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# Where is the History in Historic Districts— Some Concluding Thoughts

PATRICK W. O'BANNON

**Abstract:** This paper offers concluding statements on the papers presented as part of the working group “Where is the History in Historic Districts,” presented at the 2009 NCPH Annual Conference in Providence, Rhode Island. The working group addressed important questions regarding whose history is presented in historic districts and whether architecture is privileged over history in the delineation and designation of districts. Districts are bureaucratic constructs. They must preserve tangible, physical remainders of the past, but the history that those artifacts present may be as restrictive or as inclusive as promoters, government officials, residents, and public historians choose.

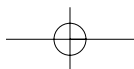
**Key words:** Historic district, architecture, public, National Register, local history

IT IS FASCINATING HOW AN IDEA CAN SPROUT AND GROW in completely unexpected directions. That has been my experience with the working group “Where’s the History in Historic Districts,” which Kim Hoagland and I organized for the 2009 National Council on Public History Conference in Providence, Rhode Island. The genesis of this working group came during a conversation Kim and I had during the 2008 conference in Louisville in which we both lamented that historic districts, both those listed in the National Register of Historic Places and those designated by local governments, tended to honor architectural over historical significance.

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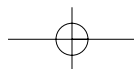
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In my view, many historic districts represent a concentration of buildings that retain a fairly high degree of integrity and convey a clear and unambiguous message about an area's past. If the architecture of the area is undistinguished or in poor condition, or includes multiple building types, various building materials, and numerous architectural styles—in other words, if the significance of the area is not clearly and unambiguously expressed by its architecture—then the path to official designation as a historic district can be difficult. This is an important issue to those of us who prepare historic district nominations and designations. It speaks to the general primacy often granted to architecture over history in the official designation process, and I assumed that the working group participants would focus on examples of this type, detailing how areas of considerable historical significance were passed over for historic district designation because they lacked architectural cohesion and could not clearly convey their importance through their architecture.

I am happy to say that the actual working group proved much more interesting, innovative, and intellectually challenging than my original notion. The papers presented here move far beyond my initial conception and address much broader issues, such as the question of whose history is told in a historic district, and how that history reflects economic, political, and social power structures. Historic districts are discussed as contested terrain, where the histories of some past and present residents are honored over those of others and where economic interests can determine the identification and delineation of district boundaries as well as the stories told in the district. This discussion moved well beyond the traditional concern over gentrification of historic districts. The working group also moved beyond the geographic confines of the United States to discuss how historic districts are conceptualized, implemented, and managed in other countries. As someone who has toiled in the rows of the historic preservation field for decades, I was particularly struck by how the working group participants moved beyond the bureaucratic confines of the historic district, as defined by federal and local legislation in the United States, to grapple with issues of definition and intent.

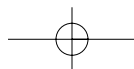
In the United States, and I suspect elsewhere in the world, the identification and designation of a historic district is an inherently bureaucratic process. Rules and regulations promulgated by federal, state, and local governments dictate and determine the process for identification and designation. There are two basic types of historic districts in the United States, those formally listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and those designated under local regulation. National Register districts are, to a large degree, honorific. There are no federal restrictions regarding what a property owner can do to a resource within a designated historic district, so long as they are not using federal funds or seeking federal investment tax credits. Local districts, however, are almost always regulatory in nature. A local board or commission reviews and rules upon applications for changes to buildings within the district. It is from locally designated districts that the horror stories about the “preservation police” originate.



Virtually all designation efforts are to some extent public activities. Within the federal system, although an individual can prepare a historic district nomination, perhaps at the behest of a real estate developer or some other interested individual, the system requires public comment prior to designation, and if a majority of property owners object to the nomination, the listing will not move forward. Local designated districts are, obviously, designated by local interests and governments, who respond to or represent some segment of the broader public. The history presented in local districts is generally the history that the community, or at least a portion of the community, chooses to preserve, commemorate, and celebrate.

