Relevance and Resilience: Proceedings from PastForward Online 2020
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Introduction: Tackling Today’s Critical Issues

PAUL EDMONDSON

I want to thank you for attending PastForward Online 2020, our first all-virtual national preservation conference! Although we can’t meet in person, we are thrilled that this conference is accessible to so many people—4,200 conference registrants—and especially to so many who are new to the preservation movement.

Back in February of this year, our PastForward National Steering Committee developed our conference theme—Relevance and Resilience—and they were incredibly prescient since it speaks directly to the challenges facing our nation and the preservation movement today. By ensuring that preservation is relevant to more people, in more places, we can help communities be more resilient in the years to come.

Thanks to a digital platform, we are pleased to welcome our largest cohort of Diversity Scholars to date. Reflecting the richness of our shared heritage and the breadth of the preservation movement, these 200 Scholars truly enrich the PastForward experience for all attendees, and we are grateful for their participation.

As you all well know, this year has been challenging in so many ways.

From a global pandemic, to a long-overdue reckoning on race and justice, to the continuing threat of global climate change, there has never been a more important moment for us to come together to discuss and advance the solutions that preservation—in all its many forms—offers for these and other challenges we face.

This conference gives us the opportunity to hear from our colleagues across the field and in related fields about creative ways that they are dealing with the issues of the day. But it’s also an opportunity to step back from our day-to-day work, to focus on the big picture, and, perhaps, to think about how we might develop an action agenda for the preservation movement to meet the challenges of our time. I’ll come back to that thought in a minute.
But first, a major theme of this conference is about how preservation can be used as a tool for justice and equity. For many preservationists, our work in this area actually goes back decades, but the current environment demands that we re-examine and recommit to ensure that this work—and the people who do that work—reflects the full history of this country, and advances preservation as a way to strengthen all American communities.

The times also demand that we re-examine our positions and practices with this same goal in mind. One good example is the Trust’s decision earlier this year to call for removal of Confederate monuments that continue to serve as symbols of white supremacy, or to repurpose them within landscapes of justice.

We are also committed to using our programmatic resources to contribute to an inclusive national narrative by protecting and elevating historic places that tell the full history of the United States and by inspiring broad public support of this work.

This year’s list of 11 Most Endangered Historic Places reflects this priority. It includes Rassawek in Columbia, Virginia, where the Monacan Nation is fighting to prevent construction of a pumping station atop an incredibly important archaeological site where their
original capital was located. It includes the Harada House in Riverside, California, where Harold Harada scrawled a message of defiance on the wall as he and his family were being taken to an internment camp, even while fighting to retain ownership of their home. And it includes Roberts Temple in Chicago, where Mamie Till Mobley insisted on an open casket funeral so that the world could see how her 14-year-old son had been brutally murdered. These are places worth fighting for because they go to the very heart of what makes us Americans.

We are also directly investing in saving these important places. Back in July, we announced more than $1.6 million in grants to 27 sites and organizations with funding provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund. Over the past three years, we have invested more than $4.3 million to help preserve 65 historic African American buildings and landscapes.

With support from the American Express Foundation and Benjamin Moore, we also have invested more than $2 million to help preserve places where women made history, and we’ve used crowdsourcing to highlight more than 1,000 historic places that tell women’s stories. This represents only the beginning of this initiative.

We are also committed to using our own historic sites to tell the full and often hidden stories of American history. For example, the Glass House, in Connecticut, a National Trust Historic Site, recently launched initiatives to highlight its connection to LGBTQ+ history, including a year-long exhibition that coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising.

Using preservation to advance the cause of justice and equity is only one of many subjects that we will explore during this conference, but it may be the most important and most relevant work that we do as a movement today. I am extremely proud to be part of an organization and a movement that has made this a priority for our time.
Speaking of priorities, I would like to end my brief remarks here today with a request. I ask that you give serious thought about how together we can tackle the most critical issues facing the preservation field. There will be many thoughtful conversations happening at this conference—and outside of this conference—about equity and preservation; about climate change; about density and affordable housing; about engaging new audiences; and about many other issues relating to our work. I recommend we build upon these efforts, share our different perspectives, and identify specific ways we can advance our goal of making preservation a more just, resilient, and relevant practice.

Over the next several months, it is our intention to join with partner organizations and allies to convene additional listening sessions to help the preservation community define a National Impact Agenda, which we hope to share during Preservation Month 2021. I hope that you will help us in this process by generously sharing your ideas, your experiences, and your perspectives. FJ

PAUL EDMONDSON is president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
A Conversation About Philanthropy and Preservation as Justice

SHERRILYN IFILL AND DARREN WALKER

Sherrilyn Ifill: I can’t think of anything better than the opportunity to be in conversation with the man I’m about to introduce. Darren Walker has been such a visionary in strengthening and undergirding the work of the National Trust’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund and marrying the work of the fund to the work of social justice and racial justice, which lies at the core of what much of the Ford Foundation does. I’m privileged to know him. I have learned so much from him. I know that we are all going to learn a lot during this conversation. I’m eternally inspired by Darren Walker who will join me for this conversation.

Darren Walker: Thank you, Sherrilyn. It’s always great to be with you. So honored that you’re here.

Sherrilyn Ifill: This is a period in this country when we are all deeply anxious about the future. We’re all worried about the future of democracy in this country. We’re all worried about the future of racial justice. We recognize that we’re in a very perilous moment.

Graffiti on Decatur House in Washington D.C.
PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
And so we’re all thinking about the future, and yet we’re having a conversation that’s largely about the past. And so I wanted to begin by asking you to talk a bit about why this moment actually is precisely the moment when we have to be talking about the past—about the past and the truth, about the stories that undergird our present and the stories that will propel our future. So that we understand when we talk about preservation, we’re not talking about something sitting in amber that exists only in the past, but something that has deep resonance today.

**Darren Walker:** Well, I think, Sherrilyn, one of the reasons you and I are worried about the future is because of how our stories about our past have been told. Preservation has been about so many Americans—who we are as a people, a nation, a culture. That has been the mandate of historic preservation in this country historically—the preservation of American history. Regrettably, the preservation movement, if we were to be honest, has been part of a larger system—a system, regrettably, of white supremacy and a system that was designed in a caste-like hierarchy that places at the top of that hierarchy Western European ideas of civilization, what constitutes cultural treasures, what our story is.

And we know that, unfortunately, those charged with preservation over the last 200 years have not told the full story of America. They have not preserved the full history of America.

And so, therefore, historic preservation, must be righted. It is in desperate need of expansion, to include the fullness of our history, both the boundless, courageous, noble men and women who built this country and the romanticized things that we learned about them—our founding fathers in particular—but also the reality of the scourge of enslavement of people of African descent, the treatment of immigrants and people who were indigenous to these lands.

And we now must, ask how do we preserve those histories? To me, that is the exciting work of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund. It’s that the National Trust for Historic Preservation has recognized that its job has not been done, and that it, as the most important historic preservation institution in America, must do better to fulfill its mission.
PRESERVING THE PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Sherrilyn Ifill: I often think that our history, the history of Black people struggling in this country, is deeply embedded in the physical landscape. When we think about discrimination, the worst of discrimination during the Jim Crow era, we actually think about the physical manifestations, right? We think about sundown towns where Black people could and could not go, we think about water fountains that say “colored” and that say “white.” We think about bathrooms that say “colored” and say “white,” and there is a physicality to it. And we recognize that. But it’s interesting to me that, having removed the signs that said “colored” and “white,” it’s as though people now don’t see the physicality of that history in the landscape. For me, this really came to the fore as I began to research and study lynching. But even before that, when I was doing work in Maryland on behalf of Black communities fighting against environmental encroachments, finding a Black cemetery that housed the bodies of Black Union soldiers was a way for us to keep that encroachment of the developer from happening in this small, rural Black community. So I always thought of it as a kind of activism. So I want to hear you talk a bit about what is hiding in plain sight.

Darren Walker: Your excellent research on lynching is where I would start, because there are many painful moments in the physical spaces and places that have represented our history. Those hanging trees, those public places where we were killed are historic places of pain and trauma for us. And we should recognize those places, and the courageous work that you have done, and Bryan Stevenson has done, to lift up those places that are sacred. Hiding in plain sight is the physical manifestation of our labor, because most of the historic structures in this country were constructed by Black people—whether we’re talking about the White House or the state capitol of many Southern states, of course our nation’s capitol, Mount Vernon, so many historic buildings. And yet those stories have never been told.

When the Ford Foundation supported the Sally Hemings Project at Monticello, I learned, with absolute horror, that when the heirs of Jefferson and the family that purchased the Monticello site to turn
it into a historic site, one of the first things they did was to raze any reminder that there were once slaves physically on Monticello.

So the little Mulberry Row, which was where the slave shacks were, was eviscerated because what they wanted was a narrative of greatness, of purity, and a narrative that was without the stain of the reality of Monticello. How might visitors even imagine this 2,000-acre plantation being able to generate the income and to hold all of the dignitaries, and of all of this, without some understanding of the role of the slaves? And yet those slaves’ houses and any physical representation of the slave was just simply eradicated.

And that is in many ways the challenge we are faced with in the country and that is with us today—acknowledging the unpleasantness, the distastefulness, the immorality associated with these historic sites and the men and women who made them.

**Sherrilyn Ifill:** You said that so powerfully, Darren. It is an effort at erasure, it is an effort at removing the evidence. It’s almost like evidence tampering—removing the evidence that they knew, the evidence of the immorality. I’ve been thinking about the presidential
order that just came out about teaching about diversity and teaching about the 1619 Project, and the kind of attacks that have come. And I really believe that there is an effort to erase a history we’ve only just begun to fully know. We have so many amazing scholars who are excavating such powerful messages and lessons from our history, whether we’re talking about lynching or whether we’re talking about the extraordinary work of Henry Louis Gates and so many other scholars, and [Pulitzer Prize-winning historian] Annette Gordon-Reed with the Sally Hemings Project at Monticello. We’re in a kind of a golden moment of being able to reveal this history, and precisely at that moment, of course, there’s going to be backlash.

But preserving the physical evidence in the landscape is such a powerfully important part of this work. It’s so critical that we can say, that’s what the schoolhouse looked like that Black people tried to create for themselves in impossible circumstances. This was the courthouse lawn where 2,000 white people came to hang a Black man right outside the Hall of Justice with all of the law enforcement officers looking on. This is the reason why Black people live on the south side. This is what happened in lower Manhattan in this period. The physical evidence is so powerful.

