

THE CULTURE OF PRECIOUSNESS

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ESSAY PROMPTS:

1. How would you characterize preservation's culture? What aspects of the work are prioritized and should they be?
2. Do you believe that historic places are treated as precious? If we shifted our focus to people living in a place today, how would preservation be different?
3. What is gained and what is lost by the culture of preciousness?
4. How could the preservation designation process work differently?

PRESERVATION FOCUSES TOO MUCH ON THE MATERIAL

I remember the first time that I felt disappointed with preservation practice. The subject of this rising doubt was a long-vacant, deteriorating historic building that, because its construction was specific to its original use,

had limited reuse options. Preservationists spent years trying to attract a new user. One finally came along proposing housing units, but that use required installing windows into a windowless brick wall.¹⁸ These windows were necessary for the building's reuse and to comply with building code. The regulatory reviewer determined that the proposed openings did not meet the Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation and prevented the project from qualifying for Federal Historic Tax Credits. The developer walked away. I too walked away, asking if a windowless wall was worth more than saving the building and creating new housing. The reviewer was just doing their job, following the regulations and their training.¹⁹ But, didn't we all become preservationists to save places [Figure 6]? Are we missing the forest for the trees?

Herein lies one systemic issue inhibiting preservation's relevance: using "integrity," as defined in regulation, as a gatekeeper to designation and incentives puts too much weight on the materiality of significance.²⁰ Preservation professionals learn that the integrity criterion measures how much original material remains to tell the story of the place's

Figure 6: Specific building types like grain silos may appear difficult to adapt to a new use, but numerous adaptive reuse examples can be seen worldwide. To make the often needed historic tax credits available, our guidelines need more flexibility for necessary alterations. Built in 1906, the Damen Silos were amongst the few remaining grain elevators in Chicago before their 2023 demolition.





Figure 7: The Sheldon and Harriet Peck Home in Lombard, Illinois, is significant for its association with the abolitionist Pecks who made their home an Underground Railroad stop. However, because the 1839 portion of the home is partially obscured by later additions, the home has been determined ineligible for National Register listing to date. Photo courtesy of Jean Follett.

significance. Our practice assesses when these changes cross what is essentially a subjective line of when a property does, or does not, convey its significance – that is, if a person can, or cannot, understand why a place is historic [Figure 7].²¹ Inevitably, places change over time, whether actively or passively. Someone could argue that these changes were preservation: investing in the building’s material and long-term usability. To the building owner, it could seem counterintuitive that by maintaining or improving the building, it has been ruined for historic designation purposes. This might seem like an oversimplification, but it is essentially the

message that we are delivering. And, when we use the term “integrity” to explain this, it can be offensive to hear that your property doesn’t have enough of it to make the cut [Figure 8]. It becomes one of the narratives used to label preservationists as out of touch with reality, “hysterical preservationists,” who are always saying “no” to change. These negative narratives matter, especially when they become embedded as public opinion, are shared by the media and influence decision makers.

Our regulations are designed to protect historic material rather than prioritize the



Figure 8: Blues legend [Muddy Waters' Chicago home](#) was, as of November 2022, on the National Register pending list. Its listing had been questioned over its historic integrity since significant interior changes were made since Waters moved out in 1973. Waters' great-granddaughter, Chandra Cooper, owns the home and is pictured here with civil rights activist Timuel D. Black, Jr. Photo by Landmarks Illinois.



Figure 9: The Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Frederick Bagley House in Hinsdale, Illinois was saved at the 11th hour after fears it would be a teardown. The State Historic Preservation Office suggested that the home can't be nominated to the National Register for architectural significance until the replacement aluminum siding is removed that covers the original wood shakes underneath. Photo courtesy of Jean Follett.

needs of people living in and using these places today. We don't expect people to live and work in museum-like settings, so why mandate that places arrive relatively untouched in order to receive protection? According to the National Register for Historic Places criteria for listing, "historic places either retain integrity (that is, convey their significance) or they do not."²²

"We assume the material is telling the story. That's not always the case."

