Historic Preservation: Challenges to Collaboration with Other Disciplines

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Abstract
Working and researching in the built environment requires an interdisciplinary approach. A continual challenge is how to collaborate not only within one’s discipline, but also with other disciplines. Historic preservation, as one of the newest arrivals to the built environment disciplines, is challenged with a unique set of circumstances that render its researchers and practitioners at a disadvantage compared to architecture, landscape architecture, planning, and construction science. As there is no overall organization that exclusively represents the preservation professional or academic, historic preservation tends to be a minority player in collaborative efforts with the other disciplines in the built environment. This paper will discuss the challenges to collaboration, focusing on foundational, internal, and external attributes that work in an antagonistic or synergistic manner to impede or facilitate partnering, teamwork, and mutual benefit. Several solutions are recommended, including the need to have historic preservation sit at the table of the built environment disciplines as an equal partner.

Introduction
Historic preservation was first recognized as a distinct profession separate from the other built environment disciplines in the 1980s. It is an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor incorporating architecture, landscape architecture, planning, construction science, history, and archaeology. In more recent times, sociology and anthropology have assumed an important role in historic preservation. This paper will explore the genesis of the discipline of historic preservation, relate this field with its allied disciplines, and then discuss issues with collaborating within its own discipline and with the other disciplines of the built environment. As part of this process, common trends and challenges will be explored in relation to how they impact historic preservation. This work will incorporate a review of literature from historic preservation and the allied fields in the built environment as well as the author’s ten years of experience working in the field of historic preservation.

Before discussing the nature of historic preservation, an explanation of international terminology is in order. The term, “historic preservation,” is entirely unique to the United States; in addition to being grammatically incorrect (it should really be spelled “historical” preservation), no other country uses it. Canada, Hong Kong, and Australia, for instance, tend to use “heritage conservation,” while in England, the terminology is usually more context specific such as “architectural conservation,” “urban conservation,” and “landscape conservation” depending on the project. Other countries across the world tend to use terms that are a variation on the concept of cultural patrimony (e.g., “conservación de patrimonio” in Mexico or Spain). There are many more possible variations. Because of this variety in terminology, researching historic preservation issues can be difficult as one may not know the proper words to use in describing the endeavor. For all intents and purposes, however, this paper will only examine the practice of historic preservation in the United States.
The birth of historic preservation as a discipline

In the narrowest sense, the discipline of historic preservation, called as such and practiced by professionals who refer to themselves as “historic preservationists,” did not occur until the 1960s when a number of academic conferences and federal legislation helped codify the term and roles of the preservation professional for the first time in the United States. Two conferences were particularly important: The “Historic Preservation Today” conference in 1963 in Williamsburg, Virginia (published as a book with the same title in 1966) and the “Principles and Guidelines Workshop II” conference also held in Williamsburg in 1967 (published as Historic Preservation Tomorrow in 1967). The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 further codified the professional roles of historic preservationists as did the publication of the book, With Heritage So Rich in the same year. By the late 1970s, however, there were still questions as to whether historic preservation was a “scholarly discipline or a field of specialization incorporating related professions” (Haupt 1977). According to Michael Tomlan, a professor of historic preservation at Cornell University, historic preservation wasn’t recognized as a discrete discipline until the 1980s (1994, p. 191). Surprisingly, even today, some question whether historic preservation is really a discipline or “a hybrid—or hydra—that we rightly call multidisciplinary” (Cather 2000, p. 10). In the United States, James Marston Fitch created the first degree program in historic preservation in 1973 at Columbia University, only one year after the first degree program in historic preservation in the world was founded at the University of York in England (Tomlan 1994, p. 189). The establishment of Columbia’s program legitimized historic preservation as an academic discipline as approximately fifteen graduate-level programs were developed across the country from 1974 to 1980. Many more were to follow in the subsequent decades.

There is no national body in the United States which either accredits or certifies historic preservation programs in academia. The closest approximation is for a university or college to become a “member” in the National Council for Preservation Education, which was formed in 1980 and first reviewed its members’ programs in 1988. Membership is contingent upon an institution’s preservation program meeting certain open-ended guidelines. A failure to justify that these guidelines are being met results in a denial of membership. There are no licensing requirements for the practice of historic preservation in the United States.