And I liken it to when people say, it’s really powerful that people are seeing cell phone videos of police violence against unarmed African Americans. And I’m always of two minds. I say, well, we’ve been talking about this forever and it shouldn’t take the visual, but it does for many people. And so we know how powerful it can be when people can see with their own eyes what something is. And I think likening the effort to preserve our own history to this, to ensuring that there is physical evidence that cannot be washed away or erased, is critically important at a moment when there’s tremendous backlash against telling the truth about this, as you say, stained, tainted, unpleasant, immoral history.

GIVING VOICE, RESTORING DIGNITY

Darren Walker: Don’t you also find, Sherrilyn, that it is in part a backlash to the contestation of the very question of “What is it to be an American? What is our history?” And I think one of the
reasons institutions like yours, the Legal Defense Fund, are so essential is because the courts are a critical place where that story gets told. We are unable, often, without the rule of law to actually fully acknowledge that, because there are so many stakeholders in that narrative. And when those stakeholders are challenged, sometimes we’ve got to go to court to actually get them to acknowledge, as we say, what is right in front of them.

Sherrilyn Ifill: That's the sweet spot of being a civil rights lawyer. I taught law for many years, and when I would be teaching my students about a particular matter that we were trying to think through, I would ask, “Now tell me, how are you going to present this to a court?” And usually, at first, the students would respond, “I would just say that ...” And I would stop them and say, “Your job is actually not to do all that talking.” Our job as civil rights lawyers is to master the process so well, and to master the elements of the substantive law so well, that we get the opportunity to give our clients the chance to tell their story. What they have been prevented from doing is articulating their own narrative of justice, of power, of equality, of opportunity in their community.

And, in fact, it’s one of the reasons why we think trials are so important, because we want to create that opportunity. I can’t tell you how many times, if you’ve been a civil rights lawyer, that your clients will say to you, whether you win or lose the case, that the most important moment was when they were on the stand and had the chance to finally be heard. “Everyone had to stop,” they will often say, “and listen to me.” “Even the judge seemed to be listening.” “I’ll never forget the chance to tell the story of what happened.”

And sometimes when we lose a case, we as the lawyers will be despondent and it’ll be the clients cheering us up, because they will say, “Yes, but remember that day when we got to tell the story and everybody had to listen. Everybody knew what the truth was when I was speaking” or when this particular person from our community was speaking.

And it’s a reminder for me of how powerful it is, and how important it is, for a people who have been denied the ability to tell their truth, to live their truth and tell their story, to have the opportunity to have their story told.
Darren Walker: And that’s what preservationists do. Preservation gives a platform.

I wanted to hear the story of Sally Hemings. I wanted to hear her voice. I wanted to hear the voice of her and Jefferson’s children. And even though Madison Hemings had been silenced, because he gave an oral history in which he described how Jefferson treated him and Sally’s children different, that they were special. They were never allowed to go out to the fields with the other slave children. They lived a “privileged” existence—as slaves, let me be clear. But it was only the advocacy, the demands of people like Annette Gordon-Reed [that brought the true story to light].

And, of course, technology once again, thank goodness, rears its head. So just as in the cases that you litigate, where you see the video, making it undeniable, we now have DNA. And so that technology took away deniability for Jefferson’s white heirs, because they had denied forever the voice of Madison Hemings and his siblings when they gave oral histories in the 1850s and ’60s. The testimonies were deemed to be scandalous and outrageous, and they were deemed complete fantasies. And now we actually know they were true.

And we as a preservation movement now need to be giving truth to those voices, to validate and valorize them, just as we have done for so many other great American heroes. And we need the work of preservation today. It has to be about both looking back and taking of corrective action, like the Monticello Society has done by having that first-ever exhibition on Sally Hemings. Because it took 200 years for Sally Hemings to get her dignity. And the work of preservation ought to be not just about beautification and fixing things up, but it ought to be about restoring dignity. Because we have given not only dignity, we have valorized, deified through preservation so many, and we have not even recognized the fundamental humanity of so many other critically important people throughout history.

So I want to see those people. It enrages me that it took 200 years for Sally Hemings to get her dignity. For most of our American history, the narrative around Sally Hemings was that she was a loose woman who slept with a lot of Jefferson’s friends. And that narrative that took her dignity away had currency in the highest
circle of history and scholarship. And now we know the truth. How many other stories like that do we need to right?

Sherrilyn Ifill: Oh, that’s so powerful Darren.

And when people talk about repairing the harm, or reparations, for lynching, one of the things I have on the list is finding the unmarked graves of people, these innocent men who were killed. And even if they weren’t innocent, they didn’t deserve to be burned to death and hung by a mob.

But there have been many instances when the families were even afraid to come out and claim the body, because there was such violence happening around the community. And so, yes, also recognizing these places where people who suffered were just kind of thrown away. So your call to dignity is so powerful and important.

CLAIMING FULL CITIZENSHIP
And I’m curious about what you think this means for our citizenship. And by citizenship I don’t mean in the purely legal sense. I mean, the 14th Amendment. The opening line of the 14th Amendment gives birthright citizenship, which is quite controversially talked about in some political circles these days. But the purpose of birthright citizenship was to ensure the citizenship of Black people, both formerly enslaved and free, who had had their citizenship essentially stripped by the Dred Scott decision. So it ensured that we were all full citizens of the country. And then, of course, the 14th Amendment includes the equal protection clause and so forth. But that word “citizenship” is weighty.

So what does it mean to be a full citizen? To walk in full, what you described as, dignity is one of the elements of it in my view. And dignity also means that you have a claim to the place where you are.

And I worry sometimes that the failure to have preserved the historical truth of our presence, of our influence, of our building with our own hands, has often put left Black people in the position as though we have no claim to the space—you know, to Manhattan, to certain places that have been kind of distanced from us, even those Southern plantations that you talk about that so assiduously
sought to hide the slave cabin part and instead gave tours of the big house to show off all of the luxury without regard to how that luxury came to be, and who cared for it, and who financed it.

And so I actually think of this very much as being about citizenship and belonging, and giving Black people, or restoring to us, a sense of our claim to the space. We are not just wandering on this land. We really built this place. And the preservation movement, it seems to me, provides a way of establishing that. I’m curious about your reaction to my framing it that way.

**Darren Walker:** I think you’re absolutely right.

And as a lawyer, you know the history of physical property in this country and the importance of it in the narrative of wealth accumulation and creation, and the narrative of economic mobility. From the beginnings, all of the Homestead Act transfers of millions of acres of free land to whites and so forth, to the redlining in the 1960 and 70s—all of this was a conspiracy, if you will, designed to keep Black people from owning property.

And so property, which is discussed in our founding document, has been the basis of wealth. Think about all the people of our generation who came from working-class backgrounds, but their grandparents or parents bought their house with the GI Bill, and that house today is worth $800,000 or $900,000. The proceeds of that estate go to the grandchildren who can use that as equity for their startup venture, to start a business, or whatever. We don’t have that because we have been systematically denied the opportunity.

So the built environment, property, we are so removed from that. And property has been, in part, a way in which dignity was framed in this country. I remember, and you probably have relatives too, that somebody would say about them, “She owns some property” or “They own an acre somewhere.” I mean, the whole idea. I remember I had a great-aunt back in Louisiana who owned two or three acres somewhere, and that got talked about in my family like it was two or three acres in Manhattan or something. It was such a rarity that it was discussed in these revered terms. But I do think that there is an effort underway to address that.

I am impressed and inspired by current preservation movements.
I was just speaking with folks at Colonial Williamsburg. The **first African American church in this country was in Williamsburg.** It was razed at some point a very long time ago, and the foundation is currently under a parking lot. To their credit, Williamsburg has made reclaiming, re-imagining, and engaging on this historic site a priority. And they put in place a really interesting, exciting team of archeologists, archivists, Black scholars, and others who are going to lift up and give dignity to this congregation whose church was literally razed and erased. And only recently did Colonial Williamsburg embrace that part of its history.

So it is indeed time, because we were not afforded dignity, and things that told our story were erased, were razed, were treated indifferently, including as you say about lower Manhattan—Black bodies in caskets, in graves. And so we have a chance today. And so I am actually very hopeful, very excited. And I know you and I, working on the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund with Brent Leggs and Paul Edmondson and everyone at the Trust, are very excited about the prospect for the future. It is going to take hard work because, as you know from your work in the courtroom and in the street, there is resistance to the very idea of marking, memorializing, the full history of this nation.

**CHALLENGING INGRAINED ASSUMPTIONS**

Sherrilyn Ifill: We’re having this conversation as though anything we’re saying isn’t controversial, but I suspect there are some rooms in which it is controversial. Certainly for you and me and for the audience listening today, it probably is not.

So what is the challenge? What is it our own community should begin to understand about preservation, and what steps we can take in our own lives and in our own communities to ensure that materials, documents, places, and so forth simply don’t pass out of our community? And how can we really support, and gather support for, the fund? What is it people are missing? How do we strengthen this movement?

Because it’s time-sensitive, right? You just talked about this church being razed. You’ve got to get there, and you’ve got to help people understand the role that they can play, because we all have,
we all are touching artifacts of our history, right? It’s our grandmother’s this thing, or the house where we grew up, or the place where we used to go—and sometimes we just think it’s part of our family lore without connecting to the larger significance of it. So what do you think is needed to really shore up this process of getting people to understand the urgency of the work?

**Darren Walker:** Well, I think we have to admit the sad and distressing truth that white supremacy has taken hold on white people and Black people. We know from our own cultural practices that we have been taught that whiteness is superior to blackness, and that all cultural dimensions associated with whiteness are more important.

And so we Black folk have not fully appreciated our history, because we’ve been taught, actually, that it is not as important. We have to unlearn certain things, so that we can become advocates for our history, which is American history. We have to be advocates for that history, and not simply say, “Oh well, that was just some shack,” or “That’s just some little house,” or “That’s just some beer joint,” or whatever—when, in fact, that represents something profound in the narrative of this country. I think we have to acknowledge that.

I think what is hard is acknowledging that there are people in this country for whom the idea that our history, the history of Black people in this country, is important, is vital, and that the history of America cannot be told without our history—that there are people in this country who find that idea repugnant and reject it out of hand. And I think we have to know that. You obviously know it from your work, but in this space of preservation, what we are having is a contest for the narrative of who we are as a people. And to some people that idea is settled. It’s not up for discussion. It’s not up for revision. It’s not up for expansion. It is what it is.

And I think we have to challenge that, and help them to see that actually among all of us there is history, there are cultural treasures, in all of our communities. And that we have to lift all of us up if we are, indeed, to tell the full story of the American narrative.
CONNECTING PAST AND PRESENT

Sherrilyn Ifill: Darren, I want to pick up on a thread, because I’m sure that there are people who think about this. I’m talking to you from Baltimore, and just a few weeks ago, I took a drive to see the brownstone where Thurgood Marshall grew up in West Baltimore. And I hope that people will take an interest in trying to bring some of the preservation attention to that home. I’m very into this, getting inspiration from understanding where people came from.

