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Relevance and Resilience: Proceedings from PastForward Online 2020



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National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

Coming Next: The *National Impact Agenda*

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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

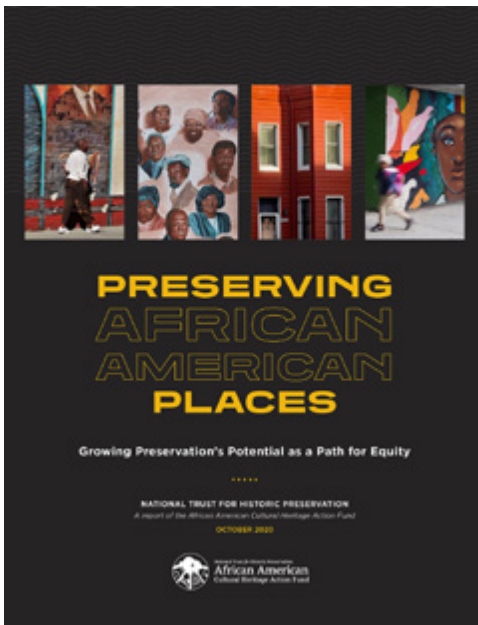
Equitable development refers to a process of sharing authority in decision-making to deliver investment, programs, and policies that intentionally reduce inequality among groups of people—whether they are defined socially, ethnically, racially, economically, or geographically—to reach more just and fair 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 to 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 wreaks havoc on the wilderness/urban interface. California alone has 19,000 fire-fighters battling 27 major blazes with 4 million acres and nearly 7,000 buildings destroyed by fire.



Thermal imaging in Denver as a strategy to combat climate change

PHOTO BY NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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.”*

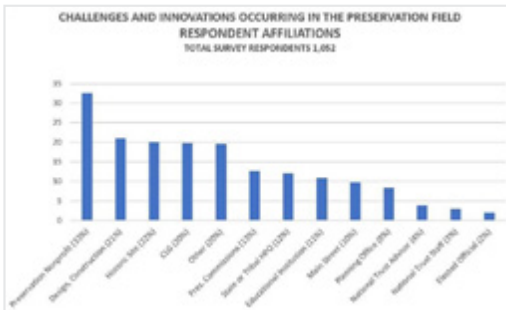
4. Tell the Full American Story: *“Tell more stories of places and stir emotion and connection” and “don’t tell just a single narrative.”*

5. Add Flexibility to Tools: *“by being less restrictive” and “re-evaluate 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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VIDEO

Voices from the Field: Equity



VIDEO

Voices from the Field: Climate Change



VIDEO

Voices from the Field: Relevance



VIDEO

Bonnie McDonald on Landmark Illinois' The Relevancy Project



VIDEO

Di Gao and Leslie Canaan on Equitable Development and Preservation



RESOURCE

PastForward Online 2020 Town Hall Reading List