

NCPH/OAH 2012
Public History and Sustainability

Revitalizing Historic Preservation: Take Two

By: Alex Bethke (Facilitator)

In today's culture, the word "sustainability" has a predominant connotation that refers to the "Green" movement, carbon footprint, recycling, etc. - at least this is what I believe the general public sees as "sustainability". As necessary civic institutions, museums and other heritage organizations have important roles to play and interesting issues to resolve in terms of interpretation and operations, among others, but it is in the preservation arena that sustainability garners the most attention. Unfortunately for the public and the public historian, the conversation surrounding "sustainability" has become too technical, a disservice that sidesteps the true nature and benefits of sustainability within society.

If historic preservation is simply the "curatorial management of the built world" as James Marston Fitch famously promoted, then its sustainability as a discipline lies in its relevance to the general public. The field, in essence, should be treated in the same manner as would the presentation of artifacts and historical narrative – that is to say, the basis for historic preservation is underlined by history. The truth of the matter is that preservation is most potent and enduring when a resource's historical significance is justified in a publically interactive and engaging manner - an undertaking that boosts an appreciation of historic resources and the stories they tell. With this meaning in mind, preservation (and preservationists) too often focus on the means to preserve rather than the end of preservation. This becomes integral as sustainability is discussed because historic preservation as a field looks at sustainability as a material, legal (ordinance), and

planning issue (i.e. “the greenest building is the one already built”) instead of an educational, interpretational, and frankly, historical issue.

I cannot stress this concern enough. The impact of this long-standing trend in historic preservation has been a local (and in some instances, promoted by national organizations) a preservation movement that blurs the line between historical preservation and “hysterical” preservation. Just the mention of this popular phrase makes the preservationist’s ears bleed, but having been involved with preservation at every regulatory and civic level, I cannot help but sympathize with the admonishers of historic preservation. As municipalities designate craftsman after craftsman, for example, with the unwavering support of the local preservation group, historical significance becomes washed down, especially when a valid statement of significance is not provided or presented to the community through continued interpretation. Instead, preservation is forced to the public through municipal ordinance. In this context, sustainability is merely a tool for managing historic properties according to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards.

The question then is how do we reverse this focus and make the built environment relevant to the local (and visiting) community? Many municipalities incorporate preserved buildings into special events, commerce, and passive interpretation like signage, but few make it their mission to truly explain the “historical significance” of these resources. In part, the solution is to take back history from the amateur historian and ensure that professional historians are directing the process. Aside from this sweeping change, however, one powerful solution is the integration of the local built environment, cultural landscape, and narratives into the local K-12 curriculum, community engagement, and tourism, as a method of illustrating the broader patterns in national, state, and/or local history. In fact, few municipalities fully integrate youth education,

let alone seemingly non-heritage forms of tourism such as recreation, with preservation planning and professional historical interpretation. For this reason, history is watered down and the meaning lost to the general public.

Sustainability means different things to different professions, but it is clear that the wider green movement has focused on the individual, corporate, and municipal role in preserving the environment. Understanding this, public historians need to determine where they fit into this dialogue. What do we have to offer? This becomes a simple marketing principle. Engrossing ourselves in the technical aspects of sustainability is a net loss for a field within the social sciences. I say leave conservation to the conservationists, planning to the planners, and history to the historians. From this view, public historians have a role to play in making historic preservation sustainable, and relevant ... as a movement.

Using these principles as a baseline, the following was the case study submitted for the 2010 sustainability and public history working group in Portland, Oregon. Perhaps a little outdated, the example remains relevant in many ways.

The transition to a more sustainable model of historic preservation has garnered support and attention through the realization of a Delaware County Public History Feasibility Study and Implementation Plan that was completed in 2010 by Donna Ann Harris and Heritage Consulting Inc. This project explored the viability of creating a centralized organization responsible for facilitating further research, identification, presentation, and preservation of the county's historical resources for educational purposes in and outside the classroom.

Delaware County represents one of the most diverse places in the State of Pennsylvania, but it too neglects to educate the local public about its own comprehensive past. Like many

communities throughout America, the county contains a large number of publicly accessible historic sites, house museums, and historical societies, many of which are floundering without a stable, let alone growing income and membership. As a whole, however, the county enjoys a favorable cultural atmosphere, one ripe for organizational partnerships that could promote sustainability through education.

The idea for a public history plan was conceived as I assisted small historical organizations develop or lobby for preservation ordinances. I witnessed the struggles of these stewards as they fought to remain operational, attract new membership, and conduct their educational mission with vigor. Without a doubt, the community desperately wanted to promote and celebrate its history, but the involvement of the broader community simply waned over the years. The same could be said of the support for preservation ordinances, which were seen only as an infringement on property rights and not for their benefits to the community. Looking past the fact that historic preservation was misunderstood (as is often the case), I better understood the cultural environment of Delaware County as an economy of scale. In total, the county is home to twenty-seven independent historical sites/house museums, eleven private historical groups, twenty-four municipal (non-profit) historical societies, and nineteen municipal historic preservation commissions, almost all of them run by volunteers.

The result was a collection of valuable, but small and inexperienced organizations that remained isolated in their operation. Nevertheless, I viewed each historical society, museum, and commission as an invaluable educational entity that had an important role to fill and story to tell. Without a doubt, few, if any were utilized to their greatest capacity. As they currently existed, each entity operated almost wholly independent of each other, regardless of proximity or

historical relevance. Even political gaming played a significant role in hindering the cooperation and continuity among historic sites.

Using the assumption that each historical site still had value, a centralized public history program would be able to see the global interpretive picture and facilitate the production of a broader context in which each individual organization would provide a different piece of the historical landscape puzzle. This would be accomplished through fundraising and grant writing, helping educators integrate local history into the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for History in all grade levels, partnering with other cultural and commercial entities, and working with tourism boards at the local level to boost the county's heritage and civic tourism.