I’m in Baltimore, and Baltimore is a place with many, many challenges. LDF (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund) does a lot of litigation work here, really working incredibly hard with a community that is struggling to keep its head above water, but with a people with tremendous dignity.

I’m sure that there are people who, when they hear about the preservation movement—you said earlier, this is the thread I want to pick up—they should know it’s not just about prettying someplace up. I wonder if you could expand a bit more on the connection between preservation and the existing community that surrounds the edifice or the space that you’re trying to preserve. Because there are real, live, current people with real challenges and problems living there.

I would love to know your thoughts about how we can marry—because I’m always thinking from an activist perspective—how would you marry that activism to the work of preservation, so that we’re really trying to create a seamless story that extends back into history but recognizes the relevance of the moment. And then, to end where I began this conversation, that takes us into the future, that undergirds us for the creation of a vital future. How are you connecting those two things in your head, and how might we on the outside of preservation be more affirmative in making those connections?

Darren Walker: I think, as you say, giving the example of Thurgood Marshall’s home, these places are often in communities that have been abandoned or that have experienced disinvestment.

I think of my time living in Harlem in the ’90s, a few blocks away from Langston Hughes’ brownstone, and the number of people who did not know that Langston Hughes lived on 127th Street in Harlem. It is actually a source of pride in a community that
is often told, benignly or implicitly, “You aren’t important, and where you live is an undesirable place to live.” When that place was the birthplace of American poetry and the Harlem Renaissance, when that place was the place where people met to plan the March on Washington, when that place was the place where Malcolm X was murdered. When those stories are told, when those markers are put out there, when attention is drawn, people say, “This place matters on 127th Street, where Langston Hughes wrote ‘Let America Be America Again.’” It says something to the people on that block, sitting on their stoops. It says something to the people when they drive by saying, “Oh, we’re in a really bad neighborhood.” When they see this beautifully restored brownstone with signage on it, just like they see down on Fifth Avenue in front of Henry Clay Frick’s house, they say, “Okay, this community has some history.”

Most importantly, the Black people who live in that community know their history, are lifted up by that history, are given dignity by that history. That to me is the connection with the built environment—the intangible way in which preservation works to grab hold of us and bring us into our history but also root us in our own dignity. That I too dream, I too can see how Langston Hughes dreamed. I can imagine him sitting out on his stoop, the way I’m sitting out here on my stoop.

That’s what historic preservation can do. That is the magic of this movement. And where we are now is probably the most exciting time in the history of historic preservation in our country. **Sherrilyn Ifill:** That so powerfully summed up, I think, what preservation is all about, and what the PastForward conference is about, and the extraordinary work that the Legal Defense Fund is
trying to do. I think it just perfectly encapsulates the power of this movement. It’s exciting, certainly, to me.

People should also know that, when you get that marker and you preserve that space, it helps us as civil rights lawyers to make demands of why you can’t gentrify, of why you can’t tear down things around it, of why this is not an opportunity zone that can be exploited for people who are not in this community, and so on and so forth. It actually helps us to be able to do our work around housing discrimination and transportation and so forth.

I think we all need to feel excited and encouraged at this moment in our country. And I think it’s the sankofa bird that looks back to look forward, and I think that’s what we have to do. I think we have to make sure that we have shored up our foundation, and our foundation is this important history.

I love talking to you. Thank you so much. This was such as an oasis in my afternoon.

**Darren Walker:** Thank you, Sherrilyn. Always great to be with you, my sister. **FJ**
It’s really good to be here with all of you today. I want to express my appreciation to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for this wonderful opportunity to share some thoughts with all of you who have come together for this year’s PastForward conference. For those of you who are attending for the very first time, I guarantee you will be hooked on these convenings. They are always innovative, informative, and inspirational, fostering collaborative and meaningful impact on all of us who are engaged in the preservation movement. I attended my very first National Trust conference in 1997 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and it got me hooked, it motivated me, and it reassured me that the work that lay ahead of me in my new role as the pueblo’s very first director of historic preservation would be both rewarding and challenging. I had the privilege of meeting so many others at this conference who were doing same work that I was to embark upon. It has had a very long-lasting impact on my work, and also for my pueblo of Acoma here in New Mexico.

Arial photograph of Acoma in 1928
PHOTO CREDIT COLLECTIONS OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
I am currently the governor of the pueblo of Acoma. I’m serving a second term and these terms are annual terms. We are appointed by the hierarchy of our clan system and so it’s a great privilege, a great honor, and a very humbling experience to serve my Acoma people. I joined many other governors of the past including some from my own family. My father, Fred Vallo, Sr., served four different terms as governor of our pueblo. There are many who have been mentors and many who have guided my own work both for the pueblo and outside of the community.

I want to explain the title of my presentation, “Haakú, Híya’stíni, ee Siú’namasti: Concepts of Resilience and Promise.” I felt it was an appropriate title during this challenging time in our collective living history. As a tribal leader these words have helped me make sense of the pandemic. It’s helped me to even gain a greater hold on my own resilience as a Native American, an Acoma person, but it’s also helped me to fully understand how, then, I fulfill my inherent responsibility to mobilize, to respond, and to prepare so that my Acoma people, and really all of humanity, is safe, that we are protected during this difficult time. Equally important in this process is working towards arriving at some balance—balance with our earth mother and all of those forces that are so much greater than us.

I want to define for you these words in the Acoma language. While they might have a singular meaning, there are concepts embedded within those words that are sacred, that are ancient, and that are foundational to the Acoma people and the way in which we view the world, the way in which we live in this time, and the ways in which we think about the future.

The word *haakú* means to prepare. It is also our place name at the time of emergence. Our ancestors were informed of this place called *haakú*. It was a place prepared for our eternal occupancy, and all that we needed spiritually was there at the special place. But the word *haakú* also means to actually prepare—to be thinking about what lies ahead and to have a plan.

*Híya’stíni* is a reference to illness or virus or a pandemic, and we learn this word when we hear the stories of emergence and migration. We hear about this term when traditional knowledge is
passed on from one generation to the next, when we learn about the prophécies of our Acoma people. We hear that there would be times in our future when the Creator would present us with a challenge, such as this pandemic, and that we had to respect the virus, respect the pandemic, as it is a living being.

And then there’s this concept *namasti*, that in light of these challenges—whether it be this pandemic or any other challenges of our people—that at the end of all that there is hope, there is promise, there are better days ahead, and there will be positive outcomes.

These three terms combined have a profound meaning, then, on the ways in which we carry on our lives during this pandemic, and the ways in which we will carry on life at Acoma during the recovery, whatever that might be.

I want you to also know a little bit about Brian, a little bit about Governor Vallo. My name is Phra’kai’seewa after a very large mesa on our landscape that has significant meaning. It’s a place that I have strong connection to spiritually and physically by having the opportunity to be with my paternal grandfather during my youth herding sheep in and around that area of the mesa. My paternal great-great grandfather was also Phra’kai’seewa, so I inherited his name. I did not know the man, but I have learned much about him and his role here in the community as a cultural leader.

I’m also of the Sun Clan, and my small clan, my paternal clan, is Eagle. And within my family of elders I am now the second in line in my family and clan, so I have a leadership role in that that capacity as well. But I am also other names that I have been gifted as I’ve become a man, as I have experienced and have been welcomed into societies within my own community. Those also come with great responsibilities.

I have had many teachers. I’m fortunate that I come from a family rooted in very strong traditions and ties to our community and to our culture. My great-grandfather Joe Chino lived to be 101 years old and served 73 of his years in tribal government—a great teacher, a great storyteller, a man of resilience. And his teachings have been relevant to my work in historic preservation. My great-uncles, clan uncles, my paternal grandfather (unfortunately I did not know my maternal grandfather), but I also have wonderful
parents—all who have taught me and continue to teach me. And I have a great community from which I come—many leaders who have informed my work, who have offered guidance, will offer protection during challenging times.

I talk about this often: There was great influence by elders on my life and on my career even today. I always look to the elders. There is a brain trust, a great knowledge within our elders that is so critical, especially in times like this, and we all need to harness that knowledge. I always credit the elders who have always been willing to share information, always willing to have conversations, and who have joined the preservation movement here at Acoma in different ways, ways that were comfortable for them, ways that were meaningful to them. And even today we have community elders who continue to advise us in this work, among other things of course.

I come from a culture that is rich, that is strong, and that is sacred, really foundationally. And we work hard every single day to preserve and protect our culture and our language. This culture, the sacred culture that runs through our veins, as Acoma people, native people, and indigenous people is so powerful. All those teachings, all of the influence, in fact, inform my work. It also helps me to be influential in the messaging, in the education, in the advocacy, in the lobbying, and everything else that consumes my time as governor. I’m really grateful that I’ve had so many role models, really extraordinary individuals, many of whom are from the National Trust family.
THE CONCEPT OF PRESERVATION FOR ACOMA PUEBLO

Acoma Pueblo, if you’re not familiar with it, is located about one hour’s drive west of Albuquerque. The old village is situated on a mesa top, a sandstone mesa that rises almost 400 feet above the valley floor. Archaeologists will tell you that we settled Acoma around 1150 A.D. Our ancestors also settled Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde and other places within the Four Corners region of the country. We have a place of emergence that is sacred to us. We have an oral history that is very sacred to us. And we live on this rock, as I sometimes refer to it, this ancient homeland that now has finally grown back to just over one million acres of land. And we thrive on this land. Our tribal membership at this point is about 5,000 people, and we are part of mainstream society. We contribute to the greater society, and I would say that we have contributed in significant ways to this preservation movement. And I trust that we will continue to be involved and engaged in the important work that lies ahead.

Throughout our history, my humble pueblo of Acoma has been a trailblazer on many issues that have shaped the ways in which we, the 19 pueblo tribes in New Mexico, have established a presence here in the United States. Over time, we’ve also been able to influence policy set forth by the federal government. But there’s so much work to do in this area where historic preservation is concerned, as many of you know. We are constantly thinking about the ways in which we achieve a voice, achieve a place within the federal system, within the nonprofit or private sector. And so, we’re constantly preparing. There’s always hope that’s happening. Sometimes the progress is very slow moving, but that is okay. The important thing is that we are committed to this process.

I want to share a little bit about how this process works within the Pueblo of Acoma and throughout many indigenous communities, how traditional knowledge—traditional concepts, indigenous concepts, ancient concepts, however you want to refer to them—influence and guide this work for us as native people. This term, this concept, of “preservation” is not ours; we have other terms that we use that address the issues of taking care of things, of placing value on things—on everything really—and then the acts of doing repairs, doing construction, or sharing information with
others. The longer-term preservation and protection of these places or materials does happen. Like I said, it's always a slow process, but we do all that we can to prepare for all of that.

