

# Engaged Preservation

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Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones ... Design, so construed, is the core of all professional training; it is the principal mark that distinguishes the professions from the sciences.

—Herbert Simon, *Sciences of the Artificial* (1996)<sup>1</sup>

Experimental preservation projects are fascinating and provocative, but their ultimate value to the preservation field is a puzzle. The work seems to trade engagement with empirical problems and places—the heart of design—for clever, attractive, occasionally revelatory artistic invention. While experimental preservation is a thoughtful evolution in preservation theory, it should not be positioned to replace the various modes of empirical preservation that evolved over generations. This essay contextualizes and critiques current trends in preservation and invites the experimentally minded to engage with the actual problems of environmental and built inheritance (including politics, finance, reuse, maintenance, and neighborhood change) in an age of fugitive heritage. The commentary ends with an appeal for engaged preservation.

## Strawberry Mansion

My appeal to engage with the empirical issues facing historic preservation requires a definition. By empirical, I mean those issues experienced or observed directly, “on the ground,” through the lens of practice rather than the

construction of theory. It helps to think about this through the example of an actual place.

Strawberry Mansion is a North Philadelphia neighborhood, bordered by Fairmount Park and rail lines, a mile or so from Center City. Depending on your perspective, Strawberry Mansion is a half-decimated place, with vacant lots and poorly maintained buildings, few jobs, too much crime, failing schools, and bad prospects. Or Strawberry Mansion is a remarkable palimpsest of an inner-city suburb that has witnessed the succession of four or five distinct communities over 150 years, each leaving their stories and marks. It is severely challenged yet doggedly resilient. For many preservationists, the community’s architectural fabric is too fragmented to warrant attention (Figures 1–4). But if one looks beyond the condition of buildings, assets abound in the forms of a hierarchical street grid; affordable row houses; nearby parks; deeply rooted families; and unique, highly valued local narratives. Strawberry Mansion is Philadelphia’s inheritance. We inhabit it, so we have the responsibility to help sustain and design it. How should we use, protect, interpret, and value this changeable and fraught cultural landscape? Traditional preservation cannot address the challenges of this neighborhood, nor can other design fields working alone. Strawberry Mansion highlights the urgency of the preservation field’s empirical commitments and collaborative imperative—the need for engaged preservation.

## About Experimental Preservation

Preservation is a field of design, defined broadly by Herbert Simon. Design is a profession as opposed to an academic discipline. Professions are organized principally to solve problems for society, and they evolve academic functions to support this. Therefore, professions must constantly and intimately engage with society’s empirical issues and opportunities. Intellectual and artistic work should serve the profession and its goals—though for experimental preservationists, the gallery pieces, performances, and academic publications seem to be the focus. The published work is interesting and thoughtful, a form of socially engaged artistic practice.<sup>1</sup>

But experimental preservation is ambiguously positioned, as both a critique of the status quo and an end in itself (“a new form of cultural production in itself ... test[ing] the potential of existing objects to be considered heritage ... offering alternatives [to] authorized heritage discourse.”).<sup>2</sup>

The prompt for this issue of *JAE* captured some deep tensions surrounding the field of preservation and shed light on where the preservation field is mapped these days vis-à-vis architecture and society writ large. But it also reflected some outdated and narrow conceptions of preservation—principally that “artifacts” and “materials” remain the unquestioned center of theory and practice, and that preservation is a “discipline.” Over the last few generations, preservation has been challenged to intensely question the central role of materiality in making preservation decisions, to revise

or replace theories premised on the hegemony of Western notions and institutionalized practices, to valorize and reveal the politics of preservation in every aspect, and to reflect in practice and policy these transformations in theory. In other words, the preservation field has changed a lot in the last few decades.<sup>3</sup> Based on this close reading of the field's evolution, experimental preservation emerged as a sensible critique of preservation: fugitive practices aimed at fugitive heritage.

Experimental preservationists reinforce a definition of preservation as dealing principally in objects.<sup>4</sup> This narrow but long-standing concept stands at odds with the many ways the preservation field is now paying more attention theoretically and practically to processes.<sup>5</sup> Focus on heritage conservation as a social process emphasizes the experiences, meanings, and uses of heritage in contemporary society, which ultimately motivate decisions. This shift to regarding heritage as a process, not a set of artifacts, contributes to the sense that heritage has gone "fugitive" and become more inventive and politically volatile, as compared with traditional conceptions of more or less immutable artifacts, the conditions and meanings of which are fixed by experts.

