

Policy and Historic Preservation: A Preliminary Research Agenda

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My basic premise for today's talk is that research, especially social science research, has been largely missing from policy debates in preservation. I would like to suggest that the preservation field needs to embrace a more rigorous, coordinated and empirically grounded research agenda. My talk will cover three areas. First, I will describe four categories of research questions. Second, I will discuss where we might look for the data and information to begin to answer these questions. And, third, I will highlight interesting work being done by social scientists in other research domains and suggest ways that the preservation field might draw upon these ideas and methodologies.

Regarding research questions, four distinct areas of inquiry might be pursued.

First, there is a need for more research that **describes the condition of our heritage** in the U.S.. We need better information about how many historic properties and artifacts there are? Who owns them? Where they are located? And, what is their condition?

Second, we need to analyze the **impact of preservation on communities**. What is the relationship between preservation, tourism, and economic impact? Are historic districts more diverse and more stable than other neighborhoods? What is the social, cultural and economic impact of National Heritage Areas, such as the Rivers of Steel in

Pennsylvania? What is the relationship between “preservation” and “smart growth” or affordable housing in cities and towns?

Third, we lack good research to evaluate the **tools and policies** of preservation. Does the historic property tax credit work? Is it self-financing? How effective is the historic registry program? What are the effects of certain regulation or legislation? What works and what does not? Under what conditions?

Finally, we lack **information about the preservation field** itself – its institutions, organizations, policy frameworks, as well as public attitudes and perceptions about preservation and the character and evolution of the preservation movement (Who is involved and why? How has this changed?).

Where might we look for data and information to answer these questions?

First, federal and state agencies are beginning to enter an unprecedented amount of information about roads, rivers, buildings, parks, open space, pollution emission, and, in some cases, historic structures, into comprehensive data bases, where each piece of information has a precise geographic identifier. The software to do this is called GIS, or Geographical Information System, and it will be an increasingly powerful tool for sophisticated analysis, including spatial mapping of historic resources. Preservation advocates should make it a priority to ensure that historic properties are an integral part of every government sponsored GIS database.

GIS data will prove to be a rich source of information, but it is costly to construct and, in most cases, still quite underdeveloped. So, where might we find some “low hanging fruit” -- data that is currently available and relatively easy to access and analyze. One possibility is to begin to analyze Census data in the context of preservation. In particular, researchers should cross-walk Census information – demographics, housing, commerce, economic growth – with information about historic districts. Such an exercise would begin to paint a picture of the social and economic conditions that characterize such districts. Perhaps neighborhoods with an abundance of historic properties are also more diverse and more prosperous.

There is also a wealth of data collected by government agencies. The National Park Service collects information state by state about the condition of historic structures owned by the Parks. They also survey visitors on a regular basis. Again, most of this data remains unanalyzed. Other government agencies also collect information about their historic properties, including the Army Corp of Engineers and the General Service Administration and The Department of Transportation. And, there is data at the Environmental Protection Agency that could be mined to examine the link between preservation and brown field sites. The Treasury Department collects information on the use of historic tax credits. Lastly, scholars could track preservation trends over time by examining national and local registries; they could also examine the databases of the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Trusts and other grant-making

agencies and organizations to better understand preservation funding over the last few decades.

Finally, let me talk for just a few moments about analogous research areas. First, there is a long line of research, mainly in sociology, that examines social movements – citizen-based, collective efforts to influence policy and public opinion. We might begin by asking, in what ways is the preservation movement similar to and different from other types of movements studied by social scientists (for example, the environmental movement, women's rights, pro-life campaigns, anti-pornography crusades, animal rights, and gay rights)? Such an approach to preservation might help us better understand: How and why individuals choose to join in the preservation movement? What motivates preservation activists (both psychological factors and social factors)? How do recruitment networks operate in the preservation community? How has the demographic profile of the preservation activist changed (are activist getting older or younger?) And how have such demographic changes influenced the goals of the preservation movement (e.g., from saving buildings to building communities)? It might be worth pointing out that recent research has shown that declining social movements with dwindling popular appeal often compensate for their lack of membership and broad appeal, ironically, by defining themselves more and more narrowly and rejecting possible alliances with other causes, for fear of “selling out.” In other words, just when the preservation movement might be most in need of new blood and new partnerships, the movement might become

more exclusive and parochial in an attempt to sustain the commitment of the remaining stalwarts.