I have also been directly involved in the work around the protection of cultural resources, including the archaeological resources, in Chaco Canyon (or Waphr’ba’shuka in our language) and other historic places and cultural landscapes in the Four Corners region, in Mesa Verde, and now Bears Ears that has emerged as another area that requires protection.

But I want to concentrate on Acoma. The preparation for my work and the work in which Acoma has been engaged is really rooted in a very long history. I want to explain a little bit about what Acoma is doing currently, and what has been fueling this work and the work that lies ahead.

Historic preservation for Acoma is very wide in scope at this point. It isn’t only about restoring historic buildings and it isn’t only about the protection of sacred sites and other cultural resources. It’s also about the people and the ways in which we ensure that, while we are protecting and preserving structures and landscapes and sites, that the people must also be preserved, that community and social systems and structure also need to be preserved, so that
we have the understanding moving forward. So that we know why these places are important, we know how to use them, and that our great-grandchildren and their great-grandchildren will know why. And so, there is a critical piece to all this: That preservation for us is thinking about that future that far ahead and doing all that we can in this time to inform and educate ourselves, just as our ancestors did for us.

**FEDERAL POLICY EFFORTS**

Twenty-nine years ago, I served as a tribal official and as the first lieutenant governor for the pueblo. This was the time when the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act became law. I was designated to be involved in meetings and other gatherings associated with the development of the last phase of the law, advocating and offering testimony in the halls of Congress where this new law was concerned. All this took me back to a place and a time in my youth when I heard about *Waphr’ba’shuka* or Chaco, for the first time. I must have been 9 or 10 years old when I heard a reference made to human remains and the removal of human remains from Chaco Canyon. It was a discussion that was being held with my great-grandfather and some men who were gathered in the two-room house where he lived. That experience back then triggered all these thoughts within me as NAGPRA was coming to life, that maybe this opportunity was presenting itself to locate those human remains that my great-grandfather was talking about. I learned also that there were also many cultural resources on that Chaco landscape that connect us. And so, our work is based as well on those connections. Sometimes we are put in a situation where we have the burden of proving these connections, when we’re asked to reveal sacred information for the sake of substantiating our claims for these sacred places and sacred sites. That process is very problematic.

We have identified many flaws in that law, and there are other federal policies including ARPA where we have great concern. We believe it’s also time for some preparation to see some change in these laws, based on our recent experiences working with the
federal government and federal agencies and also the private sector. This work at Chaco has evolved over the course of the last 30 years in a very profound way.

Here at Acoma we have been at the forefront on all issues that impact this cultural landscape, and we have worked very hard and invested resources to ensure that the Chaco Culture National Historical Park remains protected, that we continue to be granted access for cultural practices, and that we are at the table any time that issues are discussed about any modifications, any potential threats to the park proper, and also to the landscape beyond the park. We have been very much involved in the development of proposed legislation.

There is a pending bill sponsored by Sen. Martin Heinrich and Sen. Tom Udall of New Mexico, a Chaco protection bill which would ensure there is a 10-mile buffer around federal lands so they are protected from any development, namely oil and gas development. This has been a great fight. It remains a great fight not only for Acoma but for many tribes. We have protested the lease and sale of lands by the federal government for oil and gas development. It’s really exhausting, but we are committed to this process. And I’ve found that our commitment to this has given us the opportunity to have a voice within this federal process.

We are at a point now, after almost three years of lobbying, that we secured some funding to complete a comprehensive ethnographic study of that greater Chaco landscape, not only for Acoma but for other tribes who have cultural affinity, including the Hopi tribe in New Mexico and Arizona. There’s a tremendous amount of work that lies ahead, but there is a great commitment on the part of all of us. We just recently established the Chaco Heritage Tribal Association. This group of individuals from six core tribes will lead the study in the coming year. We hope it will become the document that is recognized by the federal government and its agencies as they carry out their work in the future, and we hope that we will then build upon this ethnographic report as this work continues to protect and preserve the sacred place and the sacred landscape of Chaco.
As you know, when these types of projects and initiatives come to the public’s attention, we then gain additional resources in terms of advocacy and sometimes in terms of funding. We’ve looked to non-native professionals and academics—scholars and organizations and individuals—to assist us. And we appreciate that the National Trust has also stepped forward to help the pueblos in this important work. We are not done. There is so much more to do, but we will continue in this fight, and I hope that our children and grandchildren, not looking too far into the future, will realize the benefit then of this work in this time to protect that landscape.

OTHER CONCERNS
There are other topics that consume my time and that of other tribal leaders throughout the country. We hear in the news of the pipelines and other development that encroach upon our own tribal lands and on our cultural resources that exist beyond our tribal boundaries, and this, unfortunately, is going to be a continuous fight for Native America. But we are in the fight, and we are doing what we can to protect on our own tribal lands. This is where I think the Western concepts of preservation come into play in a profound way, and I’m grateful that it has because now we are thinking more critically about the ways in which we engage in preservation and the protection of our buildings.

We are also very much engaged, and I personally have been engaged in for quite some time, in the movement that’s occurring within museums to have more engagement with source communities, to learn more about the collections that they steward, to be more active in repatriation of ancestral remains, associated funerary objects, and cultural patrimony. There’s a great movement that’s happening in all of these areas. It’s also great to see that there are so many more Native Americans who are working in these professions and who are really helping to shift those paradigms and force a new narrative, a more accurate narrative of the history and cultures of our people.
FROM AN ANCIENT PAST TO GENERATIONS TO COME

We come from places that have a long history. Many of our structures, our sacred sites, and other cultural resources are very old. The houses that some of us live in today are hundreds of years old. I always tell people when they come to our home at the old village, “You realize you are in a home that was constructed probably around 1200, 1250 A.D.” And it’s always such a shock to them.

We are engaged in the preservation of those structures, but we are also engaged in preservation of other things. There are buildings and structures that were introduced to us here at Acoma, including San Esteban del Rey Church, the old mission church that sits atop old Acoma, built in 1629. It’s one of the largest examples of earthen architecture in North America. It is something that is important to the Acoma people and so, although it is a great challenge for us, we are very much engaged in the preservation of that structure as it is a part of our living culture.

We also are engaged in a number of other preservation initiatives around language and culture. Language is threatened in every indigenous community and Acoma certainly is not immune. To that
we have invested many resources. We just held a virtual symposium at the pueblo to rethink and recharge our efforts around language revitalization at the pueblo.

So, like I said, these initiatives are all rooted back in the people. It isn’t just about preserving something just to do it. There has to be meaning there and it has to be relevant to the people, it has to be relevant to the time and circumstances. This is a little bit about what we’re doing at Acoma and the ways in which we’re approaching this work. And we realize that there are many unknowns as we move forward.

I think that this pandemic that we are in has really given us an opportunity, as families and as a community. Even while we are segregated as a result of executive orders and mandates that prohibit gatherings, the isolation has given us the opportunity to do some critical thinking, some careful thinking about the real, the true essence of who we are as Acoma people and what we all need to be doing to ensure that we are preserving all of that. One of the things that we are struggling with right now is the fact that the pandemic has had such a great impact on our own community, with the separation and isolation of families, the cancellation of ceremony. The fact that we cannot be who we are, true Acoma, during this time has had a tremendous impact on us.

There will be some healing ahead, there will be that recovery ahead, and we will pursue that with that concept of Siu’namasti, that there is hope. There will be a time that’s not going to be back or the same as what we knew life to be, but it can be better. It will be better than what we left behind as a result of this pandemic, because I think we also then realize and acknowledge that we have not been the best stewards of our lands and our resources and of the people, and so we have to proceed. And there will be a long process, I believe, but a process that has to be strategic and also very thoughtful as we think about the future during this time.

Of course, we are also seeing the great tension that results among humanity—the injustices, the racial social justice movements. We are also a part of those, and we are also committed to remain a part of those discussions and actions because it is important.
We’ve worked hard to have a seat at the table. We’ve worked very hard to have a voice and to have influence, and we cannot allow this to be threatened by the federal government and others. That work also continues.

Preservation is one of those heavy issues for us, but it’s also one that is very important. And the best way we can pursue this work here at Acoma is through those concepts I’ve talked about and understanding why those concepts are important in this work. My hope is that those great-great-great-grandchildren will also do the same work, and even better work on behalf of their own grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and that places like Chaco and Acoma remain closely tied and that those ancestral ties help them to shape their future so that the people can continue.

So with that, I thank you for your attention, I wish you all a very productive conference, and I wish you safety and good health. FJ

BRIAN D. VALLO is the Governor of the Pueblo of Acoma.
Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Four Decades on Main Street

MARY MEANS

Today I want to take you back a long, long time—even before the internet and Google.

It was the 1970s. My job with the National Trust was to foster the growth of historic preservation in the Midwest. Traveling around its 10 states, meeting advocates, skeptics—who included nearly everyone in power.

I discovered that, while there were fine architectural landmarks, the most striking and neglected historic resource was the town center—its Main Street.

There, the whole of it with its 19th- and early-20th-century buildings was much more than its parts. Yet Main Street was so familiar, and its deterioration had been so gradual, that it was taken for granted.

As was the migration out—business was moving to highways or to shopping centers, draining the life from Main Street.

The pattern was widespread: Fine buildings, often covered in modernized slipcovers, were at risk and their value not recognized.

The Main Street team retreat in 1979 at a very cold Wisconsin camp where they brainstormed two years of experience into what became the Four Point Approach.

PHOTO CREDIT JAMES STOCKARD
Preservation was an alien idea, thought suitable only for places with genuine historic significance. These were just old buildings.

The reason I opened with the pre-internet remark is that in the 1970s information was very hard to come by. One couldn’t just ask the Google “how do I bring our town center back?” This was also the time before adaptive use became common. Again, there were very few examples to point to.

There were only two of us on staff in the Trust office for the Midwest, and very few local preservation organizations. So we weren’t going to make any headway if we couldn’t address two related issues:

First, town centers—Main Streets—were being left behind as relics. If we were going to make preservation work, we had to find ways for communities to save them, to bring them back to life.

Second, and directly related, advocates for preservation were passionate, but seldom in power. Those who held power were at best skeptical about preservation. They viewed us as seeing the world through curatorial eyes, seeking architectural perfection—and that was expensive. We had to make believers, and the best way to do that was to make preservation matter to them. Who were those with power? Businesspeople. If we could make preservation work downtown, we could address both of these overarching issues.