Among other roles, the primary function of a defined municipal public history program would be to provide the leadership needed for coordinating the interpretation of the county's past as told through existing public sites. By re-framing the county's diverse history into a more inclusive analysis of the past and reorganizing the history that each site tells, public historians would be able to physically utilize each place as an enduring educational experience that reflects preservation's curatorial purpose. In effect, this reorganization would serve to renew the public's interest in each site as diverse themes are incorporated into the K-12 curriculum across the county. As children become familiar with the already compelling stories that define a museum, site, or historic-district's significance, a greater appreciation for that place and its continued preservation would begin a lifelong legacy to be passed down from generation to generation.

Case Statement for NCPH Public History and Sustainability Working Group, 2012
“Using a Digital Environmental History Project as the Basis for
Collaboration and Engagement”

By Maren Bzdek, Program Manager and Research Associate,
Public Lands History Center, Colorado State University

One approach to bringing public history to bear on the sustainability movement is to bring the educational goals of our discipline into cooperative efforts with scientists and community stakeholders who are concerned about some aspect of local sustainability. Just as discrete historic sites can provide opportunities to establish sense of place and educate the public about the local environment, as Devin Hunter and William Ippen suggest in their case study, so can “natural” features provide an entry point for learning about local history. Addressing the built and natural environment together, and thus challenging assumptions about their independence, is yet more productive as a tool for engaging with questions of sustainability. The development of the cultural landscape model, which requires us to interweave human and non-human features into a single fabric of understanding, has provided opportunity for resource managers, interpreters, and historic preservationists to work together to improve stewardship and public education. Digital history projects can also convey the inherent tensions and contradictions that management of complex cultural landscapes require, and their flexible format and broad accessibility offer particular opportunities for historians to stretch beyond our comfort zone.

As one example, The Public Lands History Center at Colorado State University recently embarked on a new digital history project that suggests how a topic related to sustainable

resource management and planning can lead to collaborative opportunities with community stakeholders and scientists. Funded by the USDA through the Colorado Agricultural Experiment Station, “Agricultural Water Organizations and the Agricultural-to-Urban Water Problem on the Cache La Poudre River: A Digital History Project” will produce an educational website describing the history of agricultural water organizations on the Cache La Poudre River with emphasis on the shift of water from rural-agricultural to urban, industrial, and recreational uses.

In terms of the potential to influence sustainable resource planning and use, this project has the advantage of critical timing. Northern Colorado, as a microcosm of the arid western United States, is the site of complex negotiations associated with the pressure of urbanization on agricultural water supplies, drought and water quality problems, and the search for the most equitable and efficient technologies, organizational forms, and conservation practices. As in the entire arid west, water resources in Northern Colorado are highly managed and simultaneously protected and squandered by communities. Regulation of river flows, water storage, and irrigation infrastructure support agriculture and urban-industrial water supply in the region. The Cache La Poudre River has played a pivotal role in the development of irrigation and water organization. In the nineteenth century, the State of Colorado led western states in the development of legal administration of water rights, and much of that structure began on the Cache La Poudre River. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, evidence proved that permanent alteration of hydrologic regimes produces detrimental and costly ecological effects that undermine the long-term viability of our life-sustaining freshwater ecosystems. Our ability to understand these interrelationships as a community and to make informed decisions about water use planning relies, in part, on a basic understanding of the history of agricultural-to-urban water transfer in the region and the resulting environmental and economic effects over time. As

worldwide freshwater supply continues to diminish as population grows exponentially, the urgency of this problem will become increasingly pronounced. Access to reliable, well-researched historical information about the problem is important both to inform decision-making and to document this subject for future generations.

Assembling a diverse range of expertise has been important to ensure rigor, accuracy, credibility, and engagement. Dr. Mark Fiege, an environmental historian and director of the Public Lands History Center, is the principal investigator for this website project. As the project manager, I am working with Dr. Fiege to assemble an interdisciplinary team to research and build the site as well as a diverse group of community members, scholars, planners, and farmers who will both contribute information for the site and offer comments on its content and organization. The website will emphasize the collections in CSU's Water Resources Archive, but it will also require that researchers reach out to these community stakeholder groups, including ditch companies, environmental advocacy groups, water districts, preservationists, and other interested parties. Historians will collaborate with faculty and students in other colleges, including geographers, engineers, watershed scientists, and library staff, to create the site's geospatial elements, which will provide visualizations of change over time in the watershed. This project will serve as the model for subsequent website projects that address related aspects of the environmental history of the Cache La Poudre River or similar questions applied to other Colorado watersheds.

While it is impossible to predict the full reach and effects of the information we will provide in this site, our preliminary conversations with members of Northern Colorado's "water community" suggest a longstanding need for a concise presentation of historical information about the river. It is our hope that this website will help citizens, policymakers, and managers

understand the past as a means to address current and future water issues in Northern Colorado. So far, this experience suggests to us that public historians can and should complement the role of mediators in contentious environmental disputes. Stakeholders tend to understand and defend particular aspects of the larger story—historians can synthesize these separate pieces of the story into a narrative that provides clarity and context for complicated issues. Engagement with our community’s most difficult sustainable growth challenge provides daily reminders of what is important to our collaborators, what questions they most want answered, and what may be the potential opportunities for common ground. It is heartening to know that our collaborators and the community stakeholders are clamoring for this information and inherently grasp that improving the community’s historical literacy will elevate the debate about how to manage water sustainably in our basin. In this respect, we view this project as a test of how successfully a fact-based, well-documented history website can serve as one tool for solving contemporary resource distribution and management problems. I am looking forward to discussing this potential with all of you and considering the many other stimulating suggestions that are coming forward in the working group’s case statements.

Case Statement for NCPH Public History and Sustainability Working Group, 2012
The “Greening” of Public History
by Priya Chhaya, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Facilitator

There is a phrase that preservationists like to toss around when addressing the role of sustainability in the preservation movement. It's a famous phrase, coined by Carl Elefante in the 2007 issue of *Forum Journal* and it says that “the greenest building...is one that is already built.” But it's a little bit more complicated than that.

When I began work at the National Trust for Historic Preservation the connections between the environmental and preservation movements was far from my mind. It's true that as public historians we look to the role of history in the public sphere, but more often than not it is through the realm of education and interpretation and not necessarily through public policy. However in the last five years I've learned that the role preservation can play in community revitalization and sustainability is a critical piece in serving the public through the buildings and landscapes of the past. It is through our work with sustainability in all its forms that preservation is poised to make an impact in how we think about saving places in the years to come.

