

The ROLES OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND URBAN REVITALIZATION

A Review



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Historic preservation gained momentum after the conclusion of World War II, when many mainstream families fled to the suburbs, leaving cities full of immigrants, the impoverished, and racial minorities that were falling down around them. Andrew Hurley defines historic preservation as it being “better to save old buildings than to tear them down.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In today’s globalized world regions that have reasons to stand out from others end up gaining an advantage over those who do not. Historic preservation in urban areas has allowed for a “renaissance” which helped communities revitalized the cities they lived in and make them something to be proud of again. Still, historic preservation in cities also causes challenges for those who may not agree with the history being emphasized or the techniques being used to do so. Overall, however, the practice has an astounding tendency to help foster the way communities identify themselves from others, and how people in general interact with each other.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Historic preservation started emerging as early as the 19th century, with heavy emphasis on Revolutionary War structures and heroes. Still, the real instigator to major urban revitalization movements stemmed from the need to make cities more economically viable again after the conclusion of the Second World War.[[3]](#footnote-3) The movement was helped greatly by the passing of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. It was actually a “direct response to the excesses of urban renewal and the threat it posed to buildings with historic value.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The continuing deteriorating of the nation’s cities was not at the forefront of the minds of the laws’ creators, so the fact that it stood to help mitigate the “late-twentieth century urban renaissance was the product of largely unforeseen social, cultural and economic currents operating in conjunction with subsequent policies.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The main goal of urban revitalization in the form historic preservation was something called “adaptive reuse.” Hurley best explains this on page 12 of the first chapter of his book Beyond History: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities. He says that “in the past, if a building had outlived its function, the prevailing wisdom held that it should be torn down and replaced with a more appropriate structure. Preservation offered an alternative: repair and repurpose the original building.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This allowed historic preservation to align better with the economic agendas of those wishing to bring in new jobs and investments to the city. A second goal of historic preservation that also aligned with economic desires was a ‘heritage-based tourism.’ This meant that revitalization of a city could foster both a physical transformation to the city to attract high-income workers and residents and also draw in foreigners with each unique piece of history the city has to offer.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Of course, urban revitalization was not without its challenges. One lay in the fact that some felt that this kind of historic preservation was just a way to manipulate the city’s history in order to draw a profit. In an article separate from his book, Hurley focuses on the pragmatics of revitalization movements. He notes that “executing neighborhood public history projects often require collaboration with elite polite political and economic actors who have different ideas about what types of interpretation are suitable for public consumption.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Putting it down to the basics, this particular challenge is about “balancing the goals of community building” and “capturing attention and investment from without.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Sometimes, the elites favored history that brought in more tourists and money rather than promote history that teaches the best narrative of American history to the nation’s citizens and visitors. These types of debates often resulted in creating cultural tensions between different cultural sects and social orders within a specific community. Economic revitalization was a big reason why historic preservation in cities became popular in the first place, so if officials could find ways to either save money or make more of it, then that was the route they would most likely choose.

Overtime historic preservation allowed for the cultivation of “unique senses” of tourism, residential living, and investment.[[10]](#footnote-10) The ever-growing and adapting agenda for historic preservation, public history practices, and urban revitalization movements have at their cores historians and archaeologists who are dedicated to finding “increasingly sophisticated techniques for engaging diverse urban constituencies in the act of historical interpretation.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Public history, then finds in historic preservation a way through which they can encourage ordinary people to make meanings out of the places and people that make up the history of their communities and cities. Not only does this help promote interest in history itself, but historic preservation and urban revitalization have shown people how preserving the nation’s history and heritage “increases the likelihood that preservation activities remain consistent with a grassroots vision of neighborhood development.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

References:

Hurley, Andrew. *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities*. N.p.: Temple University Press, 2010.

Hurley, Andrew. “Narrating the Urban Waterfront: The Role of Public History in Community Revitalization.” *The Public Historian* 28, no. 4 (2006): 19-50.

1. Andrew Hurley. *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities*: Temple University Press, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IBID, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. IBID, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. IBID, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. IBID, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. IBID, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. IBID, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Andrew Hurley. “Narrating the Urban Waterfront: The Role of Public History in Community Revitalization.” *The Public Historian* 28, no. 4 (2006): 19-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. IBID, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Andrew Hurley. *Beyond Preservation*. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. IBID, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. IBID, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)