So with the naivete of youth, we set out to do this. We proposed the Main Street Project. The National Endowment for the Arts believed in us and awarded us $50,000—their maximum—to get started (probably the most highly leveraged grant they ever gave!). A benevolent manufacturer of building materials put up the rest, paying for the three-year experiment.

We would work in three towns—Galesburg, Illinois; Hot Springs, South Dakota; and Madison, Indiana—to learn what worked, then we’d hold conferences, write a book, and make a film. We’d do all this in three years. And we would document it so we could prove, as our tagline rashly promised, you could have “economic development within the context of historic preservation.”

It worked. From the experience gained in the three towns we learned a lot.
Most important, we learned the vital ingredient was the presence of an energetic, savvy “Main Street manager” to orchestrate volunteers. And we learned the power of story—or vision, if you will.

The common wisdom of the time was “head out, downtown is dead.” Spoken or not, it was the inner voice in towns and cities across the country. It has been said that the Main Street Project brought a new narrative: “No it isn’t, it’s the heart of your community and you can do something about it.”

From the get-go, the media jumped on it—it was a natural David and Goliath story. The film Main Street came out in 1979 and became a Rotary and Kiwanis lunchtime hit. Soon hundreds of towns were calling and writing letters to the Trust—no email yet!

The National Trust had never seen anything like it. Nothing it had done had ever gained this much traction—and it was happening well beyond the Midwest.

Instead of riding off into the sunset at the end of three years, we managed to attract the funding to take the Main Street Approach to scale—trying it out in six states, each with five towns. Thus was born the National Main Street Center. The hope was that states would be the platform for networks of strong Main Street towns. And, as you know, they are today.

Over the last two years, I’ve been thinking a lot about how all this came about, why it worked, why it spread, and how it has endured for 40 years. I’d left the world of Main Street in the mid-1980s and had been running a small but mighty planning firm.
When I returned to find out what had happened, I was blown away by the spread, the economic impact. It’s a story that has flown under the radar of mainstream economists and preservationists. So I decided to write a book about it. I called it *Main Street’s Comeback*.

As I was finishing it, the pandemic changed everything, including the book. It is now titled *Main Street’s Comeback and How It Can Come Back Again*.

**A FORCE FOR RECOVERY**

The damage of the pandemic is profound. Beyond the tragic and rising death toll, it is truly an existential crisis, nowhere more so than on Main Street.

Those of you who have worked there so hard and so long know it well. But most Main Streets have weathered existential crises before—think of the Great Depression’s breadlines passing boarded up stores. Think of the flight to the suburbs and to regional shopping centers. Main Street has even survived—so far—the mighty Amazon.

And unlike 40 years ago, they have two things going for them: The buildings are in good condition; and, most of all, there are now skilled, dedicated Main Street organizations. These vital nodes of leadership embody years of experience working together and building trust.

Together, Main Street’s 1,600 towns and 39 states are an invisible system for recovery. It is time to lift it up and make it visible. This is the resilient network that is poised for regeneration. You are regenerators. That’s the term used by urban economist Bruce Katz, formerly of Brookings Institution, to name the vital engine of recovery. Keeping this web together and strengthening it is the purpose of the legislation Main Street America and others are pushing for. Why? Because as Katz puts it, “The notion that a quick revival of Main Streets will be driven by millions of individual small businesses acting on their own defies the laws of finance.”

He and we know that recovery is inextricably linked to the recovery of places, not just small businesses. The vital ingredient for both is the presence of these regenerators, and many of these vital
institutions are themselves in financial distress. Thus the critical need for federal funding to keep the regeneration web together. The leaders among you are already actively building a groundswell of support at all levels. Everyone needs to get involved.

We live in a fractured, divided nation. Main Street is nonpartisan. It belongs to everybody. It takes inspired leadership to keep it that way, to enable it to remain the heart of the whole community. There are states that have lost their Main Street programs due to changes in administrations. Those that have endured have weathered the storms of regime change.

Texas and North Carolina are outstanding examples. Both have been in the Main Street network since its inception 40 years ago.

Some say Texas’s magic ingredient was Anice Read, the force of nature who headed the state program for its first 16 years. Anice cooked up the First Lady’s visit—inviting the wife of the current governor to tour new Main Street communities to congratulate them. They loved it from the start and passed the word to their successors that it’s the best part of the job. Legislators know it too. Main Street is nearly as sacred in Texas as Friday night football.

Similarly, the North Carolina Main Street program has not only survived but grown since it was named one of the first Main Street states in 1980. North Carolina is a “purple” state—moving from one party to the other, sometimes electing a Republican governor, other times a Democratic one. Sometimes the legislative houses are controlled by the opposite party than the governor’s office, sometimes the two different parties control the two houses of the state legislature. Had Main Street been identified as a Republican initiative or a Democratic initiative, it is unlikely the program would have survived. Instead, in good economic years when there are ample funds in the state coffers, Main Street has often been
awarded extra funds. It has taken savvy leadership to navigate through political waters successfully year after year.

Yesterday, it was thrilling to be given the Crowninshield Award, the highest honor in historic preservation. Most of all, it symbolized that through the Main Street initiative historic preservation has evolved from a focus on architectural correctness to a place-based process that is much more relevant to many more people. And, serendipitously, the interdependent web of Main Street organizations in some 1,600 towns and neighborhood districts is even more relevant for post-pandemic recovery. FJ

MARY MEANS’ long career has centered on helping communities create sustainable futures rooted in their heritage. She is the recipient of the American Planning Association’s 2018 Planning Pioneer Award, and in 2020 the National Trust presented her with the Louise du Pont Crowninshield Award, the highest honor in historic preservation. This address was included as part of the 40th Anniversary of Main Street plenary.
Honoring the Difficult Histories and Diverse Stories of Little Tokyo

GEORGE TAKEI AND TIM WHALEN

Tim Whalen: I’m pleased to be here with a great American citizen, George Takei, to discuss with him why we choose to preserve historic places, how telling difficult stories can lead us into reconciliation, and how preservation can contribute to the social justice goals of equality and inclusion. As a highly visible community activist, George provides inspiration about how we can all more effectively communicate with a wide variety of audiences about the need for preserving our shared history.

George Takei: I’m a native Angeleno, born and raised here, and I love my city and I love the diversity of my city, the various different districts. Being an aspiring actor, certainly the glamor of the Hollywood studios absolutely fascinated me. And it’s constantly changing. So I know Los Angeles well and the many districts, but Little Tokyo is where my heart and soul resides. It’s the Japanese American district of downtown Los Angeles, literally in the shadows of City Hall. And I have many, many areas of Los Angeles that I love, but Little Tokyo is a very special place for me.

May I share the history of Little Tokyo and all the vicissitudes of life that it went through? Little Tokyo is a district that we call 118 years old because a legend has it that a Japanese sailor jumped ship at San Pedro Harbor and came to downtown Los Angeles and started an American cafe. He sold hamburgers and French fries, hot dogs, and sauerkraut—a very American restaurant. But the Japanese immigrants that came to Los Angeles congregated there, in was the area that was not restricted. Immigrants from

George Takei
PHOTO CREDIT: GREATER TALENT NETWORK
Asia were restricted to move into certain parts of Los Angeles, but that was where that restriction didn’t exist, and a community grew. Restaurants opened up, grocery stores, barbershops, and churches began to be built. A Christian church and many Buddhist temples were built. The very first Buddhist temple was built in what we call the heart of Little Tokyo, on the corner of First Street and Central Avenue. And you can’t get more smack dab in the center than First and Central Avenue.

On the opposite side of that very same block to the west, the first Japanese Christian Church was built. That was a Neoclassical building with four elegant ionic pillars. So that was where the Japanese immigrant Christians went.

In 1921 the leaders of a Japanese Buddhist congregation—which was founded in 1905, but their gathering place were initially in people’s living rooms and then in social halls—decided they were affluent enough and large enough to build a real temple. On the corner of First Street and Central Avenue, they bought that real estate, hired an architect to build their magnificent temple. The congregation was headed by a savvy businessman. First Street was the retail street, the commercial street. All the businesses were there. And so they decided that the First Street frontage would be commercial on the ground level, with shops—a barbershop, a jewelry shop, and a sushi bar—and the second floor and the third floor would be offices—lawyers’ offices, insurance offices—and the Central Avenue side would be the entrance to the temple. They wanted for this temple a classic ceremonial entrance with the undulating traditional canopy over it. And the hot architect that they hired knew about the Japanese Buddhist temple entrances, so he designed that for them. But he was a passionate lover of Art Deco. On the rest of the facade, he built Art Deco Egyptian pillars. It’s a very singular, unique building; nowhere in all of Japan or all of Asia will you see a Buddhist temple with Art Deco Egyptian colors next to a classic ceremonial entrance.

And Little Tokyo thrived. In the 1920s, it became the place to go. And even in the Depression, it had a substantial support base because there were Japanese immigrant farmers in the San Fernando Valley, Japanese flower growers in the Santa Monica
area and the Malibu area, Japanese fishermen in San Pedro. They all made their weekly trips to Little Tokyo to buy groceries, Japanese groceries—pickled plums, the bags of rice and fish, and all the other things that they needed. They went to the shoe stores, because Japanese feet are smaller than Caucasian feet, and they had stores that offered shoes that fit their size. They went to dry goods stores where they bought clothes, and they had a dinner or lunch in the restaurants. But most importantly, every Sunday, they came down to Little Tokyo to worship in the Christian churches or the Buddhist temple. And certainly, the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple at First and Central was the most vibrant of all the temples.

**INTERNMENT, AND AFTER**

But when Pearl Harbor was bombed, everything changed cataclysmically. Terror swept the country from the Pacific all the way to the Atlantic. We were categorized as enemy aliens, which was not true at all. A second generation was born. Some were adults. I was four years old at the time. We were American citizens and we were not the enemy. I mean, I was just a four-year-old kid. It was the most irrational thing that they could say, but that hysteria was combined with racism, and every legislative body from the local city councils to state legislatures to the United States Congress in Washington thundered with irrational words of hate. The mayor of Los Angeles, Fletcher Bowron, talked about Japanese by saying, no matter what generation they are, they are Japanese; they cannot be assimilated.

We had an attorney general in California at that time, the top lawyer, who made an astonishing statement. He said, “We have no reports of sabotage or spying or fifth column activities by Japanese Americans,” and that is ominous—ominous because the Japanese are inscrutable. You can’t tell what we’re thinking from our face. It would be prudent to lock us up before we do anything. For this attorney general, the absence of evidence was the evidence. In the halls of Congress, the senator from Tennessee, Tom Stewart, made another shocking statement on the floor of the U.S. Senate. He said that any Japanese in the United States will stab you in the back. Stab you in the back! How many Japanese, first of all, would a
senator from Tennessee know? I would suspect zero. And yet those statements were made wantonly, and even then the president of the United States—who during the Depression made the statement “There’s nothing to fear, but fear itself” and pulled the nation up from that crushing Depression—was stampeded by the fear of people of Japanese ancestry.