Last year the National Trust for Historic Preservation released a white paper detailing its new strategic plan entitled “Preservation 10x.” As part of this new plan the Trust is looking to serve the wider preservation community by bringing preservation to the forefront nationally. This involves focusing our work less as an association and more as a *cause* by “increases the Trust’s commitment to direct, on-the-ground action at important and threatened sites nationwide,” through a revolving portfolio of sites we are now calling “National Treasures”. At the national level, this new strategic plan emphasizes the role preservation plays in sustainability through two distinct paths: engaging 15 million “local preservationists” and through one of our Preservation Priorities—Sustainable Communities.

In developing this strategic plan the National Trust underwent an extensive marketing study to determine, much like other public historians do, who our audience was. On one hand we have the preservation leaders—those individuals that look to preservation as their number one cause, and an audience of individuals that we have previously misunderstood. This group, called “local preservationists” is 15 million strong. They take direct action for preservation—some without even recognizing that they *are* preservationists, but not as their first, second, third, or fourth priority.

But who are these “local preservationists?” According to [our research](#) they can be grouped roughly into five interest based categories: Young Activist, Community-Conscious Parent, Green Go-Getter, History Buff, and Architecture Lover.

The Green Go-Getter is an individual that “enjoys natural landscapes,” “tries to be sustainable in all aspects of life—from living within walking distance to the office, to serving on the board of his/her local farmers market.” This is someone who recognizes the importance of heritage conservation as a part of his/her larger worldview.

What the Trust is trying to do by engaging these individuals goes beyond boosting membership numbers. It is a way of pulling in more like-minded individuals into the preservation world at the local, state, and national level. In terms of sustainability this is one way that preservationists can influence public philosophy. It’s a matter of changing the way we as a movement engage interested parties. It isn’t merely “if we build it they will come,” but more of raising awareness by going to the local preservationists directly.

Another key way that the National Trust for Historic Preservation is focusing its work is through the lens of four Preservation Priorities: Sustainable Communities, Diversity and Place, Public Lands, and Tomorrow's Historic Sites. The sustainable communities’ priority emphasizes the organizations

commitment to supporting economic, environmental and cultural sustainability in the communities in which we work. In terms of [environmental sustainability](#), much of that work is through recognizing that “the conservation and improvement of our existing built resources, including re-use of historic and older buildings, greening the existing building stock, and reinvestment in older and historic communities, is crucial to making our urban places greener, more livable, and healthier.”

One of the constant frustrations that I’ve heard regarding preservation and sustainability (and is part of our conversation in this working group) is that while we talk about our commitment to the process and the cause within our core constituencies it is difficult to push our ideas beyond and outside of the singular preservation sphere and into the larger green building, environmental movement. That isn’t to say that there aren’t individuals who have worked tirelessly for years (Carl Elefante, being one) to change minds about the role preservation plays in sustainable building practices and living, but that awareness on a larger scale is still something we struggle with.

Through the lens of this Preservation Priority, the National Trust is committing to tackle this problem. One way is through the activities of the Preservation Green Lab.

Preservation Green Lab

Launched in March of 2009, the Seattle based [Preservation Green Lab’s core mission](#) is to “advance research that explores the value that older buildings bring to their communities, and pioneers policy solutions that make it easier to reuse and green older and historic buildings. The Green Lab seeks to minimize carbon impacts from the built environment through direct emissions reductions from building retrofits and reuse, and to conserve character-rich and human-scale communities that attract people to more sustainable, urban living patterns.”

Much of their work looks at outcome-based energy codes and district energy solutions. However, one critical focus is looking for building reuse policy solutions. This January, as part of their ongoing work, they released a report entitled “[The Greenest Building: Quantifying the Value of Building Reuse](#).” The report which examines the results of a study using the Life Cycle Analysis model finds that “building reuse almost always offers environmental savings over demolition and new construction.”

Conclusions include:

Reuse Matters. Building reuse typically offers greater environmental savings than demolition and new construction. *It can take up to 80 years for a new energy efficient building to overcome, through efficient operations, the climate change impacts created by its construction.*

Scale Matters. Collectively, building reuse and retrofits substantially reduce climate change impacts. retrofitting, rather than demolishing and replacing, just 1% of the city of Portland’s office buildings and single family homes over the next ten years would help to meet 15% of their county’s total CO2 reduction targets over the next decade.

Design Matters. The environmental benefits of reuse are maximized by minimizing the input of new construction materials. Renovation projects that require many new materials can reduce or even negate the benefits of reuse.

The Bottom Line: Reusing existing buildings is good for the economy, the community and the environment. At a time when our country’s foreclosure and unemployment rates remain high, communities would be wise to reinvest in their existing building stock. Historic rehabilitation has a thirty-two year track record of creating 2 million jobs and generating \$90 billion in private investment. Studies show residential rehabilitation creates 50% more jobs than new construction.

But what does this mean? In terms of the science, this gives preservationists something we have long since been without. A measure of proof to hold up when we talk the talk. What it also does is give the movement credibility, so that we can step forward and have a seat at the larger table regarding environmental impacts and the built environment. As public historians, this is the harder piece of our work in the sustainability movement, and while there is still a ways to go, having research like this at our fingertips can only help to pave the way.

The “Greening” of Public History

As we discuss the role of sustainability as an element of public history practice, there are two “tracks” upon which our conversation could be directed. On one hand we should consider what our goals are within the larger sustainability movement (and perhaps within the historical discipline as a whole.) What are we trying to accomplish as we look to more fully integrate sustainability into our work i.e. how do we define sustainability? This is contingent upon the particularities of discipline, as the goals for historic preservation practitioners are distinct from those in the education and interpretation quarter. For example, we might want to create a set of sustainability best practices for museums, develop a method to fully incorporate sustainability into interpretive programs, or be involved in developing green guidelines for existing buildings. In developing our goals we will better position ourselves to link with non-traditional partners.

