

THE RELEVANCY GUIDEBOOK

HOW WE CAN TRANSFORM THE FUTURE OF PRESERVATION



BY BONNIE C. MCDONALD, PRESIDENT & CEO
EDITED BY JEAN A. FOLLETT, PHD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREAMBLE

HISTORIC PLACES MATTER

People have a fundamental connection to historic places because they give context to the events that have shaped our history. Historic places are about culture and tradition, our achievements and mistakes: what we choose to save speaks to our values and beliefs. Just as destroying historic places can untether communities, saving them can help maintain a vital connection between generations, providing a source of recognition, pride, joy and hope.

WHY IS PRESERVATION STILL SO DIFFICULT?

So, if historic places are so important, why is preserving them still so difficult? Because not everyone values historic places. With lagging public support for preservation, the field faces fundamental challenges: embattled regulatory tools, a lack of political and public support (or downright hostility), misinformation and insufficient funding. Preservation also faces new challenges emerging out of an overdue examination of our practices through the lens of justice, equity, inclusion and accessibility.

PRESERVATION'S RELEVANCY CRISIS

For preservation to survive and be useful in a changing world, we must reckon with its relevance. (The “we” and “our” used here refers to preservation professionals and people who identify as preservationists.) A relevant tool solves a problem that connects, relates and is applicable to a person’s life. Rather than being hailed as a solution, preservation is criticized, challenged, marginalized and even vilified. We are excluded from decision-making tables when we are not seen as problem solvers. Add to this the criticism, or truism that we lack self-awareness about the preservation field’s inequities and a reckoning is, indeed, long overdue.

The preservation community has historically been white and higher income, generally saving places that they care about. As a result, our work has overlooked a large and significant group of people, stories and historic places. Consider that

prior to FY2014, the National Park Service found that only 8% of National Register sites reflect the stories of women, people of color and members of the LGBTQAI+ community. Preservation practice is irrelevant, or in danger of becoming so, because of this underlying inequity.

Further, people interviewed for this project believe we are not engaging effectively as a solution for larger social issues including advocating for racial justice, providing affordable housing and fighting climate change. The huge gap in the people we serve and the need for our goals to align with larger community goals illustrate the crisis that historic preservation finds itself in.

CHANGE IS NEEDED, BUT IT IS OVERWHELMING

Surveys have shown that the vast majority of preservationists believe that the field needs substantial change and that the pressure to do so is coming from both inside and outside of the profession. Despite this widespread recognition, there is no consensus about how to do it. Many preservationists are unsure where to begin or lack the confidence to challenge existing systems, fearing the loss of regulations and incentives that we worked hard to create. We must move beyond handwringing and into action. Otherwise, changes will be made for us and not by us.

THE RELEVANCY PROJECT

Landmarks Illinois President & CEO Bonnie McDonald conceived of The Relevancy Project in 2019 to identify preservation’s opportunities, to tap our field’s collective wisdom and to inspire individual and organizational-level actions that will move preservation towards relevance. Between August 2019 and February 2021, 130 people both inside of, and adjacent to, the preservation field were interviewed about common concerns, best practices and innovations. Their responses, and subsequent research, were published in an [11-part blog series](#) in 2022 on Landmarks Illinois’ website. The Relevancy Guidebook is a compilation of the project interviews, research and resources in an easy-to-reference document to inform and

inspire actions to make preservation relevant to more people. Find in-depth information about the underlying principles, key findings and reference citations in the guidebook essays, which focus on each opportunity area. Follow the Table of Contents hotlinks to go directly to your interest areas. Note that Appendix 1 lists ideas for actions to take in support of preservation's relevance and Appendix 2 has an extensive resource list.

Click here to access the full publication, "[The Relevancy Guidebook: How We Can Transform the Future of Preservation.](#)"

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Common principles emerged during The Relevancy Project interviews, underpinning the motivation to change our practice. They provide the framework for the project's findings.

- History is important to humanity.
- Places are important to people's mental and physical wellbeing.
- People have a right to place.
- Preservationists want to help more people save places that matter to them and to their community.
- Preservation practice should not only be equal, but equitable.
- Communities should not only be involved in discussions, but also be in the lead on decision-making.

