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Preserving Healing: Understanding Historic Preservation Through the Lens of Restorative Justice in Portland, Oregon

by
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Argument

In our modern era, we are able to appreciate the scope of architecture through the historical impacts that it has left behind. As innovation and technology advanced, so too did our structures and designs in our built environments. Our species began to build homes, community gathering spaces, places of worship, work and industry. We strove for bigger, better and more as we understood the physical aspects of material and building technique. To this day, we can still experience the awe of walking into old cathedrals and churches that were made centuries ago, or stand beside the vast and massive pyramids and temples in Egypt. Many of these structures still remain due to the practice of Historical Preservation/Restoration. This practice allows us to maintain a connection to our past and ancestors, as well as allow us to create our own sense of place within these structures and the communities they reside in. This art of place making revolving around pre-existing structures offers a unique perspective on the passage of time and our relationship to the built environment as we move along a linear track in history. This essay will explore how the practice of historical preservation can exist in modern day in an restorative justice manner that provides empowerment and meaning to humanity and communities as we develop connection with our built environments.

Preservation allows for us to maintain our connection to history through our ability to physically connect with space. We can see our progression in humanity over time and reflect on the growth in our values and understanding of one another. This practice should act as the cornerstone in storytelling, and work to include space for all people groups and communities to share their stories. It is our duty as a society to strive towards healing and prevention, rather than erasure. Portland was created from the hard work and labors of Black communities, and it must not be forgotten in an effort to lift up
others. Moving forward, preservation must exist to serve all, and include the most vulnerable members of our society. Restorative justice will not come overnight, but progress towards inclusion and equity will only serve to benefit everyone within the community.

Definition

Restorative Justice as it applies to this paper is identified as a process of inclusion for the Black community of Portland by working to preserve the Black community's heritage, culture, and story by means of restructuring systemic racism practices in Historic Preservation within the city. This paper will focus only on the case of the Black community of Albina in Portland, but in no way does it mean to ignore or discredit the story of other communities within the city who have suffered in the past and present. The goal of working towards this version of restorative justice is to begin the process of restructuring preservation practices in how the city of Portland tells the story of its communities by honoring that, “History is the story we tell ourselves about who belongs.”¹ This focus aims to shed light on previous indecencies that has led to the removal of people groups and communities in the city, in an effort to promote equitable and inclusivity focused changes in the practice.

Historic preservation is a “method used in rebuilding buildings and structures with historically accurate materials to achieve historical authenticity in keeping with a particular time period or event.”² It can be traced back to the ancient Roman Empire, in an effort to conserve the Tarentum region and its built heritage during Roman expansion of the area. Rules and regulations were strict, with a monetary punishment should anyone actively work to change these

structures. “No person within the town…shall unroof or dismantle any house without a decree of the senate, unless he shall intend to restore such house to its former condition. Any person acting in violation of this prohibition shall be liable to pay…a sum of money equivalent to the value of said house.” The United States in 1966 created the National Historic Preservation Act that was signed into law with federal and state powers being put in charge of what structures are valid to be preserved as well as how structures must be maintained. These practices have been used in Portland in the past to promote racist practices such as red lining, gentrification, and removal of wealth accumulation through property for Black families and communities.

**Case Study**

Portland, Oregon is the nation's whitest city, and is no stranger to gentrification practices. In the 2017 documentary *Priced Out*, we follow Nikki Williams through her own first hand experience with gentrification in the Northeast Albina neighborhood, Portland’s historic black community (Figure 1). Albina has experienced years of systemic racism, and residents fell victim to removal at the hands of the government forcing change on the community through imminent domain, urban renewal, subprime loans and redlining practices. (Figure 2) The community was slowly squeezed out of the area, a PSU Masters of Urban and Regional Planning workshop report in 1990 claims, “Presently six potential Historic Conservation Districts are identified in the Albina Study area. Five were identified in a I-5 planning study and one was identified during the Central City Plan process in 1988. An additional 32 sites in the Albina community are identified as ‘undesignated ensembles.’ These are potential ensembles, identified in the Historic Resources Inventory. To date, however, none of these districts or ensembles

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have been formally adopted by the city council.”

In 1962, the I-5 project cut through the Albina neighborhood. This was done through the city legally taking property by force through eminent domain, with the promise of rebuilding more housing for the residents that were displaced in the community. This promise was never upheld. Instead the city focused on removing more neighborhoods and housing than was needed to build the interstate, effectively cutting off the remaining residents from the city and forcing many to leave the area entirely. (Figure 3) Today, Albina now hosts multiple protected Historic Districts: Irvington, Elliot, Woodlawn, Piedmont, and Mississippi. While some may speak proudly of living in a historic neighborhood, Nikki mocks the fact that she lives in Historic Mississippi Avenue. “What I wanted to see happen is people give a damn about the community that was there. Not push everybody the hell out, then come in, build it up, and say ‘Now they can’t come back.’.”