This leads to the second “track” for discussion, considering our audience of influence. For the Preservation Green Lab, the focus is on decision makers—those local policy makers and building owners that are actively rehabbing old buildings and public space. Since the goal of the Preservation Green Lab is to make an impact and raise awareness on sustainability practice, this non-traditional audience is key to taking a more active role in the broader movement. On the flip side, by looking at the “Green Go-Getter” local preservationist, the National Trust is looking to raise awareness, and gain allies on a grassroots level. By helping these local preservationists make the connection between sustainability and historic preservation, we will be providing further exposure of the role historic preservation plays in saving places and neighborhoods on the ground. Making this audience determination will help integrate sustainability goals at every level of public history practice.

While goals and audience cannot be mutually exclusive there must be careful and thoughtful consideration of each in order to make an impact beyond our own silos. Knowing where we stand, will allow public historians of all ilks to demonstrate our commitment and resolve to protect the planet and history at the same time.

Notes and Links:

National Trust for Historic Preservation. “The National Trust for Historic Preservation: Toward a New Level of Success.” (September 29, 2011).

National Trust for Historic Preservation. “Field Guide to Local Preservationists’ .
[http://www.preservationnation.org/about-us/fieldguide/LP_FieldGuide_Partners.pdf]

Historic Preservation & Sustainability on PreservationNation.org
[<http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/sustainability/>]

Preservation Green Lab [<http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/sustainability/green-lab/valuing-building-reuse.html>]

National Trust for Historic Preservation. “The Greenest Building: Quantifying the Value of Building Reuse.” [http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/sustainability/green-lab/lca/The_Greenest_Building_lowres.pdf]

**“Historic Preservation = Sustainability”:
An Upcoming Symposium to Forge Connections
by Deirdre Clemente
Associate Director, Public History Program**

University of Nevada Las Vegas and Preserve Nevada will conduct a national symposium dedicated to the interconnected issues of historic preservation and sustainability. Key topics addressed are distributed and large scale renewable energy, federal and state land use policy, and sustainable building rehabilitation. We seek from this working session’s participants: 1) advice on topics of interest 2) ideas for sessions and roundtables, and 3) the identification of desired resources. The symposium has received funding from the western office of the National Trust. The result of the symposium to be held in Las Vegas on Nov. 13th-Dec. 2nd, 2012 is an online digital history portal that provides current information on the ever-evolving interface between cultural resource management and sustainability. This site will be developed and maintained by UNLV. T

THEMES OF SYMPOSIUM: Nevada—and Las Vegas in particular—is slated to be the focus of a renewable energy land rush. Seven of the 24 “Solar Energy Zones” identified by the Secretary of the Interior are located here. The revitalization of downtown Reno and Las Vegas has attracted national attention from green architects, preservationists, and government agencies alike. This proposed symposium frames national and regional preservation issues in the context of Nevada.

Hosted by Preserve Nevada, the three-day event invites discussion and debate on impacts of renewable resource development to historic western landscapes, sites, and buildings. The symposium furthers Preserve Nevada's mission to promote networking and information resources that foster careful stewardship and conservancy of our cultural resources. The symposium strives to educate preservationists and others in Nevada about the opportunities of sustainable historic preservation in both the urban and rural setting.

"Historic Preservation =Sustainability" gives audience to two critical themes in the discussion of sustainable energy and historic preservation. First we will address historic preservation *as* sustainability. Building upon research and projects pioneered and funded by the National Trust, this theme considers the preservation of historic homes and buildings in terms of their environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Potential topics include: LEED criteria and opportunities for existing historic buildings and neighborhoods; federal and state tax credits; identifying compatible green building materials for historic sites; and energy efficient retrofits of buildings. As many of the west's WWII and post-WWII houses are quickly becoming "historic," this theme proactively educates architects, city planners and government officials.

The second theme addresses the issue of sustainable energy programs and cultural resource preservation. Large-scale solar and wind projects promise to solve the American west's power problems, yet could jeopardize rural landscapes, historic sites, and viewsheds. Roundtables, lectures, and open forums offer attendees case

studies of successful collaborations and lessons-learned from developers, government agencies, and preservation experts. This symposium provides “real life” solutions to pressing issues of landscape integrity, location selection, and environmental impacts. “Historic Preservation = Sustainability” will give attendees a deeper understanding of these two themes and arm them with the knowledge to make informed decisions in their local and regional communities.

THE ORGANIZERS: Preserve Nevada, which is housed in the history department at University of Nevada, Las Vegas, is partnering with others at the University including the Urban Sustainability Initiative, Brookings Mountain West, the Natural Energies Advanced Technologies (NEAT) Laboratory, and Harrah Hotel College. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Association (LVCVA) and the City of Las Vegas under the direction of Mayor Carolyn G. Goodman have agreed to provide significant in-kind donations and hard funding for the event. Additional partnerships may include national organizations such as the American Institute of Architects, public agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, and state government.

THE FUTURE OF THE SYMPOSIUM: The symposium provides the framework and resources for Preserve Nevada’s 2012 web initiative. Working in conjunction with the public history program and Special Collections at UNLV, we will create a digital history portal dealing specifically with issues of historic preservation and sustainability. This online community of practice will serve as a repository of research, a venue for podcasts, and a forum for professionals and do-it-yourselfers

alike. The project builds upon the model used for the much-lauded Nevada Test Site Oral History project at UNLV.

The initiative will begin in Spring 2012 to research, design, and build the portal. Students in UNLV's History 749 graduate-level course will provide content to graduate students in the College of Fine Arts, specializing in information technology. The portal will be taken live at the symposium and rely heavily upon social media announce its arrival. In addition to live feed, the proceedings of the event will be filmed, edited and made available. The papers presented by the symposium's speakers will be added to the site, as will commentary papers from attendees. This dialogue provides all participants a means of contributing. The goal of both the portal and the symposium is to be encompassing of all voices. In early 2013, we will launch the second phase of the portal—an online forum. The portal will be maintained and monitored by public history graduate students, who are funded by the history department at UNLV.

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR: While we recognize the timeliness and diversity of the topics covered by this symposium, we are still developing the content for the event. We ask the working group to help assemble a “wish list” of topics, issues, and case studies to be discussed. The identification of potential speakers or key participants would be much appreciated.

