

PRESERVATION'S IMBEDDED INJUSTICE



Photographer and activist Tonika Lewis Johnson stands outside a home in Chicago’s Englewood neighborhood with a “landmarker” sign she and architect Paola Aguirre Serrano designed to designate properties subject to the unjust practice of Land Sale Contracts. Her project, [Inequity for Sale](#), calls attention to this land use practice grounded in systemic racism and resulting in the [legal plunder of \\$3.2 billion in generational Black wealth](#).¹ Lewis Johnson and Aguirre Serrano created the landmarkers because they believe that the homes’ condition would disqualify them for city landmark designation and protection (i.e. lacking integrity – [see blog post #3](#)). Photo courtesy of Tonika Lewis Johnson.

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BY BONNIE MCDONALD, PRESIDENT & CEO, LANDMARKS ILLINOIS

If there is one topic that unites this project’s interviewees, it is that the preservation field is neither as inclusive nor as diverse as we want it to be.² As noted in [blog post #2](#), preservationists almost unilaterally support telling the full American story, recognizing that our work has overlooked a large and significant group of people, stories and historic places. To be

¹ “The Plunder of Black Wealth in Chicago: New Findings on the Lasting Toll of Predatory Housing Contracts.” The Samuel Dubois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University, May 2019. <https://socialequity.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Plunder-of-Black-Wealth-in-Chicago.pdf>

² A reminder that when I use the words “we”, “our” or “some” in this and other post, I am referring to preservation professionals and people who identify as participants in the preservation movement.

more relevant to more people, our movement and the stories told through the places we help preserve must expand to include more people and their perspectives. We are falling short on making changes that create pathways for inclusion and diversity.³ What is preventing the preservation field from creating these necessary pathways? I believe that some of us do not know where to begin. Others feel overwhelmed by the scale of needed change. They consider change both hard and uncertain.

Many organizations begin by inviting diverse people to participate.⁴ Invitation is not inclusion. Inclusion creates an environment where people are respected and valued, treated with fairness and dignity, participate in decision-making, and where they feel welcome and that they belong. To be inclusive is to have genuine, sincere, intentional, actionable and ongoing engagement with diverse people and communities. Importantly, the people who have excluded others are responsible for inclusion, not those that have been excluded.⁵

“How do we create a field that people want to be a part of?”

Felicia Mayro, former director of the
Neighborhood Preservation Center
New York City, August 19, 2019

Preservationists have excluded people, intentionally and unintentionally, through our policies and practices. We have to reckon with this truth in order to begin repairing what we have damaged. Preservation will never be diverse without being inclusive and we cannot practice inclusion without facing the truth that exclusion comes from our field’s imbedded, unjust practices – many of which are tied to land use policies.⁶

IMBEDDED INEQUITIES IN LAND USE AND PRESERVATION PRACTICE

Land use practices have had merit in improving peoples’ lives. But these practices have also benefitted some to the detriment of others. Discriminatory zoning practices have resulted in our nation’s continuing racial and economic segregation: redlining, Urban Renewal, the regulation of density and the widespread demolition of social / public housing and foreclosed

³ Mason, Randall and Kaitlyn Levesque. “Preservation and Change: Survey of Attitudes and Opinions in the Historic Preservation Field, Report of Findings.” March 2022. 36.

https://issuu.com/penndesign/docs/preservation_and_change_-_22_0329?e=4320573/91297851

⁴ What do I mean when I refer to “diverse people?” To Landmarks Illinois, diversity means including people of various ages, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic, cultural and religious backgrounds, people with disabilities, national origins and immigration status, sexual orientation, genders or gender identities, housing status, health statuses, lifestyles, experiences, interests and worldviews. Diversity is a group of people who are different from one another and who are working or being in the same place together. Read more in our guiding principles here: <http://www.landmarks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Guiding-Principles-FINAL-APPROVED-BY-BOD-4.20.21.pdf>.

⁵ This paragraph is how Landmarks Illinois defines inclusion. Read this and other definitions in our guiding principles linked above.

