

# BENDING .....THE..... FUTURE.....

*Fifty Ideas for the Next Fifty Years  
of Historic Preservation in the  
United States*

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and  
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UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS PRESS  
*Amherst and Boston*

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-62534-215-7 (paper); 214-0 (hardcover)

Designed by Sally Nichols  
Set in ITC New Baskerville  
Printed and bound by Sheridan Books, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Page, Max, editor of compilation. | Miller, Marla R., editor of compilation.  
Title: *Bending the future* : fifty ideas for the next fifty years of historic preservation in the United States / edited by Max Page and Marla R. Miller.  
Description: Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, [2016] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016012909 | ISBN 9781625342157 (paperback : alkaline paper) | ISBN 9781625342140 (hardcover : alkaline paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Historic preservation—United States | Historic preservation—United States—Forecasting. | Historic preservation—Social aspects—United States. | Historic sites—Conservation and restoration—United States. | Historic buildings—Conservation and restoration—United States. | Cultural property—Protection—United States. | United States. National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. | United States—Cultural policy.

Classification: LCC E159 .B415 2016 | DDC 973—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016012909>

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

# What Historic Preservation Can Learn from Ferguson

MICHAEL R. ALLEN

The events that unfolded in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 continue to challenge historic preservation to be more than an exclusionary bureaucratic consensus. As the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) reaches the half-century mark, its prescribed mode of engaging evolving urban history fails to account for public self-determination in identifying heritage, for promoting the protection of sites emblazoned with meaning in the very recent past, and for leveraging the interpretation of space to inform the urgent need for social justice in American cities. Sites that have suddenly been inscribed with highly significant associations to St. Louis' history—the site at which Michael Brown fell dead after being shot by officer Darren Wilson, the QuikTrip convenience store that was burned in the riots following his shooting, and other, related sites of police violence in St. Louis—these locations poke holes in the methods of preservation. Yet they also suggest remedies for preservation practice that are inclusive, responsive, popular, and divorced from historicization.

In other words, looking at Ferguson from the perspective of historic preservation shows us that the field needs to discard historicization in favor of history. History is a great moving target that does not bend to federal law or local statute. History defies taxonomies of vernacular architecture, because it always creates new forms. There are no limits to history's subjects and objects, although the NHPA's

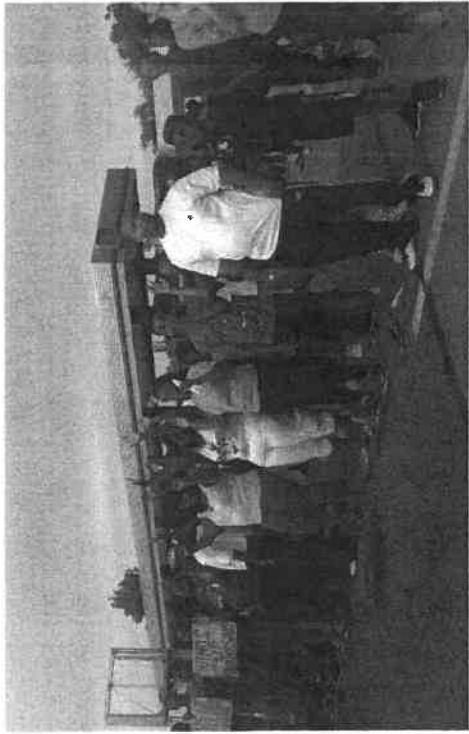
regulatory framework attempts to impose them. Few St. Louisans, whatever their beliefs, would say that what happened in Ferguson in 2014 is not important, but the National Park Service reviewer might well find the QuikTrip rubble ineligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Preservationists may be the last people to acknowledge the historic associations embodied by unlikely landmarks, and that is to our shame.

When we follow a line of thought that turns works of architecture into emblems of eras or events, we need legible, intact emblems. So much of historic preservation involves cataloging and protecting these emblems. There are no emblems for events such as the death of Michael Brown and the demonstrations that followed. There are only sites where real, unresolved, and difficult history unfolded.

On Canfield Drive, a perpetual array of stuffed animals and memorabilia marks the location in the middle of the street where Michael Brown died. Commemoration as ritual is now an ingrained spatial function, but it troubles notions of structure and integrity. Perpetual impermanent memorialization is a fluid function, not a fixed object with a clear boundary. Surrounding the site are several three-story brick-and-vinyl apartment buildings, built in 1970 in a style identical to hundreds in the St. Louis area alone. If the site were to be designated an official landmark or listed in the National Register of Historic Places, what would be included?

Some residents have pushed to build a permanent memorial, yet a tree planted with a plaque was vandalized. Meanwhile, the site on Canfield Drive and the continued tourism it has drawn has residents of Canfield Village to move, or to express distaste for the site's ongoing presence. Resident Shirley Scales told *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporters Jesse Bogan and Walker Moskop in March 2015 that the memorial unsettled her life at Canfield Green. She had moved to another apartment to avoid the site. "I wanted to be up past the murder site," Scales told the reporters. "I didn't feel comfortable there."