Case Statement for NCPH Public History and Sustainability Working Group, 2012:
Exploring Sustainability for Public Historians in Public History
By Leah S. Glaser, Facilitator

The Steamboat *Sabino*, a National Historic Landmark carrying at least 100 passengers on a half-hour-long excursion, belched black, coal-generated smoke into the air at Mystic Seaport museum in Mystic, Connecticut. As the cloud came wafting toward my family and the dozen or so other visitors, the interpreter at our program commented, “Now that’s the smell of history!” The Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad similarly spews black coal smoke into the air and often on riders in the open-air gondolas on its wildly popular and spectacularly scenic train ride, a must for tourists visiting Southwestern Colorado for its range of outdoor activities, clean air, spectacular Rocky Mountain landscapes, and of course shopping for western Americana. Durango’s railroad is the community’s identity, yet it clashes with the community’s environmental sensibilities. How should public historians balance historical accuracy with environmental sustainability? When do accurate historical experiences, opportunities, education, and interpretation cross the line in terms of their environmental impact?

According to the Brundtland Commission in 1987¹, the word sustainability means meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own need.” **But do Public Historians agree?** Over the last three years, I have organized a series of working groups and conference panels. The purpose of this series (and this case statement) is to examine viable solutions for public historians to support and advance the sustainability movement. Public historians can and should play an active role in the sustainability movement through research, interpretation, and civic engagement. Even more than traditional historical inquiry, the sub-field of public history aims to educate the public about history’s relevance to current and future problems. On April 6, 2011 National Trust for Historic Preservation President, Stephanie Meeks, spoke about the need for developers,

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), Report, 1987.

planners, and proponents of historic preservation to recognize its key role in supporting and advancing sustainability, an argument that former NT President Richard Moe has been making for years.²

Beginning in the late 1990s, historians began to criticize the National Park Service, for its poor management of ecosystems in favor of tourism.³ In 2001, Rebecca Conard wrote an article for the academic journal, *The Public Historian*, about the common ground shared by “culturals” and “naturals” in managing natural and cultural resources. She encouraged collaboration between cultural preservationists and environmentalists in development projects and in educating the public about the relationship of humans to the natural world. Three years later, she noted the difficulty of cooperative projects across disciplines and professions. On the eve of the first NCPH/ASEH joint meeting in 2004, Conard asked, “How do we make ‘sustainability’ and ‘stewardship’ compatible parts” in an American culture that celebrates change and development?⁴ *The Public Historian* invited environmental and public historians to consider what we have in common, including the desire to make history matter by applying it to current problems. Catherine Christen and Lisa Mighetto asked, “What possibilities can public history offer to environmental historians?” and “How might environmental historians adapt public history’s approach to the dissemination of history?” Since the 2004 publication of Martin Melosi and Phillip Scarpino’s *Public History and the Environment*, we have seen an increase in use of the buzz word “sustainability,” a concept that again unites these two sub-fields of historical practice. What ideas can environmental history offer to public historians to support sustainable, but accurate interpretation of historic sites and landscapes? How might public history’s approach to the dissemination of history help educate the public and influence policy on this

² Stephanie Meeks, President Meeks Ideas on Sustainability Offers Ideas for Historic Site Interpretation,” <http://historicsites.wordpress.com>, Posted April 7, 2011.

³ Richard Sellers, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*.

⁴ Rebecca Conard, Applied Environmentalism, or Reconciliation Among “the Bios” and “the Culturals,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 9-18; Rebecca Conard, “Spading Common Ground: Reconciling the Built and Natural Environments,” *Public History and the Environment*, edited by Martin V. Melosi and Philip V. Scarpino (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company), 2004.

environmental issue? What impact should sustainable environmental management practices have on our practice of public history, specifically historic site management, preservation, and interpretation?

I organized a working group at the joint ASEH/NCPH⁵ conference in Portland in 2010, with the goal of exploring the role of historic preservation as a tool for sustainability. We discussed different ways of thinking about sustainability, historic preservation's contribution to it, and the actual role of history and the public historian in enhancing the public conversation and at the same time protecting notions of historical significance. At the table, we had a wide swath of preservation professionals in attendance ranging from State Historic Preservation Officers to academics and consultants. We agreed upon the need to make the training of professionals in historic preservation more interdisciplinary 1) in the academy by cross-listing courses with other departments, but 2) in how we work and communicate with and educate our non-public historian colleagues out there now such as architects, planners, and even the DECON movement.⁶ We also discussed the need to educate the public about the value of history and historic buildings. Education needs to happen early in someone's education (K-12), and therefore at the local and state level through accessible publicity, workshops and outreach to real estate agents, developers, contractors, home buyers, as well as publicizing tax incentives or promoting other types of incentives for people to invest in older homes, buildings, communities.

In 2011, ASEH held its conference in Phoenix, Arizona around the theme of "sustainability." In his keynote, incoming American Historical Association President William Cronon adeptly deconstructed the word "sustainable" as a politically productive new vocabulary. But what should public historians mean by "sustainability" when we talk about it? At a roundtable I organized the next day, we tried to address those questions. Our roundtable left me

⁵ ASEH (American Society of Environmental Historians); NCPH (National Council on Public History)

⁶ DECON is the professional group representing the people who deconstruct and recycle old building parts. They held their national conference in New Haven in Spring 2011.

thinking about critical questions for pursuing this sustainability further in my research, teaching, and profession. Janelle Warren-Findley of Arizona State University and I spoke about teaching local history and historic preservation classes. We talked about how sustainability needs to become a standard theme of public history curriculum, even in introductory courses. As educators for the workforce, we need to make historic preservation more interdisciplinary in our academic training of professionals by cross-listing courses with other departments, but also in how we work and communicate with and educate our non-public historian colleagues out there now such as architects, planners, and even the DECON movement. We spoke about examining the existing literature and developing new research on how public historians have balanced cultural and environmental issues. There are several books about the conflict between preserving natural parks and the impact tourism. As the National Park Service has embraced the concept of cultural landscapes, more of us are realizing that at sites defined strictly as historic places, natural resources are critical to their accurate interpretation, central for telling more complex and complete stories. But many sites may simply not be interpreted or preserved with historical accuracy without compromising modern, environmentally sustainable practices.