On February 19th, he signed Executive Order 9066, which ordered all Japanese Americans to be summarily rounded up with no charges, no trial, no due process. The central pillar of our justice system disappeared. And we were to be forcibly incarcerated in internment camps.

But going back a few steps, immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, on December 8th, the FBI swooped down on the Japanese American community and picked out the homes of the so-called leaders of the community, presidents of business associations, presidents of kabuki clubs, teachers of the Japanese language, and Buddhist ministers. Anyone who had anything to do with things Japanese, they rounded them up with—again, no charges, no trial—and put them in what they called detention camps. Department of Justice detention camps—irony there.

But at the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple, there was something unusual. There was one minister who was not Japanese. He was Caucasian. His name was Julius Goldwater, who had a cousin in Arizona by the name of Barry, who was to be elected United States senator from Arizona and later become a candidate for the presidency of the United States. The minute the Buddhist temple was left in the care and management of Rev. Julius Goldwater, all the Japanese ministers were taken away.

When the rest of the community was rounded up (I was five years old by then, my brother was a year younger), it was a terrorizing morning. My father got my brother and me up very early, dressed us hurriedly, and told us to wait in the living room while our parents did some last-minute packing in the bedroom. Our baby sister was in a cradle in the bedroom with them.

My brother and I were just gazing out the front window at the neighborhood. And suddenly we saw two soldiers marching up our
driveway. They carried rifles with shiny bayonets on them. They stomped up the porch and with their fists began pounding on the door. I still remember it; it felt like the whole house was trembling. My father came rushing out of the bedroom, answered the door, and, literally at gunpoint, we were ordered out of our home. We were loaded onto trucks with other Japanese American families and taken down to Little Tokyo, right in front of the ceremonial entrance of the Buddhist temple. And there, already hoards of other Japanese American families were gathered. There was a row of buses waiting for us, and we were packed into those buses and taken to Santa Anita Race Track, unloaded, herded over to the stable area, and each family was assigned a horse stable to sleep in.

From a two-bedroom home on Garnett Street in Los Angeles, my parents had to take us into that stable, still pungent with a stench of fresh manure. For my parents, it was a degrading, humiliating, painful experience. But the 5-year-old me thought it was fun to sleep where the horses sleep. I had a whole different perspective. The same experience, but parallel experiences. We were there for a few months while the camps were being built.

And we were taken to the swamps of Arkansas. And for me, that was an amazing adventure. I’m a Southern California kid. I’m used to palm trees and trees growing in our yard or alongside the street. But there in Arkansas, beyond the barbed wire fence and a part of the camp itself was a bayou, pools of water that trees grew up out of and their roots snaked in and out of the water. I’d never seen anything like that. And along the edges of the bayou, there were black wiggly fish swimming that I could catch by scooping them up with my hands and putting them in jar. But the magical thing about these black wiggly fishes, they grew bumps and then legs. Fish that grow legs! And then one morning they had escaped from my jar by climbing their way out. Amazing! So those are my memories.

For my parents, it was an anguishing, horrible experience to take their children behind those barbed wire fences. And I do remember those barbed wire fences still today. There were tall sentry towers with machine guns pointed at us. I remember at
night when I made the night runs to the latrine, searchlights followed me. My parents hated it, especially my mother. But for me, I thought it was nice that they lit the way for me to pee. Two different perspectives on that.

I went to school in a black tarpaper barrack, and every morning the school day began with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. I could see the barbed wire fence and the sentry tower right outside my schoolhouse window as I recited the words “with liberty and justice for all.”

The loyalty questionnaire came a year later, because the government realized that there’s a wartime manpower shortage. And here are these young people that they could have had serve—in fact, many had rushed to the recruitment centers after the bombing of Pearl Harbor to volunteer to serve in the military. But they were in prison as enemy aliens. How to justify drafting people out of a barbed wire concentration camp for service in the U.S. military? Again, another irrational thing.

The questionnaire was very sloppily put together. There were two questions that made no sense at all. Question 27 asked, “Will you bear arms to defend the United States of America?” This being asked of my parents who were Americans. My mother was born in Sacramento. My father was a San Franciscan. They were being asked to abandon their children and bear arms to defend the nation that’s imprisoning their children. Outrageous!

The next question, 28, asked another key question to which they expected a “yes” answer. Two ideas in one sentence. It asked, “Will you swear your loyalty to the United States of America and forswear your loyalty to the Emperor of Japan?” The emperor of Japan? We had no such allegiance. The government assumed that we had an inborn pre-existing racial loyalty to the emperor, which was insulting. So if you should answer “no”—meaning, I don’t have a loyalty to the emperor to forswear—that “no” applied to the first part of the very same sentence. If you answered “yes”—meaning I do swear my loyalty to the United States—then that “yes” applied to the second part, meaning you were confessing that you did have a loyalty to the emperor and now you’re prepared to forswear that.
It’s that kind of outrage that my parents had to endure.

The war ended. We came back to Los Angeles, but it was the immediate post-war years. Finding housing was absolutely impossible. We lived on Skid Row for about a month or two, and then we moved into an all–Mexican American neighborhood. We were the only Asian family, much less Japanese American family, there. I had friends with nicknames like Pelon, Latta, Chichi, and they became very good friends, and I came to love the Mexican American culture and Mexican food, especially. And I learned to speak Spanish. I speak Spanish because of that time in our lives when we lived in East L.A. But our heart was still in Little Tokyo. My mother took me shopping down to Little Tokyo.

I should explain to you what happened to the Buddhist temple during the war. Rev. Goldwater was in charge of the temple, but everyone had been forcibly removed. Little Tokyo became a ghost town. But it wasn’t a ghost town for very long because the war plants needed labor. Wave after wave of African Americans from the South came in and they filled the vacancy in Little Tokyo. And during that time, Little Tokyo was referred to as Bronzeville and the shops became African American shops. Restaurants served Creole food and there were nightclubs there on First Street. One was legendary, became the Finale Club where good musicians, artists like Miles Davis and Charlie Yardbird Parker played. It became an African American neighborhood.

Southern African Americans are religious people. They’re Baptist and they needed a place to worship every Sunday. They approached Rev. Goldwater and asked if they might use the sanctuary of this Buddhist temple. Rev. Goldwater was a very generous and hospitable man, and he opened up the ceremonial doors of this Buddhist temple to the African American Baptists. So during the war, this Buddhist temple rocked with the hand-clapping, foot-stomping hallelujahs of Southern Baptist religious services. So this building has both a multiracial and multireligious history.

When the Japanese American community returned, then it became Little Tokyo again. But the customer base was a little different. It was Japanese American, but with a sprinkling of African Americans who had developed a taste for Japanese food. The
annual festivals that were held in Little Tokyo were reinstated, where the Boy Scout drum and bugle corps marched, and the queen of the festival rode on a float wearing a Japanese kimono. And the most spectacular part of it was, hundreds of dancers in kimonos did the classic folk dances of Japan. But after the war, we had a sprinkling of African Americans in Japanese kimonos joining in on the folk dances. I remember one very tall and very portly African American man who danced with such grace and such elegance, made the turns so gracefully, we became fans of his at every festival. Little Tokyo was back, but with a different color, a sprinkling of colors. And the Buddhist temple was, again, a Buddhist temple.

SAFEGUARDING LITTLE TOKYO

But in the 1960s, another threat emerged. Los Angeles was a growing city. The population was growing, businesses were growing. The civic center needed to expand and Little Tokyo was right next to it; we shared a border. The city needed to grow and wanted to redevelop Little Tokyo. This time, there was a sense of community within the Japanese American community. We organized, but nevertheless, the city was determined to take over land and they bought from the two congregations the Christian Union Church on the west side of our block and the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple on the east side. The Union Church built a new, very contemporary building two blocks to the south, and the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple congregation built their new temple—an even grander and more completely authentic Japanese Buddhist temple—one block to the east.

These two religious centers, the church and the temple, were vacant. There were all these businesses, but the Caucasian business owners resisted. They didn’t want to sell and they joined with the Japanese American community, together with the Los Angeles Conservancy. They recognized the value of this community, not just the two religious buildings, but the texture of the street and the history of the street. And they joined with us.

We had to sacrifice one block to the west of San Pedro, across from Union Church. And that’s where the new police headquarters
was built. The rest of Little Tokyo was going to be rebuilt, but we needed low-income housing for the senior citizens. We insisted that that be the first building to go up. My father served on the board of that building. And so we lost one block, but with the help of the Los Angeles Conservancy, that central block—First Street between Central and San Pedro—became a historic district.

But the Buddhist temple was empty, as was Union Church, and it was getting shabbier. Pigeon droppings started to cover the ceremonial canopy. Homeless people started to sleep in front of the ceremonial entrance. Little Tokyo was getting shabby. What was going to happen? But because the community was united, we were able to compromise with the city and save that block; the north side of the First Street still exists as it originally was when Little Tokyo was founded. There are contemporary buildings in Little Tokyo now that are hotels and office buildings, but the history is still there.

Far East Building, Little Tokyo.
PHOTO CREDIT: MELITA JURESA-MCDONALD
By this time, I was an activist in the community, and also a lover of classic architecture, and I recognized the importance of the Buddhist temple. The leader of the group that came up with the idea of building a museum was the president of the savings and loan association, Bruce Kaji. Their office was on the south side of First Street. He asked me to serve on the board with him. We initially got a warehouse on Third Street where the artifacts that we had collected were stored. And we engaged with the city, which owned the Buddhist temple, and we agreed on a 99-year lease for a dollar. We would restore and adaptively reuse this Buddhist temple, so that the building would be honored, but the use of the building would be a museum.

The sanctuary interior was all classic; there was no Art Deco there. There were other Art Deco elements in the social hall and the stairway, but the sanctuary was a real treasure and it is as it originally was. The only change was the floor was raked theater style, so we leveled the floor off. We did not touch the altar area at all. And that became our first building.

The grand opening of our museum was to be held outdoors. The stage was to be under the ceremonial canopy. And we had the city close off Central Avenue, and folding chairs were spread out on Central Avenue and on a wide parking lot across the street. The opening was on April 29, 1992. It was a day that we all eagerly looked forward to.