More infamous than site of the shooting is the Ferguson QuikTrip that looters—not protestors—burned on August 10, 2014. The looting and burning were prompted by the erroneous rumor that Brown had been suspected of shoplifting there, and that the owner had made the police call that led to Brown's demise. (Another convenience store



In Ferguson, Missouri, protestors gather in front of a Quik Trip convenience store in the wake of the killing of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, who was fatally shot on August 9, 2014, by a white police officer, Darren Wilson. The building was later demolished. Because of a false report that Brown had shoplifted from the store, the site became a center of antiracism activism in the city. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL ALLEN.

was the actual site of the alleged shoplifting.) Despite the misconception, QuikTrip's charred and gruesome remains have given rise to a new sort of public space. Photographs from 2014 show the Ferguson QuikTrip both in its fiery throes and as a sort of temporary arena for gathering, holding discussions, and protesting. One tag drawn across a shiny fuel station pump declared the site "QT People's Park (Liberated 8-10-14)," an apparent reference to the similarly occupied site where "Bloody Thursday" took place in Berkeley, California, in May 1969.

I publicly raised the question of whether the QuikTrip should be preserved following the site's fire and occupation. By the end of August 2014, the store's management had erected chain-link fencing and had removed the remaining gasoline to contain and isolate the space that had been used for Ferguson's agonistic grieving and revolt. In the wake of the QuikTrip closure, no other space served the function of that site. Protests diffused along West Florissant Avenue, and the political momentum lessened. The QuikTrip site had proved to be a significant space, and the direct product of this mess we call

American history, and yet the community in Ferguson was ambivalent about preserving it.

The Urban League produced its own form of commemoration and reuse of the site: the QuikTrip has now been demolished to make way for a new community center designed to help heal Ferguson's inequalities. The visible wound of the QuikTrip, a tangled and unsightly work of popular architecture, found little support as a popular preservation project. Instead, the site will live on as symbolized through a new work of architecture—albeit one that will avoid direct reference to the "people's park."

What will be preserved in Ferguson? Historic preservation seems to have ceded this question because of the unusual nature of the sites involved and the temporal closeness of the event. Yet Canfield Green may be gone by the time we can historicize Ferguson. The QuikTrip already is. Will a plaque or monument convey the events of 2014 in any teachable way?

Sites that acquire significant public meaning instantly through mass action or unrest often are bulldozed, cordoned off, or otherwise closed before the future of their physical forms can be discussed or debated. Even the designation of a site less physically altered—and therefore better suited to meet the bureaucratic preservation ideal of "integrity"—such as Chicago's Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, where the funeral of Emmett Till took place in 1955, happened only in 2005. The contentious reconstruction at the site of the former World Trade Center offers an illustration of the complicated politics of healing and of the liberatory redress for preservation when it concedes literally "saving" the remnants of a troubled site.

As preservationists, we can take away several lessons from the confounding nature of these sites in Ferguson: we need to embrace thinking beyond the bureaucratic limits of the National Historic Preservation Act; we need to abandon the historicizing motivations that seek easy emblems for eras, styles, and building types; and we need to listen to and support communities that ask open questions about the future of sites, not walk away when communities choose preservation plans that do not fit our models.

In some ways, we simply need to heed the counsel of public architectural historian Dolores Hayden, who wrote twenty years ago in

*The Power of Place*: "Restoring significant shared meanings for many neglected urban spaces first involves claiming the entire urban cultural landscape as an important part of American history, not just its architectural monuments."<sup>1</sup> Ferguson's most lasting monument will be the impact that the death of Michael Brown has on laws and culture. When Ferguson has healed, when racism has been stamped out of St. Louis culture, and when justice is within the reach of every American, the events in Ferguson will have achieved their highest significance. Then we will look to the sites as carriers of history. What will we find? And how will preservationists have aided in protecting sites that will by then have gained greater significance in local and national narratives of social change?

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## NOTE

1. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 11.

# From Passion to Public Policy

## *Making Preservation More Sustainable*

ERICA AVRAMI

The past half century has seen the codification of historic preservation as an accepted form of public policy. Through legislation at the national, state, and local levels, tax incentives, zoning overlays, listing mechanisms, and other tools, preservation has matured from a grassroots movement to an integral part of governance structures for the built environment. However, the world in which preservation functions has changed dramatically in fifty years. The earth's population has more than doubled, the world is more urban, and the planet's capacity to sustain life is challenged by the overconsumption of land and resources. Globalization and migration patterns have likewise contributed to dramatically different social and economic conditions, as well as architectural acculturation, as communities and markets become increasingly connected. Yet divisions within society are still fraught with conflict and injustice.

These dynamics have put new and increasing pressures on urban land use policy, and especially on preservation. In recent years, the protection of historic buildings and districts has been called into question on a number of counts, including its potential role in gentrification and the displacement of low-income residents, the perceived stifling of architectural creativity and economic vitality, the lack of cultural diversity in the places that are landmarked and among the people who participate in preservation, and the environmental sustainability of older buildings and low-density historic districts.

The legal rationales of the modern preservation system are premised on the notion that historic places positively contribute to quality of life and to community building. These notions have been