The panel revealed that the role of local historic sites is arguably even more important for educating an increasingly mobile and transient public about their community, not only so they feel that historic sense of place or belonging, but also so that a non-native can understand the environmental conditions in which they live. Saguaro Ranch is a heavily irrigated, lush turn-of-the-century farm in Phoenix, Arizona with citrus groves, day palms, irrigation infrastructure, ditches, and grass... hardly the definition of sustainability. Director and Panelist John Akers convincingly argued that public historians and historic sites/museums are in a position to contribute to a discussion of "sustainability" by exploring local antecedents of the movement. Finally, panelist Carol Palmer argued that public historians could help guide the integration of a community's local history into sustainability initiatives and educational programs. Her local

history of Surprise, Arizona revealed that its first residents, Depression era migrant farm workers faced economic challenges and supply shortages when building family homes. Recycling and conservation were not only prudent strategies for the present but constituted the town's heritage and identity.

These discussions are not the first attempts of our organization to grapple with these ideas in publications and at professional meetings. In addition, public history practitioners have been having these conversations for decades. It would be valuable to identify and share their examples of sustainability in public historical practice and "best practices," past and present in order to move the profession forward. But those conversations, ironically, need to evolve and be "sustained," beginning with a definition of our own.

**Sustaining Industrial Re-use, Urban Farming, and Public History: A Case Study on
an Interpretive Plan for The Plant**

2012 NCPH Working Group on Public History and Sustainability

Devin Hunter, Loyola University Chicago
William Ippen, Loyola University Chicago

Abstract

This case study articulates a historical interpretive framework for The Plant, a non-profit sustainable “vertical farm” housed in a former Chicago meat packing plant. The syncretic project infuses traditional preservation and public history principles with aspects of The Plant’s progressive mission: adaptive industrial re-use, urban environmentalism, community engagement, volunteerism, and, of course, sustainability. We seek to expand the concept of *sustainability* in both its public history and its environmental contexts. On the one hand, the project stretches the concept of public history sustainability—an interpretive project’s ability to subsist and evolve in its local environment with minimal “professional” intervention—by leveraging predisposed volunteers and The Plant’s re-use of space. Furthermore, the project embraces adaptive re-use as a means of both historic preservation and environmental conservation in a threatened historic setting within the larger urban environment. On the other hand, we plan to augment The Plant's revolutionary environmental and agricultural sustainability model by cultivating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the pasts symbolized by The Plant’s space. In so doing, we seek to present the public history and historic preservation communities with a model allowing them to reimagine their roles as community partners and the means by which they can ply their respective trades.

About The Plant

In 2010, Jon Edel purchased a recently shuttered 93,500-square foot meat processing plant that had operated since 1925 in Chicago’s economically distressed Back of the Yards neighborhood. Edel acquired the former home of Peer Foods as a way to

fulfill a unique vision. Instead of razing the building, he undertook a massive retrofitting project. Edel's site—re-christened “The Plant”—will soon again produce food; but where Peer Foods once smoked meats and packaged deli cuts, the Plant will grow a variety of vegetables and other agricultural products in its zero waste, sustainable “vertical farm.” Nothing that happens in the building goes to waste, from the fertilizer water generated in the tilapia farm to the brewery that channels the building's heat into the beer making process. The Plant also hopes to reenergize its corner of the Back of the Yards. Four hundred jobs vanished when Peer Foods closed—a significant blow to the community. Once The Plant reaches its full operating potential, it will employ at least 125—many of whom Edel hopes to draw from surrounding neighborhood. In its short time, The Plant has attracted considerable media attention, which, in turn, has drawn a reliable cadre of volunteers willing to donate a few hours of sweat during the renovation process.

Media stories emphasize not only The Plant's unique sustainable vision for the future, but also the potent symbolism of that vision taking place in a forlorn industrial building in an under-served neighborhood. The building itself holds the greatest potential for historical interpretation. The Plant sits on the southern edge of the largely empty Union Stockyards, a lone reminder of the area's productive and bricked past. Given its relatively recent closing, a living working-class memory of Peer Foods also persists in the neighborhood. Numerous former employees represent a rich potential for oral history projects that would boost The Plant's mission to become a responsible community partner. This group also potentially enhances the project's public history sustainability, as these stakeholders possess both an intimate knowledge of and vested interest in the

structure and its past. Potential projects related to these historical aspects are introduced below, following an overview of relevant urban environmental issues.

Industrial Re-use, Urban Farming, and Sustainability

The Plant advances a broadly conceived model of sustainability through adaptive re-use and urban agriculture that unites environmental, social, and historic preservation interests under one project. The nonprofit promises to practice and promote market-oriented sustainable food production, incubate new sustainable businesses, and preserve the integrity of a valuable historic structure. Once complete, it will demonstrate the viability of such a model, leading to more widespread adoption.

Industrial preservation is among the greatest challenges facing the preservation community. Decommissioned industrial structures and landscapes typically receive low preservation priority for a number of reasons. Whether or not a structure retains a high degree of integrity, its utilitarian design does not attract much attention in terms of aesthetics. Once a manufacturing structure or district's productive lifetime comes to pass, its utility for re-use is as greatly limited as its viability for preservation. Furthermore, former industrial sites tend to produce hazardous environments. As a consequence, 19th century manufacturing areas such as the Chicago Union Stockyards and their constituent structures typically stand as inactive skeletons of their former selves or are razed to make room for new uses in that space. Given these difficulties, the traditional forms of adaptive re-use in preservation—renovating for storefronts or museums—often do not obtain in industrial settings. Putting formerly productive structures to new productive, economically-oriented uses seems the greatest hope for industrial preservation interests.

