Preservation Technology: Opening the Field to New Possibilities

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In less than half a lifetime, significant portions of the world have undergone a digital transformation—one that experts believe is just beginning. Odds are that you would have read this article from a desktop computer a mere 10 years ago; today you are likely to be reading it from a device that fits into the palm of your hand. But while such impacts on our daily lives are ubiquitous and self-evident, technology’s role in protecting old and historic places may be less obvious.

A little more than a year ago, the two of us were tasked with surveying the role technology plays in historic preservation. Over the course of many subsequent hours of planning—and cups of coffee—we realized that tech has at least two distinct roles in preservation. The first is documenting historic places for their protection. Technology has transformed the methods and tools used for survey as well as the subsequent management, evaluation, and integration of survey data with other information. From mobile applications to drones, the tools we use to measure and analyze the essential details of a resource are changing, opening the field to new possibilities.

Artist and futurist Zenka speaking about technology and the future of preservation at PastForward 2017.

PHOTO BY DAVID KEITH
Technology is also transforming the ways preservationists tell the stories of old and historic places; increasingly, they use innovations like social media and virtual reality. Evolving technologies present new options for telling the full American story—but with these new opportunities come new challenges.

As we pulled together materials on this subject—for a conference track supported by the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, blog stories, webinars, and this Forum Journal issue—certain fundamental questions about the role technology plays in preservation emerged. When should we adopt new technologies in an ever-changing world? Is new always better? Or does sustainable innovation require embracing new tools in tandem with existing methods of saving places? In short, how can technology best help us do our work? Tom Schienfeldt’s article contemplates these questions—as well as how professionals and organizations can do this work while facing funding, time, and capacity challenges.

We also want to take this opportunity to underscore how Forum is leveraging technology to engage our members. Early last fall we launched Forum Connect, an online community to replace the Forum-L listserv. Discussion boards have become an integral part of digital discourse, and this community is giving Forum members a dynamic new space in which to network, engage, and discuss the issues that are most important to preservation professionals. If you haven’t joined yet, sign up today.

Technology can support the work that we do to save places. While we recognize that new methods and tools do not come without challenges, we believe, as the artist and futurist Zenka said in her PastForward 2017 TrustLive, that “if we can bring [technological experts and preservationists] to the table, we can really make magic happen and give this technology a purpose and a path forward.” FJ

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