The federal laws and regulations governing the designation of historic districts in the United States (the federal regulations serve, for the most part, as the model for local regulations) are more than four decades old. It seems entirely appropriate, therefore, that a new generation of scholars is questioning the way in which historic districts are defined and interpreted, and their history presented to the public. The practice of history in 2010 is not the same as it was in 1960. New subjects, approaches, models, and methods have altered the profession, so why should the purpose, intentions, and definitions of historic districts remain unchanged and inalterable?

My sense was that several of the working group participants wished that historic districts placed history on an equal footing with architecture, that historic districts recognized the intangible evidence of a community's history to the same extent that they recognize the tangible architectural artifacts. The difficulty in reconceptualizing and redefining historic districts along these lines is that such an approach would require completely redefining the bureaucratic definition of what constitutes a historic district. Historic districts do not exist, as formal, legal entities, outside the bureaucratic context. Consequently, although we can intellectualize about historic districts that exist detached from architecture, significant only for the historical events that occurred in the locale, or the people who lived, worked, and died there, a district must meet the basic legal definition of a historic district. Historic districts preserve things—buildings, structures, objects, sites—not ideas, events, or space. If a district is significant for its associations with events, peoples, or ideas, there still must be some tangible, physical, touchable artifact of the past to connect that significance to the physical world. I believe this is one of the reasons that traditional cultural properties represent such a puzzle for folks preparing historic district documentation (the general format for official designation of such properties) and those charged with managing these resources. I firmly believe that the notion of traditional cultural properties, defined to include both indigenous and nonindigenous cultures, is an important concept for the commemoration, preservation, and protection of significant places. But this concept doesn't fit well within the defined bureaucratic definition of a historic district. Nonindigenous traditional cultural properties are perhaps easier to shoehorn into the bureaucratic box, since they often include evidence of physical change and alteration of the natural landscape in the form of buildings or

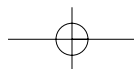


landscape alterations. Indigenous traditional cultural properties sometimes offer little physical evidence of human landscape alteration—the natural landscape itself is significant to the culture. How does one define such a place? Official designation requires a line on a map. Can a line be drawn where standing on one side of it places you within a significant space and taking a single step across the line places you in different, clearly nonsignificant space?

Rather than redefining the basic notion of a historic district, I think we can work within the existing framework to produce districts that better present the historical significance of a place and that incorporate more stories than those of the local power elites. In my view, there is a generally held concept of what a historic district should look like. Districts are, more often than not, a rather homogenous collection of architecture associated with a particular time period or architectural style. District boundaries are often drawn based upon the extant architecture, and buildings that do not meet the prevailing notion of the district's significance are excluded. As a result, we have historic districts that represent downtown commercial areas divorced from the residential neighborhoods that supported the downtown, or collections of bungalows, Victorian mansions, or shotgun houses in which other architectural styles are gerrymandered out. Heterogeneous districts that include all of the architecture associated with a particular historical theme, such as the development and growth of a community, are relatively unusual. This is a product of the bureaucratic need to delineate and describe a district precisely as well as concisely, and a preference to subdivide history and experience into easily digestible chunks.

The district that occupied a prominent place in my thoughts as we organized this working group does not “look” like a traditional historic district. An African-American residential community, platted and developed by African-American entrepreneurs, the area is largely residential and, for the most part, was developed between 1925 and 1945. The developer lacked funds to provide most essential services and essentially laid out the blocks and lots and left development in the hands of individual property owners. Historic maps indicate that salvaged building materials were stacked on some lots, apparently for the use of local property owners. As a result, the area displays a host of house forms, architectural styles, and building materials. It does not present a homogenous architectural appearance, but instead appears to have been assembled almost at random. Nevertheless, this apparent randomness is part of the physical manifestation of the area's historical significance as an African-American residential enclave developed in the face of economic hard times and pervasive racism. The district's significance lies more in its historical associations than in its architecture, yet the architecture constitutes a physical manifestation of the historical significance, and in order to meet the bureaucratic requirements for designation as a historic district, it is necessary for history to have a physical, tangible presence.