Experimental preservation overlooks the pivot of the preservation field decades ago to intervene in social processes *as well as* material fabric. Examples in the United States abound and include work aimed at sustaining the commercial districts' economic functions by preserving the architectural character of the street *and* organizing/marketing the economic uses, as did the Main Street Program, launched by the National Trust in the 1970s; applying building science and design to sustainability and building performance, which has been influential in preservation since the 1970s; adopting cultural-landscape and community-development preservation models that internalize change; embracing intangible forms



**Figure 1.** As Philadelphia's economy and neighborhoods contracted in the second half of the twentieth century, whole blocks were sometimes abandoned. The remaining building is a typical two-story working-class row house built between 1880 and 1920. (Photograph by Kaitlyn Levesque.)

of heritage, values-centered preservation, and its critiques, the seeds of which were all planted in the 1970s; learning from critical heritage studies' insights about deeper dynamics of preservation's cultural politics and its implications in much broader processes of globalization, postcolonial conflict, neoliberalism, and more—an important intellectual contribution that gained prominence in the 2000s; and building on scholarship in a number of allied fields and disciplines.<sup>6</sup>

Experimental preservation, I argue, retreats from empirical engagement and acknowledgment of the field's continuing evolution, seeking instead artistic insight and theoretical intensity. The artistic projects produced under the experimental preservation banner add substantial depth to the ways that society can understand the inherited environment. As artworks these projects create brilliant insights and clever effects. But as preservation, they fail to satisfy. One is left feeling that the preservation field is caught between traditional preservation's expertise at fixing objects and something else.

### The Preservation Field Leads a Double Life

The reputation of preservation as narrowly curatorial and ideologically uncreative is a caricature. The complex evolution of the field over two centuries belies this. History provides essential context for the sense that preservation leads a double life—one devoted to the material condition and integrity of buildings, the other devoted to the social dynamics that bring them to life.<sup>7</sup>

Material preservation represents the deepest traditions of the field in Western societies. Preservation rooted in the material authenticity of old buildings relies on formal and physical methods to create and manipulate heritage (begetting the concept of appropriate levels of design intervention as a norm). From the start, the artistic, craft, and design practices of material preservation lived alongside a variety of progressive and repressive social projects using preservation to address contemporary social and cultural issues.

Material and social "lives" of preservation (as I call them here) are distinct yet deeply related. Material preservation primarily functions to fix the condition and meaning of objects to produce an archive of societies past, consisting of environments and their





**Figure 2.** Top: Demolition and abandonment left this grand row of “twins” in fragments along 33rd Street, facing Fairmount Park. (Photograph by Randall Mason.)



**Figure 3.** Middle: Abandonment, demolition, and urban renewal has left an idiosyncratic pattern of built and open lots in Strawberry Mansion’s dense rowhouse blocks. (Photograph by Kaitlyn Levesque.)



**Figure 4.** Bottom: Once-identical rowhouses packing the small streets of Strawberry Mansion’s nineteenth-century grid have, over time, accumulated much character and wear. Additions, adaptations, and decorations bear witness to decades of family and neighborhood history. (Photograph by Kaitlyn Levesque.)

histories (i.e. monument restoration or historic house museums). Social versions of preservation foreground the changing uses of historic places beyond archiving, acting as agents of change (i.e. urban regeneration or national parks). Both contribute to collective memory processes and to the now-canonical, holistic definition of historic preservation as managing change of the inherited environment. But each activate different values of the buildings and environments that societies inherit, and thereby produce conflict in decision-making processes. Arguably, they are distinct design practices (in the way that urban planning and urban design are in ways discrete and interweaved).

