



QUESTIONS OF PRACTICE

Gray Area: Provocations on the Future of Preservation **Catalog Essay**

Produced by Gray Area, part of DesignPhiladelphia,
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GRAY AREA

PROVOCATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF PRESERVATION

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Cities are constantly evolving. Economic pressures, demographic shifts, infrastructure challenges, advancements in technology and real estate trends all present a sustained push for urban change. Yet the traditional practice of historic preservation resists change, working against some of the latent potentials that more radical approaches to historic buildings and settings could unlock. Much like botanists, preservationists have habitually been

tasked with cataloging a city's physical assets by understanding buildings and urban fabric as specimens to be categorized, prioritized, and re-presented to the public through a designation of cultural value. Preservation as such becomes a black and white issue.

Yet, design practice, both defined through blurred disciplinary boundaries and hybrid approaches, has begun to unpack these opposing sides, to explore new potentials for a productive future through a renewed relationship with the past.

This project delves into the GRAY AREA that architects, planners, urbanists and preservationists are uncovering within

the dialogue on preservation issues, proposing a shift in emphasis from catalog to catalyst. We propose that the history of the city should be positioned as a stimulus for its future through a mutually beneficial conversation in the present. Future urban, architectural, political, social and economic trends must feed back into our understanding of the past, allowing the relationship to grow in unexpected ways. We advocate for a new emphasis on design innovation as a fundamental motivating force for a future-oriented, past-conscious and present-focused conversation on preservation.

A LOCAL LENS

Every city, neighborhood and building site has a specific and unique relationship with its past. The histories of particular places define corresponding perceptions of and potentials for historic assets. Consider the range in historic preservation conditions among Venice, Rotterdam and Detroit. Venice has frozen its history so comprehensively that its economy depends on being a hyper-tourist destination, both a blessing and a curse. Rotterdam, fully leveled during WWII, was rebuilt in an image of the present and has become a playground for contemporary design. Detroit, which continues to atrophy under disinvestment and

abandonment, has become a hotbed of do-it-yourself creativity and looks poised to capitalize on a groundswell of urban retrofit, breathing new life into ailing urban ruins. It is helpful to consider the meaning and role of preservation through the specific viewpoint of local circumstance and potential. The best preserved cities sometimes create stagnant, socio-economic monocultures, while highly distressed cities sometimes find silver linings of opportunity in their broken fabrics.

Even within individual cities, the local scale of preservationist tactics is always in flux. With many clear landmark sites already protected, criteria for

historic value are applied unevenly and subjectively across different neighborhoods, blocks and even building sites, depending on a shifting set of local political, social and economic realities. In all cases, any strategy for preservation must be considered a dynamic process, and particular strategies for preservation must be viewed through a local lens.

This project treats Philadelphia as a laboratory for investigation into the future of preservation practice. As one of America's largest and oldest cities, Philadelphia is home to an impressive array of historic buildings and urban fabric. But this cache of history has shaped the city in both positive and

negative ways. An obsession with history for its own sake places limits on future possibilities by deterring much-needed growth and investment. Historic structures, particularly those buildings and infrastructures built to house very specific or unusual programs (of which Philadelphia has many), can be expensive and difficult to repurpose. In too many cases a traditional reading of preservation creates incentives to tear down or leave buildings vacant, rather than adapt, reuse and re-inhabit.

In order to face these issues head on, we encourage a renewed transparency and honesty about preservation; we believe that all stakeholders need to be respectful

and yet realistic about the historic assets of the city. At the same time, we hope to expose a more radical dialogue about the possibilities of preservation as a design opportunity. We see Philadelphia as a potential proving ground and engine for innovation—as a city that can serve as a case study in defining the future of preservation at a crucial time in the history of the discipline.

OPEN QUESTIONS

In an era of networked relationships and interdisciplinary teamwork, historic preservation continues to be an issue that is treated very differently by its many stakeholders. Preservationists, planners, developers, designers and neighbors

continue to pursue divergent agendas around issues relating to historic assets. While the dialogue plays out in public, the typical venues for debate are the politically charged arenas of regulatory hearings, neighborhood meetings and the press. These channels too often create an oppositional framework for discussion, forcing stakeholders into extreme rhetorical positions, rather than promoting an honest discussion with the potential for the cross-pollination of ideas. Traditionally, preservation is considered as a regulatory and political exercise; we suggest that it be re-positioned as a design exercise, incorporating the city's weighted past and experimenting with the boundaries of its future.

GRAY AREA is an intentional provocation rather than an even-handed analysis.

Our goal is to expose a territory within which stakeholders can challenge and critique current preservation practice and engage in a productive dialogue around the past, present and future of cities. We aim also to promote design tactics that can re-commission historic assets as economically, socially and aesthetically inspired producers of the future city.

GRAY AREA's role is to pose the questions; we hope it will kick start a spirited discussion as we all seek the answers.

This project arose initially out of a conversation between the Heritage Philadelphia Program at the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage and DesignPhiladelphia. From there, several cross-disciplinary meetings were convened, culminating in a series of provocative, open-ended questions, intended to encourage a nuanced discussion on the future of preservation.

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