What we preserve says plenty about us

Ellen Harris

In a very tangible way, historic preservation trends and developments directly and indirectly reflect societal values. The act of historic preservation is often a choice to preserve the built environment for current and future generations. So how do we choose what to preserve?

In theory, the definition of "historic" should be objective; there are specific, nationally accepted, definitions of what is considered historic as published by the Secretary of the Interior of the National Park Service (NPS). In very general terms, a building should be at least 50 years old, have significance and have integrity.

The nuance in the term "significance" can be problematic. While the NPS provides guidance on evaluating significance, there is still subjectivity in its interpretation -- which may mean the difference between preservation and demolition.

In the early days of the American preservation movement, activities focused on "obvious" historic buildings like Mount Vernon. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association was one of the earliest preservation organizations in the US, forming in the 1850s to preserve George Washington's former home. Certainly, this building has national significance and is worthy of preservation.

As the preservation movement evolved, the focus continued to be on "grand" buildings and neighborhoods, often to the detriment of the more modest ones. For example, it is no accident that the I-16 ramps into downtown Savannah are located in formerly thriving African-American residential neighborhoods and a core commercial district. Land was inexpensive and opposition was minimal and easily disregarded. This was, of course, in the 1960s, prior to the passage of federal and state environmental justice and historic preservation regulations. Entire communities were erased through short-sightedness and poor planning -- Currietown, Frogtown, LePaigeville, to name a few.

Local laws were similarly slow to recognize the history, architecture and stories of underrepresented communities. While Savannah enacted local legislation in 1973 to protect the historic resources in the Landmark District, only the principal houses were designated as historic, while most carriage houses were considered insignificant, and therefore non-historic until 2002. Similarly, while the primary residences in the Victorian District were considered historic and protected in 1980, most lane dwellings weren't legally recognized as historic until 2018, even though many were built earlier than the principal house.

Fortunately, private and community-initiated efforts have furthered the cause of preservation in underrepresented communities. Neighborhoods such as Pin Point, Carver Village, and Pine Gardens have, in recent years, pursued and received recognition and some protections. In 2014 the Davenport House Museum conducted archaeological investigations in the courtyard to learn more about all the residents of the home. In 2016 the Georgia Historical Society erected a historic marker on the Jen Library, formerly Levi's Department Store, commemorating the 1960 sit-ins at the store's white-only lunch counter.

Archaeology in particular plays an important role in understanding the history and stories of underrepresented communities. Often, it's the only remaining link to these communities when above ground physical structures have been destroyed. Yet Savannah continues its two-year-long discussion on whether to have a meaningful archaeology ordinance.

How we determine which resources are significant and therefore "worthy" of preservation, is particularly relevant today as we are experiencing a veritable revolution in societal values. As these discussions evolve, it is my hope that we continue to expand our interpretation of "significance" to see more historic preservation and archaeology reflect our rich history of underrepresented communities both through public and private actions.

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