These types of neighborhood practices are prime examples of where Historic Preservation has gone wrong, and the opportunity that cities like Portland have to learn from previous mistakes, and reinvest in communities and protect the people and the stories connected to the space.

Earning a spot on the exclusive historic list in Oregon is a difficult task for many individuals looking to save their structure, especially in Black communities. While the only outward change that may appear is the building or site receiving a plaque to display proudly, there are many steps that the owner must take prior to being added to the list. The owner must fill out a Historic Resource Record (HRR) form, which is intended to cover all manner of detail of

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the structure and its significance. Details such as date built, exterior and interior features, photos, architectural style, additions to the structure, and anything that is seen as noteworthy in the site's history are all required. The research should be thorough, with excerpts from newspapers, city directories, census data, and deeds to name a few of the avenues that must be explored to fully tell the story of the site. Many structures will have important histories associated with the architect or with someone who owned the building in the past, which will further add to the research required to better understand how this person contributed to society in an important way at either a local or national level. Many of the preserved sites in Portland were white owned, white built, and preserved a culture of higher class wealth. These buildings must also meet an integrity standard to be considered, therefore excluding structures that were unable to be “properly maintained” through time, a trend that was common in the Black community due to limited resources and racist ordinances that prevented Black families from permitting and maintaining structures to the same degree as other residents were able to. Once the HRR form is completed, the form and structure is reviewed by the State Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation (SACHP), and upon approval by the committee the site will be listed on the National Register. If the site is not approved, the owner may use two revisions in an attempt to pass the SACHP’s approval.

Once the structure is approved, the landowner is able to enjoy the perks of tax incentives, grant eligibility, building code leniencies, and consideration in planning for federal projects in

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However, there are downsides to being on the registry. As mentioned, the owner may enjoy leniency on the Oregon Structural Specialty Codes (OSSC), which works alongside permitting to ensure safe building practices and land use ordinances within the state limits. Each county also has their own version of these codes that add specific rules and requirements to sites within the city limits. Being added to the registry adds an additional set of rules to the landowners plate, known as the Standards and Guidelines for Preservation, Rehabilitation, Restoration, & Reconstruction. This document is meant to “provide guidance to historic building owners and building managers, preservation consultants, architects, contractors, and project reviewers prior to beginning work.” These rules and regulations include, but are not limited to, retention of material look and feel, processes for repair in lieu of replacement, and reconstruction of features per original documentation and processes. In short, land owners must now go to the state for permission by means of permitting, and provide proof of material intent prior to any work, be it upkeep or restorative practice, to ensure the building remains authentic to its original form. This adds another barrier for the Black community, since “Doing the permitting process was a horror story for Black folks. We were taught to never get permits.” Permitting is time consuming and requires fees that can quickly add to the cost of the project. Owners may also need to hire third party contractors to handle the documentation and building, which is costly due to specific materials and methods that are only practiced by more skilled contractors that can charge a higher rate. These regulations further alienate communities that have an

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unpleasant history with policy makers or have limited access to financial resources to properly restore and maintain the structures.

Another potential downside to this practice is the formation of historic neighborhood districts. Some may see these neighborhoods as adding value to their homes, while others, like Nikki Williams, may feel the strain of being included in this new system. One of Portland’s most recognizable historic districts is the Alphabet district. This district sits just north of downtown, and is cited “as the birthplace of important local institutions” and “as a residential district in which a large number of locally prominent merchants, professionals, civic leaders, and politicians lived.”\(^\text{11}\) This neighborhood is seen as an urban utopia to many, with high walkability, transit, shops, food, and much more. The average single family home in the area can be listed between $750,000 and $1.5 million depending on size.\(^\text{12}\) This area has effectively been partitioned off during the 1900’s for the wealthier members of the city thanks to “A number of important local institutions [were] established in the privileged Alphabet District to provide for the betterment of the health, mind, and spirit of its upper-class citizens.”\(^\text{13}\) Upon being claimed as a historic district these areas are now protected from having apartment complexes built, new development from occurring without majority vote, and can preserve a neighborhood character through the land use protections that occur. These neighborhoods are important to preserve, but the practice of preservation pushes many people groups aside due to the increase in property taxes and values that minority groups may be victims to, as well as removes the chance for communities to come into this space due to lack of housing and development in the area. This

further exploits the needs of the Black community that was promised replacement housing during the I-5 neighborhood destruction. “Historic preservation is a funny lopsided thing. It pretty much knocks certain people out of the box while allowing a lot of growth and prosperity for others.”