Common threads with other disciplines

In practice, historic preservationists interact with architects, landscape architects, real estate developers, planners, architectural historians, public historians, art conservators, archaeologists, and tradespeople in construction. Each of these disciplines have their own perspectives on how to approach interventions in historic buildings and landscapes, but they also share many similarities. For instance, historic preservationists and architects are likely to understand the basic dichotomy between the views of John Ruskin and Eugene Viollet-le-Duc in terms of preservation of the status quo versus restoration as both disciplines have read and understood these works to some extent. Both real estate developers and historic preservationists realize the economics of interventions can be an important limiting factor for changes made to historic resources while planners and preservationists understand the importance in strategic plans with an eye to the future and community values. The idea is that while each of these disciplines can have different theoretical approaches and methods, there will always be similarities which can serve to reinforce collaborative work.

Instead of viewing the different disciplines in a conflicting way, many professionals think in terms of one discipline helping another, as
Daniel Bluestone (1999) describes in relation to the practice of architectural history: “When it comes to architecture and urbanism, architectural historians and historic preservationists share important common ground. The preservation of buildings and their urban and landscape contexts helps inspire and expand the historians’ research and teaching” (p. 300). That each discipline has the interest of the built environment in mind serves as a common thread on which to build collaborative exchanges.

One particularly promising area where architects and preservationists share a common theme is in sustainability and green building. In a recent article in the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Forum Journal, Carl Elefante describes how the “greenest” building is one that has already been built: “The intersection between preservation and green building is being well traveled. Significant crosspollination has occurred [between architects and preservationists] and the rate of collaboration is exploding” (p. 32).

Another theme is shared between real estate developers and historic preservation. Many developers have discovered that with the variety of economic incentives for historic preservation, a profitable business model can be built around building rehabilitation. Donovan Rypkema has published extensively in this area—his work on The Economics of Preservation (1994, 2005) is a well known example.

General challenges

A basic problem in working with heritage resources is understanding the parts that the different disciplines must play and who serves in the coordinating role. For instance, DiStefano et al. (2005) interviewed various professionals who work on older buildings to understand how heritage conservation professionals could work better with other disciplines. One of their respondents revealed that “while architects normally assume the role of team/project leaders in architectural projects, in conservation projects they are no more important than the other professionals involved, such as archaeologists, historians or museum curators. [An informant for this study] commented that when dealing with cultural heritage ‘architects have to put away their egos and become equal members of the community’” (p. 10).

This problem of the ego is an important issue as each professional has the tendency to think that his or her discipline brings the majority of the answers to the table; in reality the contributions are more nuanced and complex.

In the early 1980s, preservationists were excited to see the post-modern movement in architecture gaining ground: with more architects seeing value in the past, the hope was that there would be more respect for historic preservation. Unfortunately, post-modernism did nothing of the sort and instead engendered an even greater schism between the preservationist and the architect. The preservationists saw designs emerging that were two-dimensional, thin, tacky-tacky reproductions from the past and the architects thought nothing of performing “facadectomies” of buildings where the facades where preserved, but the interiors of buildings gutted (Tomlan 1994, p. 192). This distrust of the architect by preservationists still exists, but paradoxically may be on the increase now that neo-traditional design, which seeks greater fidelity to the past, has become more common. Indeed, some preservationists are now uncomfortable with neo-traditional designs that recreate the past to such a large degree that a “false” sense of historical development is the result. To this end the National Park Service’s Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation specifically directs, in item nine, that the new must be differentiated from the old and that new design which recreates the past is unacceptable. That the National Park Service made this change to the Standards in the mid-1990s is likely to not be coincidental. Before this change, the wording indicated an inherent distrust of designs of the moment and an acceptance of historicized design.
Architects are often at odds with the basic tenets of historic preservation. Architectural studios in colleges and universities typically do not encourage thinking that involves constraints based on pragmatic considerations, such as limited resources and design that is predicated on environmental and sociocultural contexts. The result is that historic preservation, with its attendant doctrines of limitation, is given little attention or is maligned outright. The National Architecture Accrediting Board (NAAB) requires extraordinarily little education in historic preservation for professional architecture degree programs, consisting of only a cursory overview of laws that impact cultural resources. No education in preservation theory, practice, design, community values, or conservation of materials is required. The result is that newly minted architects do not have the skills nor the understanding to work on older buildings, yet the majority of work done by architects is on existing and not new construction (Cunningham 2002). The unfortunate fact is that even if NAAB required historic preservation coursework, few architecture faculty would be qualified to teach such courses as they do not have the required experience or educational credentials.

