

# Now is the *Future Anterior* for Advancing Historic Preservation Scholarship

It is difficult to escape the impression that historic preservation currently enjoys an unprecedented moment of expansion in American culture. Unlike other design disciplines, preservation is popularly embraced as a worthy “cause.” The number and success of individually funded non-governmental preservation organizations attest to this fact, as do fashionable preservation television programs, and rising class sizes at universities. Fundamentally, the view of preservation as a just ethical pursuit stems from the belief that it is carried out in the service of uniting people in some kind of a shared history. By way of contrast, other artistic occupations (the classical image of the painter comes to mind) suffer from the perception that they are self-centered elitist enterprises that divide between those who “get it” and those who don’t more than they unite constituencies. This basic reception has encouraged the association of preservation with “civilizing” forces, a trope that is regularly exploited by the media in discussing the destruction of cultural patrimony as an index of anti-social “barbarism.” The current prosperity of preservation then says as much about the increased sophistication of its growing disciplinary knowledge, as it does about the cultural desires and anxieties of the societies that promote it, and sometimes exploit it.

The escalation of preservation’s engagements has heralded a correlative intensification and amplification of scholarly research by faculty, students, and professionals. Quantity however is no guarantee of quality and, in the absence of an impartial specialized journal, scientific findings have not received the necessary scrutiny, attention, and dissemination. This situation becomes aggravated by the rapid inflation of preservation’s cultural currency, which threatens to devalue it through a loss in specificity. It is precisely this concern that prompted us to initiate *Future Anterior*. The project was made a reality thanks to the exceptional support and enthusiasm of Mark Wigley, Interim Dean of the Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation, Paul Byard, Director of the Preservation Program, Janet Foster, Assistant Director, the members of our editorial board, the preservation faculty, and finally our incredible students, among whom Robert Thomson, editor of this inaugural issue, deserves special mention for his acumen and commitment to making *Future Anterior* a reality.

Over the last quarter century, Columbia University's Program in Historic Preservation has distinguished itself by leading the advancement of scholarship in the field, furthering its critical examination, and encouraging debates about its often-difficult engagements with culture, politics, economic development, public health, and post-colonial identity struggles. The pages of *Future Anterior* continue this tradition and, in doing so, will open a new chapter in the development of historic preservation by providing a trusted source for the diffusion of cutting-edge research in domestic and international arenas. Its twice-per-year publication is intended to keep up with these current issues, while allowing time for their maturation. Articles from academics, professionals, and students in preservation and related fields are evaluated for publication by the editorial board, and exceptional articles are subjected to the higher scrutiny of a blind jury that authorizes their publication as "peer reviewed" entries.

The magazine's title highlights preservation's foundational theoretical and historiographical problem of having to speak for two eras (the past and the present) in the name of the future. One might argue that, strictly speaking, this problem concerns all creative acts. By definition, they all involve the projection of the past through the present and into the future. Past and future stand in opposition and mutually dispute the ground. Preservation is in that sense part of every creative action, but indeed not everything in that creative action is preservation.

To discern the unambiguous processes that may be properly called preservation requires systematic analysis, and the development of concepts (old and new) that will focus and guide that examination. This makes the journal's subtitle worth mentioning. The stress on history asks that we remain mindful of the careers of ideas and their successive failures to ever fully grasp objects. Theory requests that we remain watchful over the dangers of tearing concepts from their spheres of origin. Criticism alerts us to the fact that history is only constituted as such when it is properly theorized, and to the inverse insight that theory comes into being when historicized.

History, theory, and criticism are essential tools in clarifying and advancing preservation knowledge. Already broad new areas of research are opening up. The process of preservation is applied to objects through a medium, and all three of these categories are coming under scrutiny. Preservationists are questioning the qualities that define a proper object of preservation. Recent reexaminations of categories such as aesthetics, historicity, authenticity, and cultural significance (to name only a few) are making available new entities to preservation.

Buildings are no longer the sole objects of our discipline. Streetscapes and landscapes have also come under its purview. And lately, most intriguingly, human experience itself is being subjected to the process of preservation (witness the treatment of vision in view corridors). Through this evolution, the medium of preservation has become a significant domain of investigation and discovery for a variety of disciplines previously unrelated to historic preservation. The traditional media of designation reports, law enforcement, conservation technology, plaques, and historic tours are now being supplemented with new and less conventional media such as television, art, and theatrical re-enactments, all of which require critical examination.

This explosive outward opening of preservation has made it an important area of investigation for non-preservationists. Artists, architects, historians, developers, planners, politicians, journalists, and others are turning to preservation as a domain in which to expand their own activities. This cross-fertilization will undoubtedly be beneficial in the long run, but the success of preservation in America also has its downside.

Historic preservation has triumphed at the price of severe renunciations, by handing over to other disciplines those areas of itself which were the source of difficulty. This amounts to the projection of difficulty outside of preservation's disciplinary limits, which is a necessary pre-condition to the claim of professional proficiency. But this leaves an unexplained residue inside preservation: an unwillingness to explore the discipline's internal inadequacies for fear that they will undermine the credibility of the profession as a whole. This reluctance is the root of the animosity towards theory and criticism. But in fact the practices of theory and criticism, which *Future Anterior* seeks to further, will only advance the effectiveness of preservation by dealing with those areas of deficiency that, if neglected, threaten to be the discipline's undoing.

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New York City, March 18, 2004.