

# How can historic preservation become more relevant for all people?

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## **Introduction**

As students in a Masters in Urban and Regional Planning degree program we worked with a client for our final workshop (thesis) project to create a Plan for Historic Preservation. While researching the current state of the field in order to be able to contextualize our client's work, we discovered that the field of historic preservation has an identity crisis both in its external perception and internal structures. The experts we spoke with projected with clarity what they see as the inclusive future of the field. Yet, when pressed to provide examples of cities or states currently building a truly diverse story of their heritage, they had little to offer us. This white paper explains some reasons why, and is intended for practitioners—both planners and historic preservation experts.

## **Problem**

The field's narrow architectural and historical priorities on the national level, top-down funding structure that dampens innovation, and general historic lack of engagement with diverse communities, handicaps the field's relevance today. Historic preservation's focus on gathering inventory items to support the tiered register system has blocked progressive practitioners' ability to shift the focus of their local programs to engage with broader topics and more diverse audiences and stakeholders. With extremely limited resources of funding and staff time in many localities, the prioritization of the register system, and the process of identifying, cataloging, and reviewing resources, appears to have taken some Certified Local Governments (CLGs) captive by absorbing most of their resources. Our interviews indicated that many practitioners acting as attending staff to a commission were so busy with resource reviews that they spent time on little else. Preservation of architectural buildings, which was intended as a means to an end, seems to have become the end. How can the field be reoriented to prioritize community involvement and preservation for an active and inclusive future?

## **How did this happen?**

The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) was adopted by Congress in 1966. This Act created and formalized the governmental interests and institutions that govern the field of historic preservation in the United States. To protect and preserve historic sites, the NHPA established organizations and processes that included the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), Section 106 Reviews, and State Historic Preservation Offices. The Act also formed the tools of the field including inventories, registers, CLGs, Commissions, special tax valuations, historic tax credits, surveys, and more.

Knowledge of, and protection for, sites of historic and architectural significance is stated as the priority of historic preservation, with the inventory and register at its functional core. Local sites are surveyed and identified as having local significance, with some filtering up for inclusion in the state inventory and register, and the most important and compelling being nominated for

admittance into the exclusive NRHP. The inventory and register system is a classification that is, in many graphics, pyramid-esque (Figure 1). The pyramidal nature, whether intended to or not, implies that the NRHP, at the top, is the most significant. The local properties, at the bottom, by extension, are less important. While there is no dispute that inclusion into the NRHP is an honor, the reality is that the active day-to-day implementers of historic preservation in a locality likely have priorities that can and should be quite different than the NRHP, and not judged as less important. What is important at the national level may not be what is important to a small, extremely diverse, more rural, or extremely urban place. Local priorities may not match national priorities because the qualities that make each place unique are different.



**Figure 1: Inventory and Register System**

*Source: Portland Bureau of Planning & Sustainability*

One area where different priorities present themselves very clearly as an obstacle is in funding and resources. Though some CLGs have dedicated funding streams, most major projects and initiatives are funded through state or national grants. If at the national level, sites of architectural significance are deemed most important, then funding is allocated as such. If at the state level, telling more inclusive stories of the past is prioritized, then funding will become available for this. If a CLG wants to crowd-source their inventory or try a new rural Main Street strategy—which are not widely accepted practices—it is unlikely they would easily receive state or national funds. This is problematic for CLGs or organizations that want to shift the tide of the field in new directions by stretching and shaping historic preservation to create new avenues for engagement and a more inclusive field.

Ask any practitioner about who usually attends their historic preservation meetings and invariably the standard answer is retired, mostly white, middle class folks. While this, in general, is similar to those who become involved in many committees or associations, the necessary background in architecture or interest in history create additional barriers into involvement in historic preservation. This presents specific issues. First, the field cannot possibly achieve its economic, environmental, and educational goals if there are few full-time working professionals outside of architecture engaged in it and incorporating its tools into broader regional strategies. Second, people will feel unwelcome to become involved if no one looks like them or shares their educational or other background characteristics. Third, the future of this country will look different from the past; it is unsustainable to preserve buildings without acknowledging and addressing the problematic racial and classist histories of many of them. Without more diverse involvement, telling difficult stories is likely to be unsuccessful, as telling the stories of others without their involvement is ill-advised at best and validity torching at worst.

## **Solutions**

To increase the effectiveness of historic preservation as a community-focused planning tool, there are actions that could be taken at the national, state, and local level. Starting at the local level, some half-jokingly suggest that local governments could give back their CLG status and opt out of the tiered system. However, the reality that funding is tied to that very system makes that suggestion politically untenable in most localities. Therefore, the best solution is to allocate resources (both funding and staff time) away from surveys and inventory work on its own, and reserve it only as a tool for engagement. For example, practitioners can use community surveys as a way to engage with new audiences and create more diverse programming. This approach will help to focus on community significance, rather than architectural significance. Managers of long-standing programs can update their code to reflect broader priorities and create space for new approaches.

At the state level, state grants should acknowledge and reward those programs using nontraditional approaches. The effectiveness of local programs should be measured by their ability to broaden the scope of the field, tracked by metrics related to new partners and diverse audiences. The state should provide assistance not just with resource reviews or with consultants qualified to determine if something is “significant,” but with the qualitative and relationship-building supports that are needed in departments with little time and inexperienced commissioners. It is important to know what historic resources exist in a place, but it is also important to know what people think about them. State historic preservation offices should lead the charge in empowering local practitioners to think outside the box and demonstrate the applicability of the tools of historic preservation to diverse audiences of residents and organizations.

At the national level, it should be recognized that the tools of historic preservation are not well-suited to all places. Many national policies are not viable in rural areas—for example the Main Street Program insists on strict design elements that may not be found in a rural area with a less-defined Main Street. National guidelines should elevate other criteria to the same level as architectural design. Focusing intensely on design and architecture risks missing economic development, preservation, educational, and engagement opportunities that could be pursued in areas or on sites that do not meet narrow architectural standards. Places are more than facades. The average person neither knows nor cares about the fenestration of a building—and that is okay. Thus, to engage more diverse audiences, programs need to recognize and embolden the stories that make up a place. National laws should be changed, if needed, to ascertain that the tools of the field can achieve the underlying goal of historic preservation—active community life with a deep sense of place.

Additionally, on all levels, it should be acknowledged that the tools of historic preservation have been used for exclusionary purposes. Programming should focus not just on buildings, sites, or collecting the stories into a book or app, but on crucial community discussions of the past and what that means for people today. Celebrating history by putting things on plaques and pedestals can be good, but more important are real discussions to acknowledge the past, move through it, and learn from it. Historic preservation's tools should be used to reflect communities' uniqueness and diversity and to ask and answer the question of what a place means to local people in the past, present, and future.

The field will continue to lack relevance to the broader population if no steps are taken. This lack of relevance matters because historic preservation is one of the key tools available to community members and planners to address identity and build place-based self-esteem. Identifying resources important to the community—those that build and acknowledge a diverse community identity—and positioning those resources to be used, accessed, shared, and loved in the future builds a sense of place that is emotionally and financially valuable to residents, businesses, and cities.

### **Conclusion**

The good news is that these solutions are extremely actionable, they only take will. Whether the field is truly committed in practice to being inclusive is something that can only be proven by changing the mechanisms and criteria that guide its institutions. Without changes to these structures and funding, innovative local practitioners will continue to find themselves limited. In our work we found many progressive practitioners patiently waiting for the broader field to catch up with them, we only urge the field not to wait too long to catch up. Change must come at the local, state, and national level in order to be successful and permanent. Demonstrate that not only do these places matter, historic preservation matters.