There is however a change taking place within the city in regards to working to include communities who have previously been excluded. Portland is home to the Historic Resource Code Project (HRCP), which is dedicated to practicing inclusivity in preservation by focusing on;

“-Meaningful and tangible connections to the past to enhance the lived experiences of current and future community members.
-Extending the useful life of existing buildings retains embodied carbon and reduces landfill waste.
-Historic resources provide opportunities to acknowledge, address and reverse past harms.
-The broad community should be engaged in the identification and designation of historic resources, with underrepresented histories prioritized for protection.
-Historic places must continually evolve to meet the changing needs of Portlanders.”

This new structure opens doors for marginalized communities to restore their history and work to heal prior trauma that may have been inflicted upon them. One of the most

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common examples of these traumas is neighborhood gentrification dressed up as urban renewal. While the goal of developers and planners is to make the space more liveable and invite new tax payers to live in the city through urban renewal, it’s often at the cost of low income or Black communities that are forced out by large cost of living spikes and developers working with cities to claim eminent domain, where the government legally acquires land without the current owner’s consent in the act of the greater good. Practices such as redlining and blight ordinances were used to control the Black community and prevent the building of wealth. “Blight was so non-specific that if you had a loose step it could be labeled as blighted. [Home owners] could have it seized by the city. You can’t make money on a home that’s been seized. Any kind of ways that the Black community was trying to develop some wealth was taken down and destroyed.”\textsuperscript{16} An example of this is explored in Root Shocked, a documentary about Cleo Davis, a local artist and activist, and his family’s stolen opportunity. His grandmother had purchased a lot in the Albina neighborhood with a house and 7 unit apartment complex that would generate $2.5 million for the family in investment. The city immediately declared a blight ordinance on the site, and demolished the apartment units after a 2 year battle. Cleo has since reclaimed part of the site through moving the historic Mayo house, which was set to be demolished, onto the site where the apartment complex sat. (Figure 4) “They envision the Mayo House as embodying a multipurpose future through the creation of an “ARTchives”– a hub for African American arts, history, and culture…”It will be an

extraction and extension of the narrative story and artwork of the oppressed, exploited, and innovative history of Blacks in Portland.’ says Davis.”

Groups such as Albina Vision Trust are also working backwards in an effort to restore the history of the community and base their projects around the core values:

• Honor what was, what happened, and what could be

• Heal ourselves and our communities

• Reconnect to the river

• Build a place to live, work, and play

• Integrate arts in the process and product

• Be intentionally remarkable”

This project is a prime example of where preservation matters most, and where future projects need to align focus. As Cleo Davis said in a panel discussion on the future of preservation, “Place and space preserve culture.” These projects are working to restore the history and tell the stories of the community that was once integral to Portland, without the removal of nuance. It is not a matter of us vs. them, but instead is focused on the we aspects of community growth and development. In order to move forward with preservation, we as a collective must change our understanding of what it means to preserve and whose responsibility it is to do so. “When you buy old buildings, you’re a preservationist. Not only are you preserving that building, you’re preserving the building

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for your own preservation.”20 Preservation should no longer focus on a narrow set of history and stories, nor should it exclude previous and current communities from benefiting from a culture being saved and shared. This process does not need to remove anyone's stories in an effort to preserve another, rather they should work to exist side by side. Preservation must relinquish the current gatekeeping methods, such as having a panel to decide which story is more important, and where leniencies exist in the system. Instead, the decision must be made by the members of the community, because “Historic preservation does not have a future unless it’s supported by grass roots.”21 It should be the responsibility of the Nation to preserve our history, through more accessible access to funding for preservation and protected salaried trades people to maintain and restore the sites per the historic blueprints and methods.

**Conclusion**

Historic preservation is a tool that is meant to connect people and communities to the past, and allow for responsive growth and outlooks for future generations. Moving forward, preservation should focus on community based decisions, and allow space for all people groups to maintain their stories. Committees shall be elected by the neighborhood that the preservation is occurring in, and everyone should be able to voice their concerns or tell their stories in regards to the site. These members will also work to meet the needs of the growing community through development agreements that preserve a neighborhood while in turn building necessary housing and services for the new and existing community members. The art of preservation should also be given freedoms to

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the community rather than sticking to strict rules and regulations of how something must be preserved. There are many instances across the world where the practice of preserving and rebuilding is seen as a community building tradition, with the rules set by the people who are governing over the space. The community should not be solely responsible for funding the preservation, as it should be seen that all stories are an integral part of our Nation's building and as such should receive balanced funding and resources moving forward. These small changes could help to begin the process of healing generational trauma for communities, especially in urban settings where many people have felt pushed out and unwelcomed. Preserving history does not mean there can be no progress, rather preserving history should be where progress is made.
Figure 1: Map of Albina neighborhood in Portland OR 1874

Figure 2: Map of Portland Neighborhood Redline

Figure 3: Overview of ODOT showing I-5 project as a light pink line (left), vs. the actual line of impact (right)²⁴

Figure 4: Mayo House in one of its original locations

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