

With a World of Heritage So Rich

Lessons from Across the Globe for U.S. Historic Preservation in its Second 50 Years

Recognizing the Contemporary Cultural Significance of Historic Places: A Proposal to Amend National Register Criteria to Include Social Value

By Holly Taylor

Introduction

The United States should adopt a policy identifying social value as a criterion of significance following the example of Australia. Like the U.S., Australia equates significance with historical, architectural, and scientific (archaeological) values. In addition, Australia recognizes social value, finding some historic places worthy of preservation because they are associated with present-day cultural significance. The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) identifies culture as an “area” of significance, yet none of our National Register (NR) criteria address cultural significance (or social value - these terms are interchangeable). Our approach to Traditional Cultural Places (TCPs) offers a useful conceptual framework, but falls short in implementation. Describing challenges facing the preservation field, the ACHP cites a “lack of widespread public...appreciation for the importance of historic preservation”; sadly, preservationists also lack appreciation for many places that matter to the public. Amending NR eligibility criteria to include social value democratizes preservation by requiring experts to cede some authority regarding heritage resources to communities that value them.

Social Value in Australia

In 1975, the Australian Heritage Commission Act defined the National Estate (their NR) as comprising “those places that have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value.”¹ The 1979 Burra Charter, which guides the Act’s implementation, identifies intergenerational equity as a core principle of Australian conservation, emphasizing the connections felt by a diverse population toward a range of special places. This approach balances the views of heritage experts and community members. Although U.S. preservationists acknowledge the need to consider perspectives of both experts and stakeholders, they rarely take community values into account when assessing significance.

Burra Charter guidelines describe social value as “the associations that a place has for a particular community or cultural group and the social or cultural meanings that it holds for them.”² Such places are part of community identity, important as local markers or symbols. Places having social value derive their primary significance from contemporary cultural use: “Social value is about collective attachment to places...These places are usually community owned or publicly accessible or in other ways ‘appropriated’ into people’s daily lives.”³

Research methodologies integrate ethnography, since addressing social value, in addition to documenting physical characteristics and historical information, requires assessing to whom a place is important and why. Three key points must be recognized. First, while adaptive reuse is often desirable for preserving places significant under other criteria, continuity of use is the best option for retaining social value. Second, assessing social value provides a mechanism for

communities to identify places they value, even if such places have been dismissed by heritage professionals.⁴ Third, while connections between people and places may change due to community displacement or access limitations, social value may also grow over time, and places having social value may gain historical value.⁵

Cultural Conservation and Traditional Cultural Places

U.S. preservation has a peculiar relationship to cultural value. In 1965, the National Trust urged protection for landmarks of “historic, architectural, and unique community value.”⁶ The following year, *With Heritage So Rich* advocated protection for resources “having historic, architectural, social or cultural significance.”⁷ The 1966 NHPA embraced resources “significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture;” however, NR regulations (36 CFR 60) include eligibility criteria related only to history, architecture and archaeology. Culture is omitted. In other words, NPS and ACHP have a statutory mission to preserve culture, but lack the regulatory authority to do so.

NHPA amendments in 1980 embraced “cultural conservation” through a study of place-based intangible heritage. It found that while historic places could be protected, the cultural contexts from which they derive significance were not considered a concern of preservation.⁸ Although it led to recognition of TCPs, this effort was otherwise a missed opportunity. Publication of Bulletin 38 on TCPs outlined the conceptual framework relevant to social value in 1990, including a definition of culture as “the traditions, beliefs, practices, lifeways, arts, crafts, and social institutions of any community.”⁹ TCPs are understood as places important to living communities, in which the community determines significance. Integrity is assessed according to the community’s relationship to the place, which is documented ethnographically. In contrast to typical practice, a TCP’s period of significance extends to the present. These aspects of TCPs would also be important under a new criterion of cultural significance.

Unfortunately, TCPs remain poorly understood; evaluation is perceived as problematic; and Bulletin 38 remains underutilized.¹⁰ This may be because TCPs are not a property type, and traditional cultural significance is not a recognized criterion of significance, leaving practitioners, administrators and community members to struggle with a complex and nuanced process. Adopting social value as an eligibility criterion would not alter NHPA recognition that places of “traditional religious and cultural importance to an Indian tribe or Native Hawaiian organization” may be NR eligible.¹¹ A social value criterion would broaden evaluation of significance without compromising progress made by tribes and other traditional communities in securing recognition of TCPs. All TCPs would be considered to have social value, but not all places having social value would be regarded as TCPs.