But on that date, when we looked to the southern horizon, black clouds were churning up from the south, about a half a dozen columns of clouds. That was the day when the judgment came down on the Rodney King beating. The judgment on the four policemen was acquittal. When Rodney King was arrested for speeding, he was tasered and viciously beaten and stomped on. And that was captured by a man who had a camera across the street from where the beating was going on. It was a very controversial trial. And on that morning of April 29, 1992, when that verdict came down, there was a riot, and it continued for five days after that.
It underscored for us why it is so important that we build this museum. The mission of the Japanese American National Museum—it’s a shameful history that we have and that’s why we need to know our history fully. Like the slave history, where human beings became chattel, and then the war that was fought to emancipate them, and yet they were not fully emancipated, and then the Jim Crow period when lynchings were rampant.

**Tim Whalen:** This conversation makes it so clear that place and story go together, that they’re completely linked and we need everyone’s voice to tell it.

**George Takei:** That’s what makes the story important and the preservation of the Buddhist temple important: as a tool for education, to promote the understanding and appreciation of America’s ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience. The injustice that we suffered came from that same source: the injustice, the prejudice against people who are different. And certainly the African Americans have a long, long history of that. We were galvanized by that symbolic date that our museum first opened its doors.

But we were determined to make this museum even bigger, because we had a big story to tell. And we continued the fundraising and we bought the parking lot across the street and got the city to close off Central Avenue so that we could have a plaza to tie the two buildings together. And we built a third building because we organize symposia, lectures, debates, and other events like that. And we were addressing the ideals of our democracy. We called the forum-shaped theater “The Democracy Forum.”

In fact, Brad and I were the first to get a marriage license from the state of California when the California Supreme Court ruled for marriage equality in 2008. And we decided to get married in the Democracy Forum, because it was democracy that made our marriage possible. And we love the idea of diversity. I’d worked on *Star Trek*, and some of my *Star Trek* colleagues become good, dear friends. And so our best man was Walter Koenig, who played Chekhov, who is Jewish. So we had a Jewish Caucasian as our best man. And for our matron of honor, we asked Nichelle Nichols,
an African American. But Nichelle was rather picky. She said, “I am not a matron. If Walter can be the best man, why can’t I be the best lady?” We said, “Of course you are.” And so she became our best lady. As our guests arrived, we had a koto player—koto is a classic, horizontal Japanese harp—and we had this beautiful lady in a silk kimono playing the koto, a calming, lovely tune. For our officiant, the Nishi Hongan-ji Buddhist temple had on its ministerial staff a Mexican American who had become a Buddhist minister. We had a white male best man and an African American best lady, a Mexican American Buddhist minister to officiate. And when the ceremony ended, Brad is of German and English-Scottish ancestry, so we had a Scottish bagpiper at the entrance who led the wedding party across the plaza to the great hall of the museum. And we had our wedding banquet there.

This Buddhist temple has gone through many, many changes, but the history behind it and the architecture which makes it singular—the combination of Art Deco, Egyptian, and classic Japanese Buddhist temple—is something that we are very proud of. I call it an American Buddhist temple building. We say the temple is the largest artifact in our historic collection, and we refer to it as the historic building.

**SHARING STORIES, BUILDING COMMUNITY**

**Tim Whalen:** What you’re exposing is that these buildings don’t mean anything without the stories behind them. And it’s something the preservation community has not always been in the forefront of. It’s “stop the bulldozer, save the building” and then on to “stop the next bulldozer.” And we’re learning to be better storytellers. And most importantly, we’re working hard, I think, to tell a much fuller American story. I wonder if you have thoughts for the preservation community nationally about how to do that better, who to engage. We can’t always have people of national stature helping us do it. So how do we do that?

**George Takei:** Well I do think that you need a team or a community, as we have in Little Tokyo. The community is built on a common, shared history. And we educate. We tell the story to the
community about what these buildings mean and what we’ve experienced in the buildings. When it was a Buddhist temple, I’ve gone to weddings and funerals, and the social halls had talent shows. We share these experiences, and we tell them, “This is what makes this building unique. It’s our building and we have a story to tell.” We go on educational campaigns to build a base of support.

Then when there are challenges, as when redevelopment came down on Little Tokyo and we lost to the city the two most significant buildings—the Neoclassical church building and the Buddhist temple—we explain that they’re not just temples, they are symbolic buildings. And particularly, the Buddhist temple has a multiracial story. We had a Caucasian Buddhist minister when our community was most challenged, when we had to be evacuated, who maintained and managed that building. It also became an African American place of worship. That gives it another dimension of uniqueness—people oppressed who came to Los Angeles seeking opportunities, and they found their opportunity, interestingly enough, in a Japanese Buddhist temple. And that added that much deeper American significance to this building.

When marriage equality came down, Brad and I could add another dimension to the museum complex. We got married in the Democracy Forum. It’s a place that is a symbol of democracy, our form of government, a government that cherishes the ideal of rule of law, of due process, of equal justice, which we were deprived of by our own country.

Our resilience and our determination to continue to build a community give us that relevance. Resilience and relevance. It’s an American building. We are struggling with America’s struggle to realize its ideals, to make this country “a more perfect union.” We’re not perfect, but the ideals are shining ideas, and to give it meaning and relevance, we have to live it, and we live it by preserving these buildings that have those lessons and reminders for us.

Tim Whalen: That’s so inspiring. Thank you. Just going back to the stories, I should congratulate you on receiving the American Book Award for your graphic novel entitled They Called Us Enemy. Your whole family story and the course of your life is there, and it was really powerful for me to see it.
George Takei: Thank you. It just got translated into Japanese. It has also been translated into German. For me, that was important because of their history, to let them know that it’s not just Germans who did that, that we’re all fallible human beings and America is not without fallibility. And it’s also in Spanish and Portuguese. There’s a huge Spanish-speaking community in the United States, but also there’s a huge Japanese Brazilian community, even larger than in the United States. The largest Japanese diaspora community is in Brazil. We’ve sold a lot of books to the Portuguese-speaking Japanese Brazilians.

Tim Whalen: You talked about creative problem-solving, and that leads us to look to the future a bit. I realized that Star Trek aired its first episode in 1966, so that’s now more than 50 years ago (and in historic preservation terms, at the age of 50, it would now be eligible to become a national historic landmark). But its futuristic story remains iconic and uplifting and inspiring. Do you have any parting words for us about the future of saving places, and what you think this movement and this community of people should be focusing on as we go forward and try to tell a more complete American story?

George Takei: Well, we’re talking about preservation, but I have a heritage of the future, having worked on Star Trek. And one of my heroes is the creator of Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry. He was an extraordinary man on so many levels. And he said the motto of the Starship Enterprise is “infinite diversity and infinite combinations.” That combination of people with different backgrounds, different histories, different experiences coming together and working in concert. And so I’m going to steal from Gene Roddenberry and take that “infinite diversity in infinite combinations” to add “working in concert as a team moves society forward.”

Tim Whalen: Thank you. I can’t improve on that. I don’t think anyone can. I’m so grateful for your time today and thank you for bringing the preservation community along and inspiring us. I look forward to reading more about you and the stories you bring to all of us here in this country. Thank you, George, for being with us.
George Takei: Well, thank you very much, and do come and visit the Japanese American National Museum and the Buddhist temple, which we call the largest and most interesting artifact in our collection. FJ

With a career spanning five decades, GEORGE TAKEI is an actor and one of the country’s leading figures in the fight for social justice, LGBTQ rights, and marriage equality. He has been involved with the Japanese American National Museum since its founding over thirty years ago. TIM WHALEN serves on the board of directors of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the John E. and Louise Bryson Director of the Getty Conservation Institute.

FORUM JOURNAL
Tule Lake: Learning from Places of Exception in a Climate of Fear by Cathlin Goulding

RESOURCE
Preserving the Sites and Telling the Story of Japanese American Internment

TAKEAWAY
Excavating History: A Conversation with Bill Watanabe and Marjorie Akin

RESOURCE
Tadaima! Lessons From a Community Virtual Pilgrimage
Coming Next: The National Impact Agenda

LESLIE CANAAN, LISA CRAIG, DI GAO, RENEE KUHLMAN, JIM LINDBERG AND BONNIE MCDONALD

Multiple crises are rattling our nation. We are simultaneously navigating a global pandemic, a national reckoning on racial justice, an economic recession, and more frequent natural disasters. In a year that has been short on gatherings and high on isolation, we are all seeking connection.

That is why it was critical at PastForward Online 2020 to provide a way for those engaged in preservation across the country to come together, connect, and share ideas. This was done through three exciting town halls, and a series of videos, all designed to cover issues of importance to the preservation community. While each town hall had its own theme—equity, climate change, relevance—these themes are all interrelated. More than 2,000 attendees participated over the three days in small breakout discussions and online surveys.

The town halls also launched a process that will continue over the next year, capturing input with our preservation colleagues and allies in other fields on the challenges and priorities of today’s preservation movement. These ideas and insights will inform an action plan for going forward: the National Impact Agenda.

The National Impact Agenda will strive to articulate our shared values for preservation practice and describe strategies and actions that we can take—individually and collectively—to extend and deepen the impact of our work. It will look especially at how preservation practice can be more effective in three areas.

EQUITY

Equitable development refers to a process of sharing authority in decision-making to deliver investment, programs, and policies that intentionally reduce inequality among groups of people—whether they are defined socially, ethnically, racially, economically, or geographically—to reach more just and fair conditions in a way that respects past and current circumstances.
Many practitioners have documented that existing systems, practices, and tools available to identify, protect, and designate historic properties have prioritized the stories of White, male, and privileged backgrounds. A growing number of practitioners have found that our existing tools are limited in supporting heritage protection in many communities of color. Out of nearly two million sites that have been identified to be included on the National Register, still only a very small percent speak directly to the non-white experiences. This exclusion and the barriers that prevent preservation from benefiting historically marginalized communities perpetuates the notion that preservation is a practice that serves a privileged few and is not relevant to the lives of all Americans.

City policies and development practices continue to result in unnecessary demolition of buildings that can be feasibly and functionally reused. Integrity standards and survey practices continue exclude Black heritage. Many communities of color, where institutions have denied residents, businesses, and property owners access to the same financial resources as other communities for generations, lack access to capital to sustain their businesses, homes, and properties.

Then there is the issue of who practices preservation. Today, African American practitioners are underrepresented in most preservation-related professions, accounting for a very small percentage of professional preservationists. (See a recently released report on *Growing Preservation’s Potential as Path for Equity* report for an expanded discussion on these issues.)

*The Preserving African American Places: Growing Preservation’s Potential as a Path for Equity* report seeks to elevate emerging ideas, research, observations, and questions on the critically important issues of equitable development, social justice, and the practice of preservation.
How can we make equity a more intentional and evident preservation value? To develop an action plan, we must:
- gain an understanding of the current work of the National Trust and of our peers in the equity arena.
- identify structural barriers to advancing equity and social justice through preservation.
- reflect on what’s working in each of our practice areas and communities and share pressing priorities.