The Plant presents a unique opportunity for industrial preservation through adaptive re-use. Its extensive plan stands as a sustainable model for both the vertical agriculture and historic preservation communities. The nonprofit will utilize the entirety of a 93,500 square foot historic meatpacking facility. Virtually the entire exterior structure is being preserved and retrofitted to enhance energy efficiency. Similarly, much of the interior structure will be preserved and retrofitted to facilitate the needs of the vertical farm complex. In addition to preserving structure, Jon Edel, along with staff and volunteers, are working to incorporate most of the materials from the interior—which include brick and other structural materials removed during renovation, industrial meatpacking and smoking machinery, and existing HVAC and conveyor belt systems—into the new facility. In the process, The Plant is preserving a valuable historical structure and retaining a great deal of integrity, keeping thousands of tons of materials out of landfills, and reducing their need for new materials associated with new construction.

The objective of all of this re-use and retrofitting is to establish a working, profitable, sustainable agricultural complex in an urban area. One third of The Plant will house a net-zero energy vertical farm utilizing fish aquaponic growing systems. The other two thirds of the facility will be reserved for sustainable food businesses at low rents, low energy costs, and access to a shared commercial kitchen. Both the vertical farm and the tenants, which includes a brewery operated by the New Chicago Brewing Company, draw from and contributed to the zero-net energy system. Thanks in part to a \$1.5 million grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, The Plant will install an anaerobic digestion and combined heat and power system that will take the

facility completely off the grid. The schematic below illustrates the system's elements, inputs, and outputs that fully utilize wastes and byproducts.

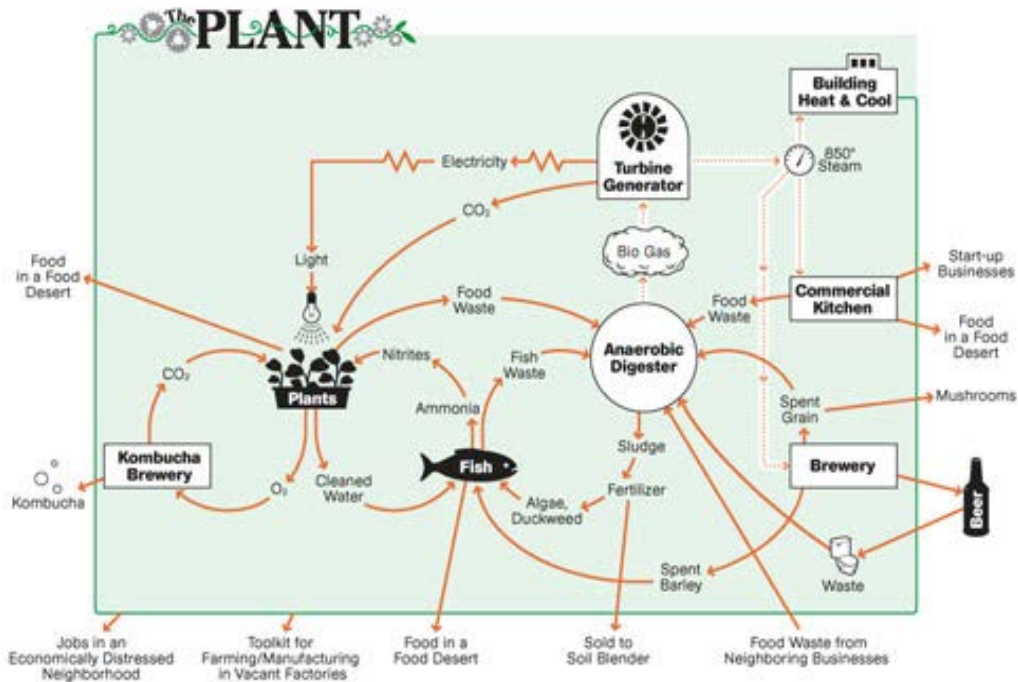


Image from "About The Plant," *The Plant*, accessed February 1, 2012, <http://www.plantchicago.com/about-the-plant/>.

Edel intends for The Plant to serve as an adaptable and replicable model in affecting environmental and social change. By the end of 2012, he plans to release a freely-available business case study and to host seminars for sustainability professionals, college students, schoolchildren and the general public on a wide range of topics from energy and efficiency in buildings to obesity to growing techniques. More concrete results of The Plant's sustainable impacts include its planned creation of 125 jobs in the economically distressed Back of the Yards neighborhood without any fossil fuel use. Furthermore, the facility will divert over 10,000 tons of food waste from landfills each

year to meet all of its heat and power needs. Once the model proves both viable and profitable, it will affect change through widespread adoption, potentially preserving more threatened structures and reducing the carbon footprint of urban foodways.

Potential Projects

We hope to augment The Plant's mission by providing the organization with the tools to sustain its own interpretive program, enhancing both its standing as a responsible community partner and its preservation imperative. In turn, we hope to raise awareness of the project both as a discrete undertaking and model in the public history and historic preservation communities so they may re-imagine their potential contributions to community uplift. Similarly, we hope to shed light on a new model of industrial preservation that is socially and environmentally progressive and economically viable.

The Plant's building is an ideal nominee for National Register of Historic Places. It retains high historical integrity: the original brick façade is intact and has suffered no significant or permanent modifications. The site is also contextually rich. The dense, pre-war industrial built environment that once made up the Chicago Union Stockyards has long since given way to sprawling metal frame warehouses and vast stretches of empty lots. The former Peer Foods building should be preserved as a unique reminder of the industrial history of independent meat packing in Chicago and its associated built environment. Fortuitously, proprietor Jon Edel is a self-described "industrial history buff." He is aware of the potential benefits of National Register listing—both in terms of good historical practice and tax considerations. Edel's historical good is evidenced in his choice of window replacement during renovation. Aspiring to an exterior look

reminiscent of the pre-war Peer Foods, he replaced the 1970s-era glass block windows with energy-efficient plate glass windows with pane facades. The historical information gained from the nomination process will serve as a baseline for future projects, most notably the acquisition and interpretive labeling of historical Stockyard images for the brewery's public tasting room.

Other potential interpretive projects include an in-depth oral history with a former Peer Foods employee who has been instrumental in Edel's education about the building's past. This oral history could serve as a model for further interviews by a wide range of Plant volunteers. Instead of being asked to wield a sledgehammer on a rehabilitation project, volunteers would be asked to interview a former Peer employee. Edel also expressed interest in promoting an associate's personal artifact collection of Back of the Yards industrial history—perhaps even housing a small museum within The Plant.