Erica Avrami, PhD
James Marston Fitch Assistant Professor of
Historic Preservation
Columbia University
January 15, 2021
New York, NY (via video conference)

We leave ourselves no middle ground [Figure 9]. This focus on a subjective, yet rigid definition of the material aspects of integrity turns historic places from things that are venerated for the stories they can tell into things that are precious. This "culture of preciousness" elevates historic material as the

deciding factor for what gets saved and what does not.

PRESERVATION NEEDS TO PUT A HIGHER VALUE ON SIGNIFICANCE OVER INTEGRITY

Preservationists preserve historic places, which are largely material.²³ What motivates us to do this work? Our field originated to preserve history, heritage, and architecture and has evolved to preserve culture, lifeways, identity, memory and story through place. One only need look back at "[With Heritage So Rich](#)," the 1966 report of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Special Committee on Historic Preservation that created our current preservation regulatory framework, to see that material culture was not our primary mission:

"If the preservation movement is to be successful, it must go beyond saving bricks and mortar. It must go beyond saving occasional historic houses and opening museums. It must be more than a cult of antiquarians. It must do more

than revere a few precious national shrines. It must attempt to give a sense of orientation to our society, using structures and objects of the past to establish values of time and place...In sum, if we wish to have a future with greater meaning, we must concern ourselves not only with the historic highlights, but we must be concerned with the total heritage of the nation and all that is worth preserving from our past as a living part of the present.”

- “With Heritage So Rich,” (1966)²⁴

The culture of preciousness values integrity over significance, which flies in the face of this framing document. If we are truly about saving places and their stories, significance must be considered independent of integrity [Figure 10]. That is, the stories that took place in a building and about its design or construction, are present even if original materials and details are compromised. If our charge is to preserve “the total heritage of the nation,” then significance must be inclusive of all people who are, and have been, on this land. For places to be “a living part of the present,” then adherence to a strict integrity standard,

Figure 10: Henry Gerber founded the nation's first gay rights organization in this [Chicago home](#) in 1924. Do we need the interior to be as it was in 1924 to make this home worth protecting? The house was designated a Chicago Landmark (2001) and a National Historic Landmark (2015). Many places of LGBTQIA+ history were intentionally hidden for safety reasons. How many would no longer meet the integrity criteria because they have been altered over time? Photo by Elisa.rolle, CC BY-SA 4.0. Photo unchanged.



“The value of a community is not based on the material of the buildings or places they lived. Don’t value the materials over the history of that place.”

Jeffrey (Free) Harris
Independent consultant
Former Member, Virginia Historic Resources Board and
Former Director of Diversity, National Trust for Historic Preservation (2003-2008)
September 11, 2020
Hampton, VA (via video conference)

as it is currently interpreted, is incongruous. For a place to be “living” it must evolve to meet present needs. Material changes that happen over time are a part of the story. The presence of changes that reflect a building’s evolution should not prevent its historic designation; in fact, they enrich the building’s story.

The culture of preciousness also perpetuates a lack of inclusion and equity in preservation. Properties that do not meet the integrity standard are not designated and are thus ineligible for incentives like historic preservation tax credits. Low-income

homeowners can be negatively impacted by the requirements for like-designed replacement materials for locally designated properties if the guidelines are inflexible or omit claims of economic hardship. The Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies tabulated results from the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s 2019 American Housing Survey [Figure 11].

“When we get so precious, we lose a connection.”

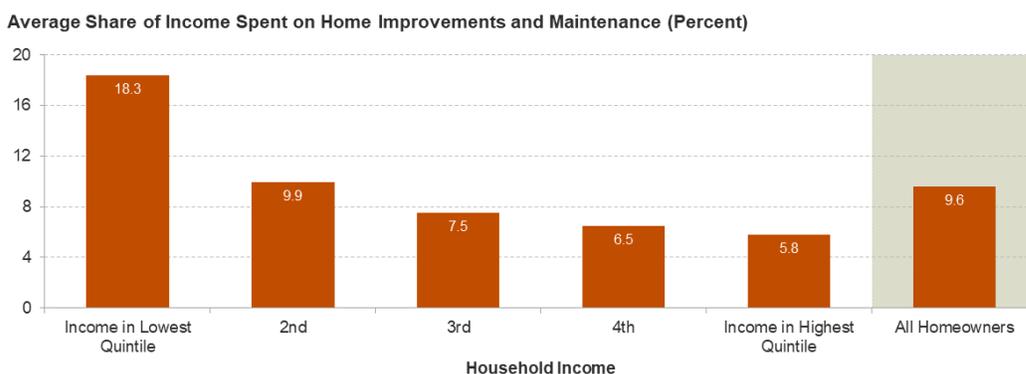
Chris Moore
 Executive Director
 The Washington Trust for Historic Preservation
 November 14, 2019
 Seattle, WA

