEW ORLEANS UNDER CREATIVE COMMONS

designed by and for architects to be significant, rather than a building or place that has made a significant contribution to the life of the community." Greg Handberg, senior vice president of properties, ArtSpace

"That's what makes us unique. Other social justice organizations could, but we use the emotional and spiritual power of place to encourage active citizen engagement." Sarah Pharaon, senior director, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience

"These buildings are cool, fun to be in. When we talk about buildings, we're really talking about the experience of buildings. If we focus on preserving that instead, it'd be more useful. How does it feel to walk in, to sit in this space?" Michael Babin, founder, Neighborhood Restaurant Group, Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food & Agriculture

"The challenge is crafting standards that are more inclusive, that take into account economic issues. The process needs to be more open, and more cognizant of the fact that standards may have to bend if some buildings are going to continue to exist." Michael Grote, director of building programs, Alembic Community Development

"It should feel like a tool rather than an obstacle." Nathaniel Popkin, journalist, author, editor, film writer, historian and critic "Preservation makes my job easier. People are looking for significance, or more to the point, fear their lack of significance. People want to feel unique, a sense of connection. Old places

make people feel like they are part of something bigger, makes them feel less mortal." Drew Mitchell, founder and president, Fathom Creative

"Preservation is about distortions in time. When something is preserved 'out of time' that distortion brings out an emotion in us. When something is brought out of its time, that gives it a jarring quality that we can sense." Catie Newell, architect, principal, Alibi Studio

"There are stewards of property in neighborhoods all across America. There are flowers in all these neighborhoods. How do you connect those stories to each other and to the preservation movement?" Brad White, Alphawood Foundation; member, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation

"There is a word that is implicit in our conversations that nobody's said, and that is pleasure. If we're doing our jobs right, our work elicits pleasure. That jarring expectation, that makes us perceptually awake, is another kind of pleasure." Jamie Kalven, The Invisible Institute

The ideas embedded in these quotes include both the stubborn limitations and the exciting possibilities of preservation:

- People love old buildings, but preservation is viewed in a limited way.
- Preservation regulation is necessary to save places, but is viewed as an obstacle to creative rehabilitation.
- Preservation is complex, and yet needs more subtle and flexible tools.
- Preservation has been about rich white people, but new technology makes it more democratic.
- Preservation is perceived as stodgy, but can jar us into awareness and give us pleasure.

Following the Kykuit meeting, in June 2015 the University of Massachusetts–Amherst and the University of Pennsylvania hosted a meeting of people who are contributing to a book tentatively

titled *Fifty Ideas for the Next Fifty Years*.[2] The participants discussed present perceptions of preservation and reviewed the ideas proposed for the book. Many of the themes were consistent with those cited at the Kykuit meeting—the need for increased inclusiveness, growing democratization enabled by new technology, the limited perceptions of preservation today, and the possibility of a broader, more vibrant notion of preservation. And perhaps because this was primarily a gathering of academics, participants highlighted the need to research, test, measure and study the goals and achievements of historic preservation.

I was struck by how the ideas discussed in both of these meetings corresponded with the draft statement of values developed at Morven Park, near Leesburg, Virginia, as part of its series of workshops on the future of preservation, led by Jana Shafagoj, Morven Park's director of preservation and education. During the first workshop held in June 2014, with a keynote address by Ned Kaufman, author of *Race, Place and Story*, participants identified the following core values to "guide the field of preservation."

Identity. Preservation of authentic natural and manmade resources allows people to recognize and experience elements of their environment that can contribute to or expand their sense of self, community and nation.

Responsibility. Preservation promotes a collective responsibility for the condition of our shared environment that balances a respect for the past with the needs of the present and an anticipation of the future.

Inclusiveness. Preservation recognizes the broad spectrum of cultures, experiences and stories that are embodied within the physical environment of our communities and strives to identify, document and protect those resources.

Civic Engagement. Collaboration, innovation, advocacy and collective action within local communities are necessary to support and guide the protection of our shared cultural resources. Preservation is only successful when resulting from, and supported by, an engaged citizenry.

The Morven Park draft values statement and the ideas raised at Kykuit and at Amherst share overlapping themes:

- Preservation is about meeting deep human needs of identity,

Morven Park in Leesburg, Virginia, preserves for the public an 18th-century mansion and gardens. But it is also looking to the future, by hosting a series of workshops concerned with "reviewing the success of current preservation practices, identifying 21st-century challenges, and developing innovative solutions to advance the field of historic preservation."

PHOTO COURTESY OF MORVEN PARK

belonging and memory, not only about architecture, and we should be rethinking our tools to match these needs.

- Preservation provides an opportunity for social justice in the recognition of under-acknowledged histories, identities and stories.
- Preservation is likely to be much more democratic in the future, with people determining the places that matter to them and how they should be protected; the field should embrace and foster the democratization.

All these concepts point to a broader vision for the role of older and historic places in American society. At the end of my exploration of why old places matter to people, I came to the surprising realization that old places were even more important to people than I, as a lifelong dedicated preservationist, had thought that they were. Listening to participants in these meetings talk about the power and challenges of old places excited me about the potential of old places to unlock possibilities in people, and in our society.

I hope that these quotes and values statements will spur more thought and discussion. As you read the essays in this issue of *Forum Journal*, and as we try to envision the next 50 years, I encourage all readers of this journal to participate in discussions and take advantage of this rare national consideration of the role of historic preservation in our national life. **FJ**

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1 See also information from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the National Park Service on PreservationFifty, at http://preservation50.org/about/nhpa-history/, and from the coalition of individuals and organizations participating in Landmarks50 in New York at http://www.nyclandmarks50.org/.

2 Edited by Max Page and to be published by the University of Massachusetts Press, anticipated in 2016.

VIDEO
Click here for a playlist of videos featuring Kykuit participants.