⁶ Landmarks Illinois defined “justice” for our own work. Our guiding principles include this definition: “Justice is the practice of being fair and reasonable and ensuring people receive the treatment or outcome they deserve based upon equity, ethics and the law.”

properties. Environmentally harmful industries have been concentrated in under-resourced communities. At the same time, discriminatory banking practices have included the manipulation of appraisals, denials or limits to lending and predatory lending, including Land Sale Contracts and sub-prime loans.⁷ In many municipalities, the government colluded in this generational discrimination by allowing (and perpetuating) racial covenants that attach to deeds. This is a heavy back-log to clear and the work to understand it and eliminate barriers is only just beginning. It is time for a truth and reckoning process for zoning, real estate development and banking. Preservation is interwoven in these practices, as well, and we must also confront the problems our practices have created.

EVALUATION IS NOT NEUTRAL

Preservation can often begin with evaluation using defined criteria. Our field argues over whether the criteria themselves are implicitly biased. This blog does not go into that argument, as the topic needs due space. Publications in the resource list below more thoroughly cover this debate. What we do know is that it is people who apply the criteria and they are knowingly, or unknowingly, subjective because people are not neutral, nor is their training. Preservationists were given a point of view on what is significant. Case in point: I've spoken with preservation colleagues across the country about their State Historic Preservation Offices' decisions. What one reviewer approves in state A is denied in state B. Fortunately, our point of view can evolve. Preservation increasingly recognizes that vernacular places are significant, deviating from the priority given to "High Style" architecture. Beauty and significance are not universal because they are based in cultural norms. In a nation with inhabitants from every part of the world, it is the historian's duty to become aware of their own cultural bias and engage other perspectives throughout the evaluation process.

THE TROUBLE WITH SURVEYS

Unlike local landmarking, the National Register of Historic Places is not tied to land use laws, but its processes also need to be questioned and reconsidered. Where does the preservation process begin? It typically begins by identifying historic resources through a windshield survey. Architectural historians travel around a community looking at places and make decisions as to whether places meet designation criteria.⁸ At this point in the process, the evaluation is primarily visual and focuses on what can be seen: the architectural elements. The survey process can lack inclusion at this point and thereafter, including:

- Local people who value preservation are generally those who will participate in a survey effort. What about others living, working and studying in the area? They have knowledge that can provide a more complete understanding of the layers of history and contemporary value. How do we ensure we record these other stories and evaluate

⁷ Read Richard Rothstein's, "The Color of Law," for an in-depth account of a century of government and private industry actions that created and perpetuate segregation in the United States of America. Rothstein, Richard. "The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America." Liveright Publishing Corporation, New York, 2017.

⁸ Here the word "community" refers to a defined physical geography, such as a block, neighborhood or downtown.

significance from other perspectives? If we only think about the past, we are working against being inclusive and diverse.

- Surveys are expensive, preventing research that would identify significant historic people, events and lifeways that cannot be seen through a windshield. Additionally, large-scale surveys are rarely re-surveyed leaving resources unrecognized that might be significant in a new context.
- When there is time and money for more in-depth research, primary sources may be limited or may not exist at all for the stories of underrepresented groups that were, intentionally or unintentionally, not documented. It has not always been, and is still not, safe to document all stories. History is not neutral. Even primary sources come with a point of view.
- Oral histories are not always treated as primary sources, though they may be more available and accurate than written accounts.
- Community members may have difficulty accessing primary and secondary sources because of their location or the need for internet access.⁹

THE RIGHT TO REPRESENTATION, ACCESS AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Who makes the decision about what is important in a community? To promote inclusion and equity, the power to decide should be with the people most connected to the place. They are experts in their own right. Preservation has to reconsider its entire process, ensuring that people connected with that place are represented every step of the way. This includes making sure the survey, research, evaluation and nomination process, and the decision-making are all inclusive and accessible. Materials should be available in the languages spoken in the community, materials should not be full of jargon, the process should be explained with consideration for different learning styles, gatherings should be at convenient times and community representatives should be a part of organizing all of these steps. Who is defined as a resident should also be considered. Remember that renters, students and the unhoused care about their community, too.

“We have to grapple with responsibility for and equity of [gatekeeping]. People can serve as navigators rather than gatekeepers. People want to be supported and informed.”

Fallon Samuels Aidoo, PhD, Jean Brainard
Boebel Endowed Professor of Historic
Preservation, Planning & Urban Studies
University of New Orleans
New Orleans, October 8, 2020

⁹ “Community” is used here to expand beyond those living in a defined geographic area. A “community” can be a group of people who share a part of how they identify. A person can be a part of many communities. In the case of a former jazz club, the “community” could include people that live or spend other time in proximity to that place, or used to go to the club or play there, or jazz lovers interested in the cultural history of that place.