Perhaps the largest area of discontent in historic preservation between the disciplines lies with the valuation of the older built environment. Should the professional’s valuation system take precedent over the public’s? There is no simple answer to this question. This basic issue is complicated by the doctrinal nature of the tenets of historic preservation which were developed in isolation from public input and are largely locked into narrow nineteenth-century notions of historical significance. Only in the past decade has the wider perspective of sociocultural values assumed greater importance, especially due to the work by the Getty Institute which was published as Values and Heritage Conservation (2000) and Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage (2002). There is, unfortunately, no widely accepted method for understanding the sociocultural values of place, much less an agreement on when and where the collection of these values are important when planning for interventions.

Each discipline places a different weight on various sociocultural values. The public and architectural historian will naturally favor historical or informational values—e.g., the ability of a built environment to be read like a book for information or to provide an example of a style or construction technique. The architect will likely favor aesthetic and artistic values while the tradesperson or craftsperson will place a high importance on economics and intensive interventions (more work equates to greater revenue). All of these values indicate a required responsiveness to the nuances of heritage and what heritage means to people. Some values are intuitive while others are not. Overall, unfortunately, sociocultural values are often ignored when planning for interventions.

An important issue with architects and the construction trades is the tension between a desire to make large-scale changes to building and landscape fabric and a fundamental preservation tenet that as little building or landscape fabric as possible should be changed. It is not in the best interest of such professionals to limit their work and thereby decrease their overall potential for revenue. This problem is partially offset by the higher amounts of labor that a preservation project typically entails. Unfortunately, in the public’s mindset—typified by popular media, such as This Old House—there is no difference between preservation, restoration, or renovation. The “updating” process which often removes the majority of the historic fabric from a building, especially in the interior, is taken for granted with little attention paid to the philosophical issues of historic preservation or sociocultural values associated with the removed fabric. Few architects or contractors stop to conduct a sociocultural evaluation of place, document original and changed building or landscape fabric, and then plan their intervention in an informed manner unless a federal, state, or local requirement, such as preservation tax credit work, requires them to do so.
Challenges to collaboration

There are three factors that impact the ability of the disciplines to collaborate with one another. The first factor is foundational attributes. These are core, personal characteristics that influence one’s ability or inability to interact with others. The last two factors are at the level of one’s own discipline or related disciplines. There are internal attributes which are bounded within a discipline and external attributes which are outside the boundaries of a discipline. In a collaborative situation, all three of these attributes work in an antagonistic or synergistic manner to impede or facilitate partnering, teamwork, and mutual benefit.

Foundational attributes

Foundational attributes can also be thought of as personal attributes. They are the innate, internal characteristics of an individual’s personality. Because foundational attributes are under the direct control of the individual, it is each person’s own responsibility to moderate and control his or her behavior in a way that is conducive to collaboration. There are particular challenges which an individual must overcome to achieve a high level of effectiveness.

It is the responsibility of individuals to understand the roles of other people within their discipline as well as professionals external to their discipline. This kind of understanding leads to more effective teamwork (Glaser, 2005, p. 4). The salience of these roles needs to be contextualized within the project; in other words, particular tasks and duties will change depending on the work that is to be accomplished. For instance, an historic preservationist needs to understand the kind of work an architect does, but in addition, has to understand that the responsibilities of the architect will be different for rehabilitation versus a restoration. If other team members are involved, such as an architectural historian, the architect’s role may become more narrowly defined. Again, the context of the situation directly defines the roles of each professional that is involved.

Certainly an individual is responsible for acquiring and updating the body of knowledge about his or her own discipline as well as related disciplines. Without a personal commitment to lifelong learning, an individual can become out of touch with not only other disciplines, but his or her own discipline. We all know of anecdotal accounts of the professional—a doctor, for instance—who no longer takes the responsibility to keep up to date on available information and dispenses sub-par treatment as a result. In other words, we have a responsibility to others to educate ourselves as Barrow and Keeney (2001) explain: “Individual and general good depend to any marked extent on the ability of individuals to share understanding and take responsibility” (p. 59). Professionals need to be able to learn from each other and the first place to start is with the individual.

A particular challenge for the individual is to balance the desire for recognition with the need to work as a team with others. Can one find satisfaction in the group’s effort, or does the drive for individual power take greater precedence? There is no simple answer, but there is a danger where the desire for recognition becomes more important than the greater good and causes an ambitious professional to force others to constantly acquiesce. Forceful personalities can become overly dominant in their quest for recognition and control others in their quest for success (Cock et al., 1998, p. 399). Issues with personal egos are closely related to the desire for recognition; inflated egos are typically equated with a high desire for recognition. A study reported by Kelley (1992) indicated that 40% of professionals in the workforce had ego problems and constantly felt a need to assert their superiority and belittle others.