The social life of preservation embraces intangible qualities, enables multiple identities and narratives, requires gregarious participation, and has engendered a preservation field using a much broader range of practices than material conservation and architectural design. This wider bandwidth of preservation practices includes the political (advocacy in its many forms), the economic (adaptive reuse, tourism, urban regeneration), and the artistic (represented in site interpretation).<sup>8</sup>

This material–social duality has been both a strength and a weakness of the preservation field vis-à-vis architecture, design, and development practice more generally, and in seeking broad public support.<sup>9</sup> This complex history and divided character of the field clarify the contexts of experimental preservation and why preservationists might,

or might not, embrace it. How then does experimental preservation fit in? It is not quite a new practice; rather, it amplifies the interpretive functions embedded in every preservation project (which flourished critically and politically with the advent of new social history in the 1960s and 1970s).

Experimental preservation uses traditional preservation as a foil. It is “experimental” in the sense of exploring a new strategy to counter, or oppose, the empirical. Experimental preservation raises important questions about the future of the field. Traditional and progressive preservation, like most fields of design, have long been prompted by empirical concerns (Simon’s “existing situations”). Today, the concerns go beyond material matters of arresting decay and judging integrity; they also include responding to sustainability and climate change, representing social justice and trauma, addressing issues of affordable housing and equitable access to public space, and supporting community self-determination in adapting to new political-economic realities like neighborhood change or globalization.

The preservation field continues to evolve to meet changing societal and intellectual demands while hewing to its traditional core. An expanding range of tools, practices, and theories puts an enormous array of strategies and tactics at preservation’s disposal. Experimental preservation extends this farther. It is a necessary challenge, an artful riff. The projects embrace the increasingly fugitive nature of heritage in contemporary society and shift practice toward sly, smart, and attractive artistic projects. The danger lies in portraying experimental preservation as a replacement for empirical (material or social) modes. By privileging artistic takes on the field’s traditional objects and practices, experimental preservation risks being a sideways move for the field.

### Engaged Preservation

Responding to today’s empirical and intellectual challenges, *engaged*

*preservation* is a call to draw on craft, science, and physical design; embrace critical thinking and progressive politics; *and* directly address social issues beyond heritage per se.

Engaged preservation embraces the dual lives of preservation and the dual capacities of the historic built environment as an *archive* for traditional curating and critical remembrance and as an *agent* for social change. It is driven by taking on the challenges (however changeable) of contemporary society, even where they fall outside the traditional lines of culture, while constructing new, critical forms of heritage objects and heritage processes. The sorts of urgent issues faced by engaged preservation theory and practice include defining and designing sites of conscience, cultural landscapes, and intangible heritage objects; reconfiguring the politics of heritage and its preservation to address postcolonial histories and demands for citizen engagement; confronting economic valuation in an age of neoliberalism and globalization; and applying values-based conservation with its focus on broad participation and sustaining heritage processes.

Engaged preservation builds on traditions of material and social preservation in a few ways. Conceptually and theoretically, engaged preservation pursues the ideal of preservation as a public good and even a civil right. It responds to the broad range of heritage, social, and societal values found in heritage places (as opposed to a narrow range of cultural values) and is underpinned by theories of cultural change, political economy, and urbanization (as well as art historical canons).

Engaged preservation responds directly to the empirical demands and practicalities of community life and inhabiting place/land/buildings (as opposed to representation and critique); it embraces processes of technical preservation (including forensic historical

research, archaeological investigation, material science) as important means of fulfilling archival functions and extending the life of buildings. It is enabled by partnering and sharing authority with clients, communities, and allied experts.

I can envision experimental preservation also supporting engaged preservation if experimental projects are more clearly oriented to advancing, not replacing, the empirical commitments at the heart of the field’s material and social lives.

The measure of engaged preservation’s success will be its capacity to deal with material and social imperatives holistically; to advance community development, building performance, and cultural relevance by leveraging the different potentials of heritage places; and to weave historic places and narratives back into the fabric of communities and regions. This last point highlights another challenge for experimental preservation: intentionally dissociating (objectifying) parts of landscapes to heighten curiosity and awareness may magnify the tendency of traditional preservation to isolate heritage from its surroundings and contexts (by listing, by fences, by ownership) and work at cross-purposes to engagement. Our aim should be connecting the everyday life, use, and meaning of heritage places through engaged preservation, not isolating them.