Even without a criterion, some U.S. preservationists consider social value beyond TCP guidelines. Nonprofits City Lore and Place Matters celebrate “living landmarks” important to New Yorkers through their grassroots Census of Places that Matter. Kingston Heath called this “the humanist branch of historic preservation,” in which relationships between people and places underlie significance.¹² Through its former Applied Ethnography Program, NPS recognized interests of “living people linked to the parks by religion, legend, deep historical attachment, subsistence use, or other aspects of their culture.”¹³ That program’s Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedure offers models for community-based “demonstration projects” integrating social value into NR nominations.

NEPA's consideration of the human environment, including historic properties, Native American cultural items, religious practices, and "valued beliefs and ways of life of communities and neighborhoods," would dovetail more effectively with the NHPA if social value were an eligibility criterion. Consideration of social value in a preservation context neither replaces nor duplicates environmental and social justice mandates regarding low-income and minority groups. Nor does embracing social value dilute the preservation mission of ACHP or NPS; rather, it integrates a much-needed dimension of culture into our fifty-year-old definition of significance.

Implementation

Adding a social value criterion would not require NHPA amendments (criteria are not specified in law). It would require revisions to NR regulations, bulletins, policy documents, and outreach materials. Building on Bulletin 38's conceptual framework, the addition of an actual criterion under which to consider cultural properties would simplify rather than complicate evaluation.

Philosophically, the major hurdle to implementation is Criteria Consideration G: Properties Achieving Significance Within the Past Fifty Years. The basis for considering social value of historic properties (50+ years old) is recognizing accrual of significance up to the present. Properties having social value may be eligible under other criteria, but these may be unrelated to the place's significance for community members.

Two examples highlight historic places significant for social value. A cultural center located in a former Seattle elementary school, El Centro de la Raza has been the Latino community's hub since 1972. While the 1904 Colonial Revival building might be considered significant for architectural style or association with the architect, this assessment ignores the Latino community's four decades of holiday celebrations, classes, political organizing, mural painting, and other traditions [Figure 1]. The Port of Seattle established Fishermen's Terminal in 1914 as the North Pacific Fishing Fleet's homeport, and it still serves that purpose for historic vessels, shipyards and support industries, accommodating commercial fishing families who maintain traditional practices. Preservationists rarely recognize such continuity of use as culturally significant. If the fleet was displaced by yachts, tourists, and condos, documenting the place's history would be a hollow exercise [Figure 2].

Evaluating integrity in these examples prioritizes location, feeling, association, and use, consistent with approaches to authenticity in ICOMOS's Nara Document. Because NR eligibility is the gateway to considerations including 106 review, grants, and disaster assistance, the preservation field needs to respond positively when the public says a historic place is important.¹⁴ Recognizing social value would foster preservation's engagement with immigrant communities in historic urban neighborhoods, and with places linked to traditional economies where continuity of activity eclipses history or aesthetics. The field of place studies, integrating environmental psychology and phenomenology, offers analytical tools that could reinvigorate preservation,¹⁵ if we have the ability to consider cultural significance of historic places.

Conclusion

This proposal to recognize social value is part of a paradigm shift from fabric-centered to values-centered preservation.¹⁶ In *Place, Race and Story*, Ned Kaufman asks preservationists to embrace a broader understanding of what makes places important to people, saying that established approaches fail to capture the full range of heritage values.¹⁷ What unites preservationists is our common set of NR criteria, but what is missing is consideration of cultural value. Rather than incremental tinkering with NR bulletins, the dramatic impact of a new criterion provides a course correction in the federal preservation program that might be adopted by state and local

programs. Case studies documenting culturally significant places, integrating Australian methodologies and TCP guidelines, would demonstrate how and why embracing social value would bring preservation's methods and policies into closer alignment with its goals.¹⁸ Broadening NHPA criteria to include social value will move preservation forward as an inclusive and vibrant field in the next fifty years.