The same survey reported by Kelley (1992) also mentions that nearly half of the surveyed professionals did not trust their coworkers. Trust is a very important issue in the workplace and among professionals. Without the ability to trust other professionals, all work would simply stop (Koopman et al., 1998, p. 374). Higher levels of trust result in more effective communication, higher levels
of productivity, and lower levels of stress. High levels of trust also help to foster an environment where people are more willing to share ideas and potential solutions; there is less of a fear of retribution when an individual takes a dissenting position on a topic (Glaser, 2005, p. 149).

Trust is also essential when dealing with issues of values. Each of us carries our own personal value system which may or may not be congruent with the values of others. When there is a high level of trust, professionals are more willing to discuss and negotiate on these values to avoid an impasse that can cause ineffectiveness at a minimum and at most could lead to a complete stoppage of work. Cooperative negotiation, which is dependent on trust, is one method that an individual can employ to come to a consensus about group values (May, 1996, p. 147).

Lastly, the treatment of these elements—understanding one another’s roles and learning from one another, a desire for recognition, ego management, trust, and issues with differing values—depends largely on the professional’s ability to rise above self interest in the interest of a greater good. This value, which is related to _altruism, equality, aesthetics, freedom, human dignity, justice, and truth (Kasar, 2000, p. 5), when expressed to a high degree naturally leads to collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork. When absent, the negative attributes of the ego surface and the professional’s actions are largely dictated by self-interest to the exclusion of others. In essence, the goal is to achieve a win-win instead of a win/lose mentality.

**Internal attributes**

Each discipline in the built environment sets its own priorities, goals, structure, and criteria with which to judge its own members. There are several internal attributes that can either foster or impede collaboration between its members. Because historic preservation is a relatively recent arrival compared to the other fields, the boundaries of the discipline are not particularly clear. The problem is compounded by some of its practitioners who fail to see historic preservation as a discipline at all, but rather as a loose conglomeration of other fields that occasionally dabble in the practice of preservation. While the general consensus is that historic preservation is a unique discipline, the differing viewpoint of the minority has, unfortunately, only served to impede the growth of the field.

One particular area in which historic preservation often grapples is recognition. There is no entity that certifies or accredits educational programs in historic preservation (NCPE’s “membership” process is close, but not equivalent) and its practitioners have no opportunity to become certified or receive any such similar accolades in recognition of lifelong learning. Anyone can call themselves an historic preservationist and obtain paid work without having had any formal education in the field or professional practice experience. As such, there is a wide range in the quality of historic preservation practitioners. In addition, many practitioners from related fields, such as architecture or planning, often teach historic preservation in university and college degree programs without having had any formal degree in the subject, and sometimes have little or no professional practice experience in the field as well. In essence, one could make the claim that if the discipline of historic preservation does not take itself seriously enough, why should the other disciplines in the built environment? Or related a different way, if historic preservationists cannot collaborate to a degree sufficient enough to clearly define their own field, why should other disciplines recognize the (supposed) unity of the discipline?

Historic preservationists are also lacking a single, unified professional organization akin to the AIA (American Institute of Architects) to represent their interests. The National Trust for Historic Preservation does not have an arm that exclusively represents the interests of professionals, instead choosing to wrap its advocacy efforts around the common goals of regular citizens as well as professionals. The National Trust’s Forum,
while catering to professionals to a higher degree than its other activities, does little in the way to advocate for the professional interests of historic preservationists; anyone can join the Forum as no prerequisites are necessary. The Association for Preservation Technology (APT) does exclusively represent historic preservation professionals, but only those individuals engaged in technical/engineering and materials science issues. Historic preservationists that are interested in the social sciences are, unfortunately, not represented by APT, nor any other preservation-specific organization.

Without a unified entity representing historic preservationists, it is difficult for these professionals to come to a consensus over the roles of preservationists, much less the roles of other disciplines. Out of all of the disciplines in the built environment, historic preservationists have to work with the broadest range of professionals. In addition to architects, landscape architects, planners, construction managers, and real estate developers, preservationists also have to work with historians, archaeologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and museum and interpretive professionals. It is no wonder that Cather (2000, p. 10) referred to historic preservation as hydra-like. There are many, many heads at the table and a broad lack of agreed-upon definitions of these fields and disciplines as well as their roles within preservation.

