

11.947, History and Theory of Historic Preservation  
Prof. Max Page

**Lecture 4: The Politics of Significance: The Presidents House on Independence Mall, Philadelphia**

Introduction and Announcements: Each student should prepare a prospectus by next week's class, which will meet in Amherst, Mass. The day's events will include a tour of the Emily Dickinson Museum, a talk with the Museum Director, a look at the landscape of the site, a talk with the head of the Historical Commission, lunch, a walk through town, and a visit to an adaptive reuse project. The tour starts at 11:00 a.m., the day's events should end by 3:00 p.m.

Outline for this Class Session

A brief review the key themes from last week's discussion of the history of historic preservation

Discuss historic preservation policies

Discuss the concept of "historic significance" and the case of the Presidents House

**Slide Lecture**

Philadelphia. To problematize and complicate the traditional narrative of historic preservation's history leads to a rethinking of preservation practice. The traditional tale and mode of preservation has hidden stories. As we discussed last week, the earliest sites were considered significant for their patriotic association, not necessarily their architectural quality.

Mound City, Ohio; Mt. Vernon; Chaco Canyon; Devil's Tower. Devil's Tower was one of the sites that was to be protected by the 1906 Antiquities Act. The involvement of government in historic preservation was slow, but it came, bit by bit. These developments, as we have read, culminated in the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act.

Paul Revere House. Remember that alongside this series of developments, the increasing presence of government in the historic preservation field, early preservationists are engaged in a number of other significant activities. Of particular importance, in this respect, is using historic sites to educate and encourage the assimilation of (the "uplift") of immigrants.

Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan; Williamsburg, Virginia; Charleston, South Carolina; Penn Station, New York; Santa Fe, New Mexico. Keep in mind our discussion from last class about the focus of preservation work in Santa Fe: the idea of creating a sense of place. This idea goes against the dominant trend in historic preservation, which is sometimes described as "object" or "artifact-focused." This different sense of preservation could be seen in Santa Fe as early as 1912.

Illinois Institute of Technology campus, Chicago. Recall the Bluestone article. The African American preservationists who sought to save Mecca Flats argued for a different kind of preservation, too. They were concerned with community, with the building as a social center, with the building as a home. Modernist principles became a dominant view within the preservation movement: the object-focus and the notion

of the pure moment in time. Alternatives and challenges to this view are represented by the histories we read of sites in Santa Fe and Chicago.

### **Some Comments on Preservation Policies**

There are three basic steps to preservation policy:

finding and describing an historical resource  
evaluation and registration  
protection

In the first step, local government is the most important player. In step 2, responsibility "flows up" to the state and federal level. In step 3, responsibility "flows back down" to the local level.

Ways of protecting a building can vary from gentle to severe and they can involve the "carrot" (incentives) as well as the "stick" (regulation). These ways include: tax incentives (for federal tax credits only commercial buildings are eligible), mediation (Section 106 of the NHPA), demolition delay ordinances (local governments), design review (requiring a certificate of appropriateness, for example), and, most powerful of all, eminent domain. One of the most important tools for preservation advocates has been the creation of historic districts, an innovation which began in 1966 in the U.S. Historic districts allow for much broader consideration of context. For the most part, historic preservation is federally organized, but locally run. Private initiative remains very important.

### **Slide Lecture, Part 2 and Discussion: The Politics of Significance**

Robben Island, South Africa; demolished Ayodhya mosque, India; site of Nazi headquarters, Berlin; Emmett Till site, Money, Mississippi; Lorraine Motel, Memphis, Tennessee; City Hall plaza, Memphis, Tennessee. These sites raise questions about significance. Significance is an amorphous concept. There is no single definition of historic significance. Significance is socially constructed.

Discussion of Ayodhya case. Questions: What happened here? How was the mosque destroyed? What part did anthropologists play? How does the history of colonialism and its association with anthropology and modernity factor into an analysis of these events?

Discussion of Robben Island case. Questions: How should this place be memorialized? How has its meaning changed over time? What does the author argue? How might a place like Robben Island assume new meaning in a new South Africa? What is the interpretive lens that is being put forward?

Discussion of Presidents House case. Questions: How do we define significance? What is shown? Why was the memory of this place lost? How was it rediscovered? What were the series of events Lawler describes? What was the NPS response? Why? What did you think about the proposed designs for a new structure or structures (and interpretation activities) on the site of the Presidents House at the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center?