Amongst their findings are that repairs and improvements made by low-income homeowners represent three times as much of their income as higher-income homeowners.²⁵ Preservationists must work

with homeowners to ensure affordable building operations, maintenance and hazardous material remediation.²⁶ For property owners that are under-resourced, local designation should be accompanied by more flexible replacement guidelines, free or affordable financing for maintenance and improvements, and accessible information about the permitting process and other resources. Preservation will continue to be irrelevant, or a threat, to under-resourced property owners and renters if they are not engaged in the designation process, if the designation increases maintenance costs or triggers code enforcement without any accessible financial incentives, or if the designation brings no tools to prevent gentrification and displacement [Figure 12].

To be seen as relevant, preservation must move beyond the culture of preciousness to put greater priority on the people interacting with historic places today and tomorrow.

Figure 2: Lower-Income Homeowners Spend Three Times as Much of Their Incomes on Home Improvement and Maintenance Projects as Higher-Income Homeowners



Notes: The lowest income quintile includes homeowners with incomes of less than \$32,000. The highest income quintile includes homeowners with incomes of more than \$144,000. Homeowners with zero or negative income are assumed to spend 0% of income for improvements and repairs, while those spending over 100% are top-coded at 100%. Average share of income spent on home improvements and maintenance includes households with no spending.
 Source: JCHS tabulations of HUD, 2019 American Housing Survey.

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Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University JCHS

Figure 11: Source: ["Home Repairs and Updates Pose Considerable Burdens for Low-Income Homeowners,"](#) by Sophia Wedeen, Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, June 16, 2022.



Figure 12: In 2006, a large portion of Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The City proposed local historic district designation in 2019. Many residents and businesses in the historically Mexican American community fought the designation due to gentrification fears and concerns about building repair cost burdens. They prevailed and the district was denied. Photo by pasa47, CC BY 2.0. Photo unchanged.

A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE TO PRESERVATION'S CULTURE OF PRECIOUSNESS

10 REASONS WHY ... PRESERVATION NEEDS TO CHANGE ITS PERSPECTIVE

- **Material “integrity,”** as defined in preservation regulation, is used to evaluate and measure a place’s worthiness for official designation, thus **acting as a gatekeeper to designation.** This puts too much weight on the materiality of significance.
- **Inevitably, places change over time,** whether actively or passively. It could seem counterintuitive to people that by maintaining or improving the building, it has been ruined for historic designation purposes.
- According to the [National Register for Historic Places criteria for listing](#), **“historic places either retain integrity (that is, convey their significance) or they do not.”** We leave ourselves no middle ground.
- **This focus on a subjective, yet rigid definition of material integrity** turns historic places from things that are venerated for the stories they can tell into things that are precious.
- **The presence of changes that reflect a building’s evolution should not prevent its historic designation;** in fact, they enrich the building’s story.
- If we are truly about saving the places and stories inclusive of all people who are, and have been, on this land, then **significance must be considered independent of integrity.**
- The culture of preciousness **elevates historic material as the deciding factor for what gets saved and what does not** and prioritizes historic material over the needs of people living in and using these places today.
- The culture of preciousness also **perpetuates a lack of inclusion and equity in preservation.** Properties that do not meet the integrity standard are not designated and are ineligible for incentives like historic preservation tax credits and some grants.
- **For property owners that are under-resourced,** local designation should be accompanied by more flexible replacement guidelines, free or affordable financing for maintenance, improvements and hazardous material remediation, and accessible information about the permitting process and other resources.
- To be seen as relevant, preservation must move beyond the culture of preciousness to **put greater priority on the people interacting with historic places today and tomorrow.**