KEY FINDINGS

OPPORTUNITY AREAS FOR PRESERVATION TO ENHANCE ITS RELEVANCE

As previously noted, project interviewees believe that our field is not relevant because preservation is not actively engaged in addressing social issues. The following are the most frequently cited, important and, not surprisingly, daunting opportunity areas for moving preservation forward.

1. **Dismantle our culture of preciousness.**
Preservation regulations are designed to protect historic material rather than prioritize the needs of people living in and

using these places today. The focus on a subjective, yet rigid definition of integrity turns historic places from things that are venerated for the stories they can tell into assemblages of precious materials. This practice can weigh heavily against under-resourced property owners, perpetuating preservation's lack of inclusion and equity.

2. **Create a just preservation movement.**

To be more relevant to more people, the places we help preserve must include more people and tell the stories valued by, and reflective of, our increasingly diverse nation. Who decides which places are saved must be an inclusive process where people are respected and valued, treated with fairness and dignity, and lead the decision-making. Until we address implicit bias and our field's imbedded, unjust practices, including those tied to land use policies, we will continue to be exclusive.

3. **Preserve and create affordable housing.**

The United States has an undersupply of all housing types, especially at low-income price points. A majority of Americans see housing affordability as a problem despite geographic, demographic and economic differences. Historic buildings of all types can be adapted for housing and can increase the overall supply by converting places from their original purpose to residential use.

4. **Fight climate change through preservation.**

In a 2021 Gallup poll, 65% of Americans reported worrying between a fair amount and a great deal about climate change. Reusing existing buildings helps mitigate climate change by eliminating building material waste and avoiding upfront carbon emissions from new construction. Estimates are that two-thirds of our existing buildings will still be in operation in 2040, so improving their energy efficiency and climate resilience is essential.

5. **Connect preservation to health and wellness.**

The right to health, education and culture are designated and protected human rights.

Historic places connect to these rights. Although they can be emotional anchors, strengthen social connections and improve healing, the physical and mental health and wellness benefits of preserving historic places remain largely unexplored.

6. Create more preservation jobs.

We need to expand the pool of workers that value preservation and can influence change. Building a diverse preservation workforce results in teams that are more effective and is imperative to telling our full history. Making construction apprentice programs more accessible and attractive is imperative as droves of long- experienced tradespeople leave the field. Internship, hiring and employee retention practices need to be competitive and center people's needs and we must address widespread levels of burnout.

7. Tell better stories.

Basing a presentation around architectural style, architect names and dates is a surefire way to make people feel like outsiders. When we tell relatable stories about people and historic places, especially in a group setting, we create valuable, memorable and emotionally beneficial experiences. Entertaining and informative stories have the potential to change people's minds about history and build future advocates for our historic places.

8. Practice values-based fundraising with an abundance mindset.

When we align our operations with our principles, our team's fundraising passion, joy and success follow. As our work becomes more relevant to more people, preservation philanthropy will increase. We can change our fundraising practices to believe in abundant resources – that there is enough for us all. Share resources and mentor other organizations that want to grow their fundraising skills. A rising tide lifts all boats.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Remaining relevant is a dynamic practice that will see us continually engaging with stakeholders, learning about their needs and delivering the resources that connect, relate and are applicable to them. As we are building preservation practices that better respond to society's interests, let us:

- Make community engagement, reevaluation and evolution our foundation
- Create a preservation movement that is accessible, inclusive, just and relevant, and
- Ensure a future where everyone and anyone can save, maintain and reuse places that matter to them and to their community.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

WHO IS THE "WE" USED IN THIS PUBLICATION?

Note that when "we", "our" or "some" are used in this publication, it refers to preservation professionals and people who identify as participants in the preservation movement.

COVER PHOTO

For preservation to be a relevant solution it must respond to the needs and wants of, and be an accessible tool for, people connected to historic places. The rights of communities to determine what is worth saving is paramount to building a just, inclusive and welcoming practice. Pictured are residents and volunteers in February 2022 advocating for the preservation of Altgeld Gardens – Phillip Murray Homes on Chicago's far South Side, a public housing community listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Community members joined the [Skyline Council of Landmarks Illinois](#), the organization's young professionals committee, and local environmental justice organization, [People for Community Recovery](#), to "heart bomb" Altgeld's vacant Shop Building to call for its preservation and reuse. Their goal is to bring a locally owned grocery store to the space. Photo by Lewis Purdy for Landmarks Illinois.