The Full Spectrum of History: Prioritizing Diversity and Inclusion in Preservation
I had barely sat down at the kitchen table, a plate full of pan dulce and a hot cup of coffee in front of me, when one of my hosts leaned over, trying to control her giggling, and said, “Make sure Danny tells you the cemetery story.” I set up my recording equipment as quickly as I could. The lively family I was visiting in San Antonio had gathered, as they frequently do on Sunday afternoons, and were already reminiscing and telling stories in both English and Spanish without waiting for me to hit the record button.

We passed the next two hours sharing stories and drawing maps of childhood events; favorite fishing holes; the importance of fire traditions; and the family’s matriarch who, like many other descendants of the first mission residents, had lived within the deteriorating walls of Mission San Jose at the turn of the 20th century. Recently inscribed as a World Heritage Site, San Antonio Missions were designated for both for their authentic tangible heritage and their intangible heritage, which was created by the collision of Spanish colonial and indigenous populations.

Part of our job in San Antonio’s Office of Historic Preservation is to discover and celebrate these stories in order to preserve them. Breaking bread and sharing stories with the people whose heritage is connected to the San Antonio Missions allows us to do just that. The next step is cultural mapping, in which we pair recorded narratives with hand-drawn maps from the storytellers. We are working toward multimedia interpretations that capture and preserve a full range of stories from the community.

**PRESERVATION IS SHARING**

We know historic preservation to be a process for protecting something that has importance to a community. Typically it’s a building or a place, but as our understanding of heritage continues...
to grow, we know that it can also be a story, a tradition, perhaps even a recipe. Safeguarding and preserving our heritage is what preservationists do, but preservation is about more than protection—it is inherently about sharing.

We preserve our past to share it with future generations—every time someone walks past a building, tells a story, or teaches a tradition, we have shared that resource. And if sharing is a core value of preservation, it stands to reason that we are obligated to also develop a shared process for identifying which resources must be tended to.

Engaging the public in the process of identifying cherished resources, rather than leaving that to a so-called expert, not only advances a democratic process but also is likely to reveal resources that would otherwise go unnoticed. Members of the public are the experts and must be invited to share their expertise.

**SHARING THE WORK OF PRESERVATION WITH THE COMMUNITY**

The process of recognizing community resources is itself a shared experience. In San Antonio, as in many other cities, the public engages with the preservation process through public hearings regarding landmark designations and treatment of historic properties. As in other cities, we also have education and outreach programs through Preservation Month celebrations; lectures throughout the year; opportunities for volunteers to work on historic properties; and fun events like Preservation Races, which send participants on timed, historically themed scavenger hunts through historic districts. These are all excellent ways to engage those who are already interested in the work of preservation, but they are not sufficient to attract those who aren’t as plugged in. Even when they are aware of an activity, people need to feel connected enough to want to participate, which is why preservationists dedicated to truly engaging the community must take it a step further. Engaging groups that are, at best, unaware or, at worst, disenfranchised is an important step toward inclusivity, and that engagement is best accomplished by activities that a community can relate to culturally.
As part of our cultural initiatives through community engagement, San Antonio’s Office of Historic Preservation has been working with residents to create a cultural map through testimonials. The work is intended to tell our cultural story, particularly regarding the intangible heritage that has led to our World Heritage designation. Using this kind of information gathering to achieve community engagement strays somewhat from heritage management as it is conventionally practiced, but it is growing in interest and potential. It also collects not quite an oral history, but a testimonio—a testimonial form of narrative and storytelling. Most popular in Latin America and other colonized regions, testimonio straddles literary theory and anthropology and allows the person telling the story to tell it as they wish, rather than forcing them to answer a prescribed set of questions.

CULTURAL MAPPING AS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Throughout history, people have created and used maps to find places, to keep from getting lost, and to shape the boundaries of geographic space. Maps, however, are more than pieces of paper with geographic points. Maps say, “We are here,” but they also say, “This is who we are.” Maps tell us how countries were formed, how history shaped territories, and who shaped history. Essentially, maps are stories about the lives of people in places.
Many of the cultures that compose San Antonio’s population have strong oral traditions. While this is true in many places, a city with Latino, Hispanic, African American, and indigenous cultural foundations is particularly given to strong spoken-word traditions. Songs, story-telling, and testimonials are all thriving. In the United States, cultural mapping is an emerging tool for documenting customs and activities while relating them to geography. In San Antonio, we’ve found this to be a creative solution to gathering community knowledge that reflects the cultural foundations of many of our citizens.

Cultural mapping may be done in different ways. Our approach is rooted in listening to stories and memories. The conversations, recorded on video, are guided by the question “Which memories and traditions would you like to hand down to future generations?” After the conversations—which range from a few minutes to two hours—are completed, storytellers are asked to draw maps that reflect their narratives. The maps are drawn by hand and each represents a unique story. Using the collected maps and the videotaped stories, we create one unified map. Eventually we plan to create a map using GIS technology that urban planners can use to obtain quantitative data, as well as an art exhibit that captures the spirit of the place and people.
One day when we were holding a community open house for story gathering, a woman named Josie Mendoza walked in and joined an ongoing conversation about culinary traditions. After 20 minutes or so of discussion, Mendoza said, “Well, I’m here because I wanted to talk about my ancestor, Domingo Bustillos. He received a land grant in 1824 and I still live on a part of that original grant.” At that point everyone stopped to listen to the story she was about to tell. It isn’t every day that one meets a descendant of someone who owned most of the county we live in and, as we would learn, who served as an alcalde (mayor) of La Villa de San Fernando de Bexar.