Through direct and intentional engagement, research and analysis, and coordination, we seek to learn from each other and identify actions to address shared priorities. These issues are systemic; change must come in the form of both how we practice, interpret, and carry out existing preservation work, and also how we find new ways to support a more diverse cross-section of Americans in protecting the places that matter to them.

We should also look inward to our own organizations.

A pre-conference questionnaire answered by more than 1,000 attendees revealed that they hail widely from various organizations, are in different stages in their career, and are diverse in age. It is clear, however, that we still have a great deal of work to do to gain diversity in racial, ethnic, and gender identity. For instance, those who responded are predominately white and highly educated. Additionally, more than 70 percent identify as female. While we celebrate who is showing up for these conversations, we must also acknowledge where more work needs to be done to increase inclusion in our field.

As stated in the *Preserving African American Places: Growing Preservation’s Potential as a Path for Equity* report, the National Trust is confronting “its own limitations on the issues of equity and, even more broadly, our own place in the structural racism and inequity inherent in historic preservation, both as a cultural movement and a professional practice.” Our organization is on a journey that will continue for us and is one that we hope will continue to involve each of you as well.

There are already countless preservation professionals and volunteers in diverse roles who are striving for equity and inclusion
through their work, who acknowledge where more work needs to be done. We will be looking for ways to engage more members of the field, to hear more perspectives, and to collectively develop the National Impact Agenda as an equity-driven plan to evolve the preservation field.

**CLIMATE CHANGE**

Extreme climate events are causing deaths, inflicting damage, and costing billions of dollars, forcing governments and property owners to act. From Santa Rosa, California, to the Shinnecock Indian Nation on the East End of Long Island, New York, communities across the country are adapting and preparing for a future of fires, drought, flooding, and rising seas.

Climate change is costing families and communities throughout the United State. In 2019 climate related disasters exceeded $45 billion in associated costs. The year 2020 is on track to exceed those numbers with $17.6 billion in damages recorded in the first 6 months—not counting the calamitous fires in the West.

Few areas of the country are spared from devastation.

In the Great Lakes region—from Duluth to Chicago to Cleveland to Buffalo—billions have been spent in flood recovery along a shoreline that stretches farther than the combined length of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

In the past two years, extreme weather has driven Midwest rivers over their banks and spun killer tornados costing lives, devastating homes and businesses, and causing nearly $11 billion in damages across millions of acres from rural South Dakota to Main Street Joplin, Missouri.

Along the Atlantic coastline from Lake Charles, Louisiana, to Charleston, South Carolina, in 2019 and 2020 hurricanes Dorian, Delta, and Laura have taken their toll on an already disaster-weary Southeast and Gulf Coast.

Meanwhile, out West, California, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, and Colorado are heating up as climate change wrecks havoc on the wilderness/urban interface. California alone has 19,000 firefighters battling 27 major blazes with 4 million acres and nearly 7,000 buildings destroyed by fire.
But there is hope. We still have time to act—to protect our communities, minimize damage to historic places and cultural heritage, adjust our policies and regulatory systems, and reduce resource vulnerability and human suffering.

As we consider preservation’s response to climate change, it is useful to consider two ways we can take action. The first is our role in mitigating the impacts of climate change. Mitigation (as defined by the Global Change Research Program) is about slowing—and eventually eliminating—human-caused greenhouse gas emissions to reduce the severity of climate change impacts.

As we in preservation know, the biggest source of human-caused carbon emissions is the built environment. This includes emissions from both operating existing buildings and constructing new ones. Worldwide, the construction and operation of buildings are responsible for 39 percent of carbon emissions.

We can reduce carbon emissions from the building sector in two ways—and preservation can play a significant role in both. First, we can help reduce emissions from building operations through green rehabilitations and retrofits of older buildings, joining efforts to “decarbonize” all building operations by 2050—or sooner.

In addition—and this is a role where preservationists can really take the lead—we can avoid carbon emissions through reuse. Every time we reuse an existing building—instead of demolishing and replacing it with a new one—we prevent carbon emissions that would have occurred during construction. This helps cut CO2 emissions right away, not decades from now, when it may be too late.
Reducing carbon pollution through reusing and retrofitting existing buildings will help reduce the severity of climate change. But even with dramatic reductions in carbon emissions, we know that more change is coming—more flooding, more storms, more drought, more fires. We will need to adapt.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) identifies adaptation as the effort of reacting to a hazard by trying to minimize and prevent damages. The Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals sees adaptation as an adjustment in natural or human systems in response to the effects of a changing environment to exploit beneficial opportunities or moderate negative effects. The National Park Service guidelines on flooding adaptation state that the intent of adaptation is to ensure historic buildings, their sites, and their settings are made more resilient to flooding risk in a manner that preserves their historic character.

Preserving character. Minimizing damage. Adjusting systems. It is all about becoming more resilient. We need to build or rebuild more resilient communities and focus public investments and private incentives to where the impacts are greatest, and the outcomes are equitable and socially just.

Preservationists across the country are taking on this challenge. No matter what your level of involvement in climate change may be today, it’s likely that you or your organization will be engaged in issues related to climate change mitigation or adaptation in some way.

Think about how you can make a difference. Is it through policies and incentives to help reuse and retrofit historic buildings? Or working to plan or implement adaptation strategies? Is communication or sharing resources your biggest role?

We will be gathering input from those in the field addressing climate change challenges, to determine how preservation can play a larger and more respected role in both mitigation and adaptation activities.
RELEVANCE

Relevance is both an outcome and a process.

How can preservation be more applicable to today’s most pressing problems? That is the outcome-based definition of relevance. Over and over again we’ve fretted about preservation not having a seat at the table, whether that be around climate change, affordable housing, public health, or policy development. We will never be invited to the table until we are seen as being a part of the solution to the problem. We not only need to make a better case for what we do offer, but also evolve to offer more and better solutions.

Past conference speaker Nina Simon, in her “Art of Relevancy” TED Talk, artfully laid out relevance as a process. What are the issues facing the community you serve? Who did you talk with to identify those issues? What solutions did they identify, and did you listen? Where does preservation have a role to play, and what impact do we want to have on those issues? The journey is as important as the destination.

The preservation field is reckoning with our relevance. Our movement is being criticized, challenged, marginalized, and even vilified. It’s hard to hear that your efforts, your work, your passion is discounted and rendered frivolous, unimportant, and, worse, inequitable. Some of us feel this is unwarranted and only see our intentions as benevolent, and our impact as positive. Some of us feel we are woefully lacking in self-awareness and that this reckoning is long overdue.

There are those of us who have become disillusioned with preservation. Others feel powerless, hopeless, or fearful about change. We want you to know that you’re not alone.

The relevance of historic preservation has been debated and discussed for decades. We recently unearthed a 1991 conference schedule that showed similar conversations were going on around the 25th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act.

A 2019 survey of our field conducted of the preservation movement by the National Trust asked:

- Have you felt that preservation could be more relevant to solving our society’s problems?
- Do you feel that we as a movement need to take action to become more relevant?
Out of the more than 1,000 responses, from people with diverse affiliations and at varied stages in their career, 86 percent felt that preservation needed to innovate. We want to do our work better and to have a greater impact.

In that same survey, 92 percent felt that preservation should help anyone live, work, and play in neighborhoods despite their income status. We want our work to be fair and equitable.

And an even more whopping 96 percent saw sharing multilayered narratives as important. We want to tell a more full and complete American story.

When answering the question “How can preservation be more relevant?” the responses fell into all six categories and also revealed that we have many ideas about how we can take action:

1. **Increase Preservation’s Relevancy:** “By teaching all who will listen how preservation impacts our lives.”
2. **Address Climate Change and Sustainability:** “Preservation is an environmental act—prove it, broadcast it.”
3. **Address Housing Needs:** “People need shelter to survive. Find a way to help cities and towns renovate their old buildings to house people in affordable apartments and homes.”
4. **Tell the Full American Story:** “Tell more stories of places and stir emotion and connection” and “don’t tell just a single narrative.”
5. **Add Flexibility to Tools:** “by being less restrictive” and “revalue relevancy of existing tools, and who our tools are benefiting.”
6. **Be More Inclusive:** “Be more inclusive and reflective of America’s diverse peoples and places.” and “Diversify the racial and socio-economic demographics of staff, boards and stakeholders.”

These concerns and ideas will be explored more fully for the National Impact Agenda, to develop a consensus-based, actionable plan that will collectively reorient preservation toward greater relevance.

A 2019 survey of our field conducted by the National Trust reveals perceived challenges in preservation.
Similarly, Landmarks Illinois celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2021, saw not only an opportunity, but a mandate, to explore how to make the organization more relevant. To evolve the organization, a diverse task force of 30 people from inside and outside of preservation is identifying and exploring where they feel preservation practice must change.

As part of The Relevancy Project, Landmarks Illinois CEO and President Bonnie McDonald conducted nearly 130 interviews with people nationwide about how the preservation field is, or is not, a solution for today’s pressing problems. These interviews, supported by the Peter H. Brink Mentoring Fund at the National Trust and the James Marston Fitch Charitable Foundation’s 2020 Mid-Career Fellowship, will be published as part of an open-source, digital Guidebook to Relevancy. Nearly every interviewee voiced concern about preservation’s relevance including:

1. Preservation lacks relevance, but we don’t know how to, or who will, fix it
2. We need to do more to mitigate and adapt to climate change
3. Our toolbox needs serious revision and expansion—including reassessing our regulations and incentives
4. Our field lacks diversity, equity and inclusion
5. Diverse preservationists are not adequately recognized or supported
6. Our movement does not make racial, economic and environmental justice part of its mission and practice
7. We are not doing enough to support income equality
8. Our movement is not fostering housing affordability
9. We do not fully understand preservation’s relationship to displacement and gentrification
10. Preservation is not creating scalable training programs and job opportunities for preservation craftworkers

Ideas, concerns and suggestions raised in the town halls will be explored more fully for the National Impact Agenda, a consensus-based, actionable plan that will collectively reorient preservation toward greater relevance. To help shape this changemaking agenda, we need to be confident in the value we provide and our resilience as a movement. We also need to listen and learn from
people outside of our preservation silo. Preservationists need not be fragile to criticism or immediately defend our practices but instead remain committed until our shared agenda for change has become a reality.

PastForward is just one venue for discussion and feedback. To be a part of the groundswell taking action to evolve preservation, e-mail your creative ideas and reactions to this article to National-ImpactAgenda@savingplaces.org. Opportunities to continue these discussions over the next year will be highlighted on savingplaces.org and on Forum.

We look forward to continued conversations and collaboration to increase the impact of our work. FJ

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