### Back to Strawberry Mansion

Now let us return to Strawberry Mansion. Too many Philadelphians regard Strawberry Mansion as a distant island. Its empty lots and degraded buildings are part of the neighborhood’s fabric. Are they heritage? The empty lots were once building plots. Disinvestment, deindustrialization, riots, white flight, and urban renewal changed that. The land still bears narrative and memory, is valuable to residents, changes with the seasons. Does the preservation of Strawberry Mansion depend on these lots? Absolutely. But their preservation depends



not on listing them or arresting (further) decay, but in redesigning and rebuilding them.

Preservation of Strawberry Mansion will also depend on the more traditional, visible, and object-centered protection of churches and synagogues, corner stores and polite row houses. The empirical challenges of inhabiting Strawberry Mansion—immediate and future, tangible and intangible, creative and conservative—are an important challenge for historic preservation. Engaged preservation should protect affordable housing, create new parks and rebuild existing ones, strengthen civic assets like libraries and recreation centers, help commercial districts thrive, and—ultimately—contribute to addressing the core issue of poverty. Preservation alone will never achieve all this, but engaging the values of heritage and reinvesting in the inherited environment is a great start to repairing the community's fabric and reconnecting it with the rest of the city.

Experimental preservation can help. The work of preservation cannot stop at listing historic districts based on criteria of architectural and historical significance and repairing them with whatever funds are available. Preservation must be deployed as a means to address housing, jobs, safety, and health issues, while valorizing historic and contemporary cultures (a strength of experimental preservation). The fabric to be curated and repaired in Strawberry Mansion is social, economic, and political as well as cultural, architectural, and ecological. The work will be done collaboratively by capital-P Preservationists and small-p preservationists. The most urgent matters of preservation and design in Strawberry Mansions everywhere will depend on engagement foremost, though they likewise require material expertise and can be elevated by artistic experimentation.

We need to let these material, social, and artistic lives of preservation flourish. Indeed, we need to find ways to connect and leverage them, lest they take on the cast of competing ideologies.

### Author Biography

Randall Mason plays several roles at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design: associate professor of city and regional planning; senior fellow at PennPraxis; and, from 2009 through 2017, chair of the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation. Educated in geography, history, and urban planning (PhD, Columbia), his published work includes *The Once and Future New York* (2009). Mason's professional practice includes projects at many scales addressing planning, preservation, and public space issues, commissioned by organizations including the Getty Conservation Institute, William Penn Foundation, Brookings Institution, the City of Philadelphia, and the National Park Service. He lives in Philadelphia and was a Rome Prize fellow in 2012–13.

### Notes

- 1 *Sciences of the Artificial*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 129.
- 2 Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Experimental Preservation," *Places Journal* (September 2016), accessed May 8, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.22269/160913>; and Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik Fenstad Langdalen, Thordis Arrhenius, eds., *Experimental Preservation* (Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2016).
- 3 Jorge Otero-Pailos, "Experimental Preservation: The Potential of Not-Me Creations," in Otero-Pailos et al., *Experimental Preservation*, 9, 16.
- 4 For instance, see "The Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994," <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>; and the discussions in Forum on Nara +20, *Heritage & Society* 8, no. 2 (2015).
- 5 *Forum on Nara +20*, 11–39.
- 6 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–2; and "On Heritage Practices, Cultural Values, and the Concept of Authenticity," *Forum on Nara +20*: 144–47.
- 7 To sample these developments, see Graham Fairclough et al., ed. *The Heritage Reader* (London: Routledge, 2008) and review recent issues of the journals *Change Over Time* and *Future Anterior*.
- 8 In earlier work I described these distinct, coexisting traditions as "curatorial" and "urbanistic" (Randall Mason, "Historic Preservation, Public Memory, and the Making of Modern New York City," in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 9 Dolores Hayden's *Power of Place* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) is a pivotal work in this vein, bringing public art, critical history,

and cultural landscape theory to bear on reinterpreting and preserving a broader range of narratives in Los Angeles, prefiguring experimental preservation.

The intellectual infrastructure of preservation draws on many epistemologies: scientific, humanistic, social-scientific. Partnership with many disciplines is required in practice, given the broad scope of heritage issues. Preservation is thus best defined as a field drawing on the ideas and methods of many disciplines. It follows that most attempts to model preservation from the perspective of any one discipline fall short, as with recent works such as Edward Glaeser's *Triumph of the City* (2011) and Rem Koolhaas/OMA's *CronoCaos* (2010).