Figure 1: Members of the traditional dance group Folklore Mexicano Tonantzin perform at El Centro de la Raza in Seattle during Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations, one of many community gatherings and cultural events held each year at this historic property. *Seattle Times* image by Marcus Yam, used by permission.



Figure 2: Fishermen's Terminal, in foreground, was established in 1914 as the home port of the North Pacific fishing fleet. This 75-acre port facility on the Lake Washington Ship Canal north of downtown Seattle provides freshwater moorage for sea-going fishing vessels. Port of Seattle image by Don Wilson, used by permission.



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- ¹ Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw, and Tracy Ireland, *Social Significance: A Discussion Paper*, Second Edition (Hurstville, NSW: New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003), 4.
- ² [Australia ICOMOS, Practice Note: Understanding and Assessing Cultural Significance](#) (November 2013), 4, and Meredith Walker and Peter Marquis-Kyle, *The Illustrated Burra Charter: Good Practice for Heritage Places* (Australia ICOMOS, 2004), 20.
- ³ Chris Johnston, [What is Social Value? A Discussion Paper](#) (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992), 10, and Meredith Walker, *Protecting the Social Value of Public Places* (ACT: Australian Council of National Trusts, 1998).
- ⁴ Chris Johnston, *What is Social Value?*, 4, and Chris Johnston, “Inhabiting Place: Social Significance in Practice in Australia,” *APT Bulletin: Special Issue on Values-Centered Preservation* (Vol. XLV, No. 2-3, 2014), 40.
- ⁵ Chris Johnston, “Inhabiting Place...”, 42.
- ⁶ James A. Glass, *The Beginnings of a New National Historic Preservation Program, 1957-1969* (American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, TN and National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, Washington, D.C., 1990), 8.
- ⁷ Albert Rains and Laurence G. Henderson, eds., “Findings & Recommendations,” *With Heritage So Rich*. (U.S. Conference of Mayors, Special Committee on Historic Preservation, New York: Random House, 1966), 208.
- ⁸ Antoinette J. Lee, “Discovering Old Cultures in the New World: The Role of Ethnicity,” *The American Mosaic: Preserving A Nation’s Heritage*, Robert E. Stipe and Antoinette J. Lee, eds. (US/ICOMOS, 1987), 197; the study’s findings are reported in Ormond Loomis, *Cultural Conservation: The Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress), 1983, 27.
- ⁹ Patricia L. Parker and Thomas F. King, [National Register Bulletin 38: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties](#) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1990, revised 1998).
- ¹⁰ Ned Kaufman, “Righter Than We Realized? New Life for a Historic Movement,” Opening Plenary Speech, New Jersey History & Historic Preservation Conference, June 5, 2014, Brookdale Community College, Lincroft, NJ.
- ¹¹ NHPA, 1992 amendment, now in §302706.
- ¹² Heath quoted in Laurie Kay Sommers, [“Integrating Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy: Toward a Richer Sense of Place.”](#) American Folklore Society, Folklore & Historic Preservation Policy Working Group, June 2013, 10.
- ¹³ National Park Service. *Legacy: Muriel ‘Miki’ Crespi, National Park Service Chief Ethnographer – Her Professional Contributions to the National Park Service*, 2005, 3.
- ¹⁴ Milford Wayne Donaldson, [“To Whom Does Cultural Heritage Belong?”](#) *Preservation Matters: The Newsletter of the California Office of Historic Preservation* (Volume 5, Issue 3, Summer 2012).
- ¹⁵ For a broader discussion of applicable social science research methods, see Jeremy C. Wells, “Social Science Research Methodologies and Historic Preservation,” *Preservation Education: Sharing Best Practices and Finding Common Ground*, Barry L. Stiefel and Jeremy C. Wells, eds. (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2014), 245-263.

¹⁶ Randall Mason, "Theoretical and Practical Arguments for Values-Centered Preservation," *Cultural Resource Management: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* (vol. 3 no. 2 Summer 2006).

¹⁷ Ned Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 227.

¹⁸ This issue is explored in detailed in Raymond W. Rast, "A Matter of Alignment: Methods to Match the Goals of the Preservation Movement," *Forum Journal* (Vol. 28 No. 3, Spring 2014), 13-22.