In conclusion, we hope to discuss with the working group the following interpretive, theoretically, and practical challenges:

- How can we initiate these potential projects in a way that will ensure their perpetuation by Plant volunteers and Back of the Yards residents?
- What are some methods for centering the working-class experience in industrial history, given The Plant's desire to tell the story of its building?
- How can we best use digital media to promote The Plant's historical project?
- How do we, as historians, focus the concept of reused, repurposed, and sustained space in a way that will serve as a model for other urban environmental projects?

Case Statement – NCPH Public History and Sustainability Working Group, 2012
“Public History and Sustainability: The Urban Context”
-Melinda Marie Jetté

The documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (2011) traces the rise and fall of the public housing project of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Missouri, which opened in the early 1950s and was later demolished in the early 1970s following years of decline and neglect.¹ As the title suggests, the filmmakers sought to disentangle important myths associated with public housing in the twentieth century: that government subsidized public housing was intrinsically problematic and that the low-income minority residents (in this case African Americans) were themselves largely responsible for the decline of the infamous housing project. Through interviews with former residents and researchers, the filmmakers demonstrate that the failure of the Pruitt-Igoe project was in fact the result a perfect storm of larger historical forces affecting American cities in the postwar period, pressure from powerful outside interest groups, long-standing racial tensions, and counterproductive (some would say inhumane) public policies at the local, state, and federal level. Although both city planners and residents had high hopes for Pruitt-Igoe when it opened, the community was neither economically nor socially sustainable in the long-term because the bulk of social and economic resources in Missouri and St. Louis were directed elsewhere during the 1950s and 1960s. These resources went to subsidize the growth of middle class suburbs and suburban office parks—and thereby supported urban to suburban population shifts, “white flight,” and the shredding of St. Louis’s tax base. In an ironic twist, activists, scholars, and planners alike have since argued that suburban sprawl is ecologically unsustainable and that

¹ *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, directed by Chad Freidrichs, DVD (St. Louis: Unicorn Stencil in cooperation with the Missouri History Museum, 2011).

creating sustainable urban/suburban landscapes will be the focus of economic development, regionalism, and historic preservation in the twenty-first century.²

For my case statement, I will focus on the interconnections between public history and sustainability in the urban context. I would like to propose that public historians addressing sustainability issues ought to ground their work in ethic of social inclusion and social equity. Such a stance would accord with both the NCPH's Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct and the consensus on sustainability that emerged from the Bruntland report, *Our Common Future* in 1987 and the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992.³ An emphasis on ecological, economic, and social sustainability follows the "Three E's" in contemporary sustainability that refer to ecology/environment, economy/employment, and equity/equality.⁴

As our studies of history demonstrate, deep divisions in both the U.S. and throughout the world are the result of long-term historical forces and trends (such as the rise of industrial capitalism to name one prominent development). Mindful of this legacy, illustrated in the microhistory of the Pruitt-Igoe community, I would argue that making connections between public history and sustainability necessitates an attention to issues of power, agency, and privilege, especially in the urban context where divisions between groups and populations can be quite striking. In the contemporary effort to create sustainable cities and communities, there is a risk of replicating or reinforcing social injustices and social inequalities that have flowed from rigid systems of control over space and resources (natural, public, economic, social, and

² Janine Schipper, *Disappearing Desert: The Growth of Phoenix and the Culture of Sprawl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); Chris Wilson, Remarks, Public History 2036: The Next 25 Years, Symposium Sponsored by the History Department, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, September 24, 2011, n.p.

³ NCPH Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (2007), Bylaws and Ethics, National Council on Public History website, <http://ncph.org/cms/about/bylaws-ethics/> (accessed February 1, 2012); Andres R. Edwards, *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift* (Garbiola Island, BC: New Society Publishers), 16-18.

⁴ Edwards, 19-20.

cultural). These systems of control have affected urban populations differently based on a variety of factors, such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, gender, sexuality, and age.⁵

Equally troubling have been the processes of marginalization and erasure in American cities that have contributed to sanitized versions of the past. Current residents have either forgotten or misremembered past injustices.⁶ Traces of these processes are sometimes visible in the cityscapes created by the complex history of urban renewal and in the landscapes littered with the detritus of deindustrialization.⁷ However, a close study of urban history and urban communities reveal that in fact urban communities, including ethnic and working-class communities, have a long-standing history of addressing environmental as well as economic and social inequalities.⁸

What then, might be the connections between public history and sustainability in the urban context? What might be the role of public historians? From one perspective, we might recall roots of the public history movement in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and conceive of public history as a form of social work or social action, to borrow a phrase from Patricia West.⁹ If the purpose of public history work is to play a role in public affairs, then public historians can contribute to more sustainable urban communities and cities by contributing our knowledge of history and public policy, community-based research methods (such as oral

⁵ Andrew Hurley, *Class, Race and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995).

⁶ Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (New York: Verso, 1997).

⁷ Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁸ See Hurley, *Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution*; Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Jeffrey Craig Sanders, *Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Graciela Sanchez, Presentation on the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, San Antonio, Texas, Public History 2036: The Next 25 Years, Symposium Sponsored by the History Department, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, September 24, 2011, n.p.

⁹ Patricia West, Closing Remarks, Public History 2036: The Next 25 Years, Symposium Sponsored by the History Department, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, September 24, 2011, n.p.

history), and a commitment to collaboration, shared authority, and reflective practice. This methodological approach can foster an attention to power, agency, and privilege.

How might we move forward? The NCPH might consider the recent work of the coalition that produced the White Paper and Final Report on Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly-Engaged Historian, which involved the NCPH, the AHA, and the OAH. Partners would need to be identified for a national study that might involve research, survey work, data collection, deliberation, and the writing of a White Paper and Final Report. Such partners might include urban communities, urban historians and scholars, planners, specialists in environmental history and the built environment as well as organizations and agencies such the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, and the National Park Service, among others. Such a national study might include curricular recommendations for public history education and training, recommendations on program review for public history programs, and perhaps a strategic plan for the NCPH itself.

In closing, I would like to quote the last line of narration from *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*:

“The next time the city changes, remember Pruitt-Igoe.”