LAWS LIMITING TELLING THE FULL HISTORY

Continuing calls for racial justice have led to debates over the rights of history, or perhaps the right to history, and its narration. Arguments over monuments' futures have played a leading role as a proxy for self-determination about one's own history and identity. It is important to emphasize how significant history can be to identity, even leading to violence. The debate has led states like Texas and others to propose and pass bills directing which histories are taught, and which are not.¹⁰ Preservationists work with people's histories: their identities. We have free (or, relatively free) access to sources enabling us to create a narrative about another person's identity. Are we entitled to another person's story just because we have access to the records? Should we be asking for permission to tell another person's story? If these questions are compelling, they will lead to others about the ethics and practicality of a right to history that need further exploration.

WITH PEOPLE, NOT FOR PEOPLE

Communities must be in the lead. Preservationists can be a resource when called upon, but we must have the awareness that we are not all-knowing. How can we ensure that community members speak for themselves, shape the process and that their voices are heard? And not just the loudest or exclusionary voices.

My hope is that the challenges raised in this blog inspire individuals and groups to evaluate their own actions, to reckon with the truth, and to work toward repairing our practices so that we can help save places with people, and not for people.

YOUR INPUT IS VITAL

Your thoughts on this and forthcoming topics are not only welcomed, they're imperative to ensuring this project is inclusive, with well-considered outcomes. So post away on Landmarks Illinois' [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) feeds and my [LinkedIn](#) page (blog comments are not enabled)! I'll collect and consider your comments to inform future blog posts and the project's outcomes published in the forthcoming Relevancy Guidebook to the U.S. Preservation Movement (working title).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Does the preservation process need to change in your mind to dismantle systemic injustice and racism in our practice? How would you change the process?
- How would you define inclusion and diversity for your preservation practice?
- If you are not already including diverse communities in your work, what steps do you need to take to move forward? Are there any challenges to taking those steps?
- In what ways would increasing inclusion and having diverse voices as part of the decision-making change your work? How would doing so improve the relevance of your work?

¹⁰ Pérez-Moreno, Heidi. "Texas' 1836 Project to promote 'patriot education;' critics worry it will gloss over history of racism." KWTX, June 11, 2021. <https://www.kwtx.com/2021/06/11/texas-1836-project-promote-patriotic-education-critics-worry-it-will-gloss-over-history-racism/>.

- Have you participated in training in inclusive community engagement practices and diversity, equity and inclusion training? Would you participate if you had access to such training?

**STAY TUNED FOR NEXT WEEK’S BLOG POST COMING ON THURSDAY, JULY 21, 2022:
PROMOTING A JUST PRESERVATION MOVEMENT**

FURTHER READING

- Avrami, Erica. “[Building a Foundation for Action: Anti-Racist Historic Preservation Resources](#).” Columbia Center for Archaeology. December 22, 2020.
- Briscoe, Tony and Rashod Taylor. “[Conservationists See Rare Nature Sanctuaries. Black Farmers See a Legacy Bought Out From Under Them](#).” ProPublica, October 14, 2021.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “[The Case for Reparations](#).” The Atlantic, June 2014.
- Diaz-Griffith, Michael and Mary Wang. “[On Being and Anti-Racist Preservationist](#).” Nicholas Hall, June 26, 2020.
- Fullilove, M.D. Mindy Thompson. “[Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It](#).” New Village Press, 2016.
- Gray, M. Nolan. “[Apartheid by Another Name: How Zoning Regulations Perpetuate Segregation](#).” Next City: July 4, 2022.
- Kalven, Jamie. “[The Right to the City](#).” Forum Journal, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Fall 2015. 16-25.
- Page, Max. “[Why Preservation Matters](#).” Yale University Press, 2016.
- Plastrik, Peter, Madeline Taylor and John Cleveland. “[Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact](#).” Island Press, 2014.
- “[Racial and Social Equity Resource List](#),” Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania.
- “[SurveyLA, the Los Angeles Historic Resources Survey, is the first-ever comprehensive program to identify significant historic resources throughout the City of Los Angeles](#).” Los Angeles City Planning, accessed July 15, 2022. Read more about how SurveyLA invited Angelinos to participate in the survey process.
- Wells, Ph.D., Jeremy C. “[10 Ways Historic Preservation Policy Supports White Supremacy and 10 Ways to End It](#).” University of Maryland, May 12, 2021.

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