10 IDEAS TO CHANGE PERSPECTIVES ON PRESERVATION PRACTICE

- Put people before buildings.
- Look beyond just one building to the community as a whole.
- Collaboration needs to be centered as a value for the movement.
- **Words matter.** We need to meet people where they are by making our language more accessible and with less jargon.
- **Preservation practice is too rigid.** Our policies need to allow for the non-binary – the conversation shouldn't be about whether a place is, or is not, eligible for designation.
- **The National Register of Historic Places criteria, Standards and Guidelines need to be continually questioned and reconsidered.** The community of people who are engaged in this conversation needs to include people who have used, and been impacted by, this tool.
- **Reevaluate the need for, and value of, an integrity standard** for designation. Or, create a sliding integrity scale and require an interpretive plan.
- **Make it easier for a person to successfully nominate a property** for historic designation by providing easy process guides and Nomination 101 videos.
- **Stop getting in the way of people reusing buildings.** It is not written in law – it is about interpretation. Be lenient and consistent.
- **Disentangle the federal regulations from local regulations.**

SUPPORTING DATA

- The 1966 report, "[With Heritage So Rich](#)," that created our current preservation regulatory framework specifically **noted that material culture was not to be preservation's primary mission:** "If the preservation movement is to be successful, it must go beyond saving bricks and mortar...It must be more than a cult of antiquarians. It must do more than revere a few precious national shrines. It must attempt to give a sense of orientation to our society, using structures and objects of the past to establish values of time and place...In sum, if we wish to have a future with greater meaning, we must concern ourselves not only with the historic highlights, but we must be concerned with the total heritage of the nation and all that is worth preserving from our past as a living part of the present."
- The Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies tabulated results from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's [2019 American Housing Survey](#). Amongst their **findings are that repairs and improvements made by low-income homeowners represent three times as much of their income** as higher-income homeowners.

RESOURCES

ARTICLES AND PUBLICATIONS

- Consult the [1994 International Council on Monuments and Sites \(ICOMOS\) Nara Document on Authenticity](#).
- Frear, Sherry. “[Diversity + the National Register: “How will we know it’s us?”](#) 2021 PastForward Conference, November 2, 2021. 10.
- Frey, Patrice. “[Why Historic Preservation Needs a New Approach](#).” Bloomberg CityLab, February 8, 2019. Frey references [Historic England’s gradient designation system](#) as an example.
- United States Conference of Mayors Special Committee on Historic Preservation. “[With Heritage So Rich](#).” Originally published by Random House, New York, 1966, reprinted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1999.
- Wedeen, Sophia. “[Home Repairs and Updates Pose Considerable Burdens for Lower-Income Homeowners](#).” Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, June 16, 2022.

CONTEXT STUDIES AND DOCUMENTATION GUIDELINES

- The National Parks and National Historic Sites of Canada. “[Guide to the Preparation of Commemorative Integrity Statements](#).” February 2002. 14.
 - Canada includes in its “[Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Sites in Canada](#),” a conservation decision-making process that includes developing an understanding of the site that includes its “evolution over time,” “past and current importance to its community,” “traditional practices associated with the historic places” and “the interrelationship between the historic place, its environment and its communities should also be considered.”
- “[National Register Bulletin: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation](#).” National Park Service, 1997.

INITIATIVES AND ORGANIZATIONS

- [Beyond Integrity](#), a coalition of advocates in Seattle and King County, Washington, looking for more equitable preservation practices.
- [Just City Index](#), Harvard University Graduate School of Design.
- Examples of programs to de-silo preservation include:
 - The [Michigan Historic Preservation Network](#) being a part of the Governor’s [Sense of Place Council](#), formed in 2006, which helped them to forge strong relationships with organizational partners that later helped with other issues.
 - The [New York Landmarks Conservancy](#) is the only preservation organization that is a member of the [New York Building Congress](#) to keep open lines of communication with developers.
 - [Preservation Maryland](#) manages [Smart Growth Maryland](#), the state’s smart growth coalition opening it up to a large group of partners.