Historic preservationists working with and within government have been quite successful in enacting policies and laws to identify and protect historic resources. Unfortunately these same policies, such as the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Venice Charter, preempted the discussion of the significance of cultural values in understanding historic places nearly thirty years ago. It has only been in the past ten years or so that the role of culture and phenomenology in the experience and valuation of place has begun to register on the radar screens of preservationists. Even with this greater recognition, it is anthropologists and sociologists that are on the cutting edge of the sociocultural valuation of place, not historic preservationists. It is almost as if, by prematurely closing the argument on how places are valued, historic preservationists have cut off their noses despite themselves. Thus, historic preservationists are often out of touch with how the average person values historic places.

In sum, historic preservationists do not necessarily share the same values in regard to education, working with their own discipline, or working with other disciplines. There is no consensus on what is required to become an historic preservationist and no organization to gauge and improve the quality of the field for the benefit of all historic preservationists, regardless of their specialty. It is no wonder that the public really does not understand the roles that preservationists play in the protection and sustainability of the built environment; not even preservationists can agree where they fit into the grand scheme of the built environment and within their own and other’s disciplines.

External attributes

How is historic preservation viewed by other disciplines and how do the interests of external disciplines interact with the goals of historic preservationists? This question is part of the challenges to collaboration posed by forces external to the discipline. These external attributes play an important role in how historic preservationists practice and research within their specialties.

A fundamental characteristic which sets historic preservationists apart from other disciplines in the built environment is that the retention of existing buildings and landscapes is of the highest importance. Massive new development is generally seen as undesirable, especially if it results in the destruction of historic resources. Architects generally prefer new construction because the blank slate allows for greater and freer amounts of creativity and unfavorably view the restrictions placed by preservationists on the rehabilitation of existing buildings. Many planners...
like to see wide, modern streets and utilities installed in older areas in an effort to improve safety and efficiency—again, typically at odds with the goals of historic preservation. Even with the large number of financial incentives available to rehabilitate existing historic properties, real estate developers tend to prefer new construction—it is less messy with fewer unknowns and without the confines of preserving existing parts of structures and landscapes.

As we move into an era of ever greater awareness of environmental and sustainability issues, however, the various disciplines of the built environment are moving closer together in agreement on some goals. Curiously, few people seem to associate historic preservation with environmentalism, sustainability, and quality of life. The reuse of existing buildings puts less emphasis on new construction and sprawl, which reduces impacts on natural areas. As buildings have a massive amount of energy embodied in their construction materials, the retention of existing buildings substantially reduces the amount of energy needed for new construction materials. Thus, historic preservationists have always been “green” and “sustainable,” long before these terms became fashionable. As architects and planners begin to realize that the reuse of buildings and denser construction are both greener and more sustainable than suburban sprawl, their arguments begin to sound suspiciously close to those that historic preservationists have used for decades. The AIA, the APA (American Planning Association), and the CMAA (Construction Management Association of America) could mandate the teaching of historic preservation courses in accredited degree programs (through their influence with NAAB and ACCE, for instance). Currently, none do. So while most work by the disciplines in the built environment is being done on older buildings, it is still possible to receive a degree in architecture, planning, or construction science without having taken a single course in historic preservation. Again, this issue is likely due to the fact that there is no unified organization that represents the interests of historic preservation professionals of all specialties. Until these issues are being talked about at a peer-level with the AIA, the APA, and the CMAA, historic preservation does not really have a good chance for an organizational seat at the table. The reason why is simple: In historic preservation, there is no equivalent to the AIA, the APA, or the CMAA.

Conclusion

The character and practice of historic preservation is still undergoing significant change. As a discipline, it does not have the historical roots of the other built environment professions. As a result, historic preservation still faces significant hurdles as it grows and becomes more broadly recognized as a discrete discipline. One way to approach this problem is through increased collaboration with the other built environment disciplines at a peer level. One way to begin is with an examination of the constraints placed on collaboration, based on various attributes. Foundational attributes are best recognized and dealt with at the individual level and there are problems with internal and external attributes that marginalize the role of historic preservationists in comparison with the other built environment disciplines. Chief among these issues is the lack of a unified organization to represent historic preservationists. Such an organization could serve to standardize the values of historic preservationists, ameliorate competing interests, and have an equal seat at the table with the AIA, the APA, and the CMAA.

Notes

1 An unreleased study by the author found that more than half of the faculty who teach in historic preservation degree programs in colleges and universities do not have an undergraduate or graduate degree in historic preservation themselves.

2 The Historic Resources Committee of the AIA has been trying for several years to mandate the teaching of historic preservation courses in architectural education, but to date appears to have achieved little success.
References