Domingo was eight years old when his mother died. The family lived in a home off of what we now call Alamo Plaza. He joined the Spanish Royal Army and became a well-respected merchant and politician. In 1824 he received a grant for land known as Rincón del Alamo (corner of the Alamo), which included land around missions Espada and San Juan. But the important part, she wanted us to know, is that although much of the land has been sold by now, she and her family still own and live on part of the Rincón. She and her siblings and cousins grew up swimming in the Arroyo de la Piedra (rock creek), “but all the maps are in English, and they call this Six Mile Creek.” A week later another resident and descendant of settlers in the Mission San Juan area would tell a similar story and create a map with all the Spanish names that the locals use, none of which are documented on current English maps.
While we could populate these maps with the information found in history books, the point is to gain the knowledge—like the Spanish place names—of the people who have visited the missions or live in the surrounding neighborhoods. This mapping is only beginning, but so far we have discovered—or, more appropriately, rediscovered—the many people, both great and ordinary, who created this vibrant city. And we have gained new insight into how they understood place.

By listening to our community experts, we’ve learned about two childhood games called *pajaritos* (little birds) and *cebollas* (onions), which we rarely see children play anymore in this part of the world, but which apparently come from Spanish traditions and are still played in Spain. Along with culinary traditions that are well known, like tamales, we discovered that *fideo*, a noodle dish that was an everyday staple for most families and continues to be a favorite, is equally important.

With its World Heritage designation, the city of San Antonio is charged with protecting the intangible aspects of the missions. Our map-making is a critical first step of defining and documenting this heritage. The next step is figuring out how to protect it. While mapping it will help us better understand what creates a unique sense of place here, making sure that future generations continue to play traditional games, cook traditional foods, know the names of their ancestors, and know the shared community history of the place they call home is the best way to preserve intangible heritage.
VITAL CONTRIBUTIONS FROM COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Cultural mapping was first explored in San Antonio during the National Park Service’s Latino Legacy Summit held here in 2014. The event was co-hosted by the Westside Preservation Alliance (WPA) and the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, a local Latino arts and culture community-based organization. Donna Guerra, WPA member and professional local archivist, and I led a workshop in which participants were asked to share stories and were guided through visual imagery of memories, emotions, scents, and events. More than 40 individuals from the city’s Westside shared and then mapped their stories. We were joined by several students from the University of Texas at San Antonio who were working towards a Certificate in Historic Preservation under the guidance of Professor William A. Dupont, San Antonio Conservation Society Endowed Professor and director of the Center for Cultural Sustainability. The students helped participants draw maps of the neighborhoods in which their stories occurred. Through the community members’ work that day, we not only discovered potential landmarks but also documented the history that would help us form statements of significance.

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center celebrates the oral and visual traditions of culture and, for more than 10 years, has collected stories and photographs through its program “En Aquellos Tiempos” (“In Those Times”). Its work created a document of San Antonio’s Mexican American history of the 20th century and played a vital part in identifying places of significance to the Latino community on San Antonio’s Westside, ultimately leading the city to designate 64 local landmarks.

LESSONS LEARNED

For anyone seeking effective and authentic community engagement, I would recommend the following simple steps.

- Stop using words like “process” and other jargon of the trade, and use the words that the community tells you are appropriate.
- Use tools that have meaning and cultural relevance to the community.
- Listen more than you speak.
Allow the community to participate in the planning of the work.

Build trust by allowing community partners to take the lead. Think of it like a dance: it could be a tango with syncopated leading, following, and stepping in just the right place and at the right time. Or it could be a cumbia—or a conjunto-style polka, redova, or schottische—with their coordinated twirls and carefully moderated timings.

Any two organizations coming together should be prepared to navigate differences, but that shouldn’t stop anyone from progressing and collaborating.

Be aware of and sensitive to the fact that similar cultural communities that share some traits may nevertheless differ widely in thinking. For instance, San Antonio’s Westside communities prefer to use the words platica (kitchen table conversations) and cuentos (stories) when engaging in discussions and storytelling. However, Southside communities—which share many cultural foundations, including the Spanish language—often told us that they prefer to use conversar (to converse), charlar (to chat), and recuerdos (reminiscences), which are subtly different types of conversations and storytelling.

And be prepared for unusual places to be documented.

Take Danny and his cemetery story. Danny had a cousin named Charlie, who loved to dance. He was very dapper and attractive but perhaps a bit vain and un poco medioso (easily frightened). At that time, many dances were held at the mission parishes, including Mission Espada, and Charlie loved to attend those to meet girls. But to get there and back home to Mission San Jose, he had to walk through one of the mission cemeteries. One night, Danny and his other cousins waited for Charlie in the cemetery. When they heard the tapping of his dance shoes, they spoke to him in ghostly voices, pretending to be ancestors from the grave: “Charlie! Chaaaaarrriiiieee! Where are you going? Come visit us!” They spooked him so much that he was afraid to go back to future dances.
That story provides an opportunity to recall a beloved place and person that, to this day decades later, they can reminisce and laugh about. Giving space and time for a community to share these stories—that’s community engagement. That’s preservation beyond architecture. FJ

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TAKEAWAY
See more examples of cultural mapping in San Antonio.