Equally important, a social movement perspective would ask, “How do preservation battles get framed by the media (are preservation efforts depicted as saving old buildings at the expense of creating new jobs?) and how do such depictions influence the course of events? How do participants, including the media, balance competing democratic notions – private property rights on the one hand and civic responsibility on the other? How do we explain differences between communities in terms of levels of preservation activism? Why do citizens in some communities share a preservation ethic and citizens in other locales don’t? Surely answers to such questions will inform policy and the preservation enterprise more broadly.

Second, what can the preservation field learn from existing research on urban politics.

Scholars in this field have been especially interested in what they call "pro-growth" coalitions, which they argue have brought together the major power brokers in business and government to shape urban planning and politics for more than two decades. But, preservation battles seem to present an anomaly to political theory. There are few power brokers – either large government agencies or powerful private interests – who have a strong interest in protecting and preserving historic structures. In fact, the decks of urban power seem to be stacked almost entirely against preservation interests – economic development agencies, port authorities, real estate developers, for the most part, see preservation as a barrier to progress. How then have preservationists sometimes achieved

great successes – it seems -- in direct opposition to the "growth machine"? What types of coalitions must be organized if preservationists are to gain influence? And, when preservationist form alliances (sometimes with developers), how are the goals of preservation movements compromised? What kinds of pressures lead local governments to get involved in and support preservation fights? Are highly centralized or more diffused political systems more or less receptive to preservation demands? Political scientists have asked these questions in an attempt to understand which cities in America regulated local water supplies in the 1970s, which created anti-pornography zones in the 1980s, and which cities adopted gay rights legislation in the 1990s? Do we know anything about which cities are more likely to be preservation-minded ten years from now?

Thirdly, what can we learn from social scientists who have studied neighborhoods and communities? In 1987, William Julius Wilson published the seminal book, “The Truly Disadvantaged” that showed that growing up in a poor neighborhood mattered for a child’s health and life chances. Since, there has been a deluge of studies focusing on what are called, “neighborhood effects.” Such research has achieved a fairly high level of sophistication, with multi-level models capable of parceling out the effects of a neighborhood environment on a person’s development and mental health. However, such approaches have, for the most part, focused on “a deficit” model of neighborhoods – examining the influence of high crime rates, a lack of good jobs, vandalism, and bad schools. But, increasingly, there is interest in more asset-based approaches to “neighborhood effects.” Can we, for example, use these methods to study the “effects”

or the impact of growing up in a neighborhood that is rich in historic or cultural resources? How do the attitudes and behaviors of people who grow up surrounded by history, in an environment with a strong preservation ethic, differ from those who do not?

Similarly, there has emerged a relatively new and interdisciplinary field known as environmental psychology – where scholars have developed interesting methods to better understand people’s relationship with the environment – such as their affinity for environmental causes and their cognitive orientation to their natural surroundings. Perhaps these approaches might be used to understand better how citizens perceive and relate to preservation issues.

Finally, there is a flourishing industry of studies around such issues as “quality of life,” “sense of place” and “community attachment.” Generally, such studies have tried to reveal what factors lead to greater feelings of community identity, attachment and sense of well being. Scholars have focused on such factors as the quality of government services, crime rates, jobs, and demographics and have almost entirely ignored cultural factors – such as the presence of arts institutions, museums or historic structures. Yet, I would argue, it seems reasonable to expect that people living in communities with a strong preservation ethic will have a deeper sense of local identity, and perhaps be more engaged in local affairs, than those living in less preservation-minded locales.

In conclusion, the preservation field is wide open for new research, new methodologies and new analysis. There is existing data that can be mined, and existing models and

theoretical approaches that can be adopted to better understand and advance preservation in this country. I hope we are up for the challenge.