

We Need to Move the Goal Posts

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One way to measure the success of historic preservation is to count the number of listings on the National Register of Historic Places. In its first year nearly 700 properties were registered, and today the National Register has more than 90,000 entries representing nearly 1.8 million buildings, sites, and structures and is growing at a rate of about 1,500 listings annually.¹ We could easily celebrate that as an achievement of the National Historic Preservation Act, however, the sobering truth is that fewer and fewer Americans find historic sites “inspirational” or “beneficial,” to use NHPA parlance. In the last thirty years, the number of adults who visited an historic park, monument, building, or neighborhood has dropped, from 39 percent in 1982 to 24 percent in 2012.² A similar pattern appears in a study of cultural travelers in San Francisco, which showed that while 66 percent said that historic sites were important to visit, only 26 percent had actually visited one in the previous three years.³

There are probably several reasons for this decline, including the near-elimination of history from public schools and a decreasing amount of leisure time, but our own field of historic preservation may also be at fault. Over the past fifty years, historic preservation has become more complex, often requiring expertise in legal strategies, real estate development, fundraising, and architectural conservation. It’s become more focused around technique, such as how to designate a property, navigate Section 106, or repair a double-hung window. It’s become more intellectual, with battles fought over statements of significance, National Register criteria, and applicability of the National Environmental Policy Act. It’s become an endless circuit in which we seem to fight the same battles and hear the same objections: “We can’t save everything,” “It’s not historic,” “We can’t stop progress,” and “You’re taking away my rights.” Historic preservation seems to have become less, rather than more, relevant and meaningful to Americans since the passage of the NHPA.

Maybe we’ve confused the ends with the means and are chasing the wrong goals. Preservation is not a destination but a means of reaching a destination. So what is the goal of preservation? According to the NHPA, it’s a “sense of orientation” and a “genuine opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the rich heritage of our Nation.”⁴ We need to rebalance the term “historic preservation” so that there’s equal emphasis on both words, rather than just the latter. We need to move the goal posts so that historic preservation is not *about something* but *for somebody*.⁵

As management guru Peter Drucker reminds us, the nonprofit organization’s “product is a changed human being. Non-profit institutions are human-change agents. The ‘product’ is a cured patient, a child that learns, a young man or woman grown into a self-respecting adults, a

¹ National Park Service, “National Register of Historic Places” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015).

² National Endowment for the Arts, “2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002), 12; National Endowment for the Arts, “How a Nation Engages with Art” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2013), 22.

³ Destination Analysts, “San Francisco Arts and Cultural Travel Study” (San Francisco: San Francisco Travel Association, December 2010): 16–17, 41.

⁴ Section 1 of the National Historic Preservation Act, Pub. L. No. 89-665, as amended by Pub. L. No. 96-515 (2014).

⁵ This idea is borrowed from Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2002).

changed human life altogether.”⁶ Historic preservation is not just about saving buildings; it’s about changing the lives of people.

Protecting, preserving, and interpreting is not sufficient. These are simply methods, tasks, jobs, works, or actions that define a purpose and explain how it will be accomplished. What is needed is a goal, a destination, a target, an idealized description of the future that explains “why.” To borrow from grammar, we need a transitive verb—a verb that requires one or more objects. What is the object or purpose of protecting, preserving, and interpreting?

Every organization will answer these questions differently because every community is unique, but ultimately, the struggle to answer them will result in a clear, inspiring, and distinctive vision. A few historic preservation organizations are beginning to make the shift, as can be seen in the language used in their governing documents:

“To help people understand our shared history and motivate them to preserve it by providing access to the rich continuity of history and preservation in one community and family over time, and by offering direction and knowledge about preserving our built heritage and its value.” (mission statement of Cliveden of the National Trust, Philadelphia, 2012)

“To maintain the cultural vitality that makes San Francisco one of the world’s great cities”; “not promote one culture over another, but instead to foster an inclusive narrative of our city’s history”; and “preserve the signifiers of neighborhood identity, such as art and culture, family histories, buildings, and community events.” (excerpts from *Sustaining San Francisco’s Living History* by San Francisco Heritage, California, 2014)

“Citizens deserve a city that is pleasant, safe and well maintained, and residents deserve neighborhoods that foster their sense of wellbeing. We believe these traits of a great city are nurtured by preserving places of architectural and historical significance. Preservation sustains the distinctive cultural histories and unique character of our neighborhoods and downtown districts.” (excerpt from the values statement of the Providence Preservation Society, Rhode Island, 2015)⁷

Our goals should not only consider the community as a whole but also the individuals who live and work in it. Too often people see history as merely a collection of names and dates, a ticking clock without an opinion or cause.⁸ Instead, we need to demonstrate that knowing history informs our understanding of today, and thinking historically improves our decisions for the future. Historic preservation should also produce thoughtful leaders and advocates, not just consumers and followers.

So how can history become a “living part of our community life,” as directed by the NHPA? Here are a few suggestions to get started:

1. Articulate the value of history for you, your organization, and your community. The aim of “historic preservation” is to “preserve history,” so what does that mean for you? What are the benefits of knowing history and thinking historically? Is it to improve the economy, inspire leaders, shape personal identity, develop engaged citizens, build

⁶ Peter Drucker, *Managing the Non-profit Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), xiv.

⁷ Cliveden of the National Trust, “Mission Statement,” (Philadelphia: Cliveden of the National Trust, 2012); San Francisco Heritage, *Sustaining San Francisco’s Living History* (San Francisco: San Francisco Heritage, September 2014), 5, 15; Providence Preservation Society, “Vision, Mission, Values” (Providence, RI: Providence Preservation Society, April 2015).

⁸ To explore this further, see Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982).

critical skills, or create vital places to live and work? Incorporate these values into your mission statement.⁹

2. What's your vision for your community? List the top three things you'd like to keep and three things you'd like to toss. If you are successful, how will your community be different or better in twenty years? What do you want people to know, feel, or do in the next few years to advance toward that goal? Add this vision to your next strategic plan.

3. Integrate history throughout your programs and activities. If history is so valuable, use it whenever possible to inform decisions, not just to convey facts. Facts explain who, what, when, or how; history explains why.

The National Historic Preservation Act was a remarkable achievement fifty years ago, but we've confused the means with the ends and need to reestablish the goal posts. If we succeed, however, we can achieve Ada Louise Huxtable's vision to "make the city's heritage a working part of the dynamic vitality and brutal beauty of this strange and wonderful town."¹⁰

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⁹ These values are based on "The Values of History," History Relevance Campaign, 2015 (available at historyrelevance.org).

¹⁰ Ada Louise Huxtable, "Where Did We Go Wrong?," in *Goodbye History, Hello Hamburger* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1986), 62.