From my perspective there is always history in a historic district. The question is whose history. Although historic districts generally include buildings,



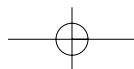
structures, or objects that illustrate and exemplify the significance of the district, that significance is often defined rather narrowly in terms of economic, social, or ethnic elites. Historic districts, particularly those designated by local agencies, tend to celebrate the past, not explore it in anything approaching an academically rigorous manner. District boundaries are often delineated to exclude resources that do not reflect or reinforce the history that the district's promoters wish to display, commemorate, or use for their profit.

Ted Karamanski's fascinating account of the designation of the Buena Park and Sheridan Park Historic Districts in Chicago seems to support this contention. The history of these districts appears to have been carefully and skillfully crafted by real estate developers and their consultants, seeking to attain National Register designation in order to qualify their development efforts for historic preservation tax credits. This is not to say that the districts are without history, just that the National Register nominations cleverly presented a history supported by the extant architecture in order to meet the goals of developers and entrepreneurs. The longer, more complex history of the Uptown area was largely ignored, and the wider community was designated into bite-sized historic districts that served, in Karamanski's words, as "gentrification zones." The history of the area was interpreted and promoted to serve developmental desires. In and of itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing. It is generally easier to move a small, tightly delineated district with a readily understood history through the bureaucratic channels to designation, but it does tend to shortchange the broader patterns of an area's history.

Shantia Anderheggen describes a somewhat analogous situation in Newport, Rhode Island. The community has a long commitment to historic preservation, with historic districts dating to 1965, prior to passage of the seminal National Historic Preservation Act in 1966. These districts appear to have been established with an eye towards the preservation of the community's colonial and Gilded Age architecture. The development of a tourism-based economy exploited these designations, promoting Newport's colonial past as a seaport and its late-nineteenth-century role as a playground for the nation's economic and social elite, and effectively delegating the rest of the community's history to a status of nonimportance.

Other periods and themes in the community's history were somewhat glossed over, and when, in the mid-1980s, historic districts were expanded and enlarged to include mid- to late nineteenth-century neighborhoods, local residents had a difficult time understanding why these neighborhoods, and the architecture they contained, should be considered historic. Newport advanced a rather narrow history of itself and paid the price in the form of local opposition to historic district designation and regulation of buildings and areas that did not clearly fit within this officially sanctioned history. Anderheggen offers some potential ways of resolving the dilemma, including revising and updating the out-of-date community surveys so that they recognize broader historical themes and a wider array of architecture.

If district boundaries are expanded to incorporate middling, vernacular-

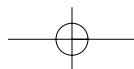


style buildings, then it is imperative that the stories those resources tell about the community be clearly communicated to both local officials and residents. The delineation of district boundaries tends to be an exercise in homogenization, throwing a loop around similar resources and winnowing out those that do not conform. If we expect better history from our historic districts, we need to assure that the districts are as heterogeneous and inclusive as the stories we want them to tell, but we need to make sure that our histories are as inclusive as the districts. I applaud Newport for expanding its districts and making them more inclusive. The task, and I assume it will be ongoing over many years, is to convince local officials, residents, and visitors that stories of Newport's past beyond those associated with the colonial era and the Gilded Age mansions are significant and important.

Even if a historic district is delineated to encompass multiple stories and multiple pasts, those stories need to be conveyed to residents and visitors. Leondra N. Burchall describes an effective program to make the stories presented at St. George's, Bermuda more inclusive and more relevant to residents. It seems clear that the designation of the St. George's district emphasized architecture, and particularly high-style architecture associated with the community's colonial past, over a broad view of the community's history. An official history is told and presented in the formal historic district designation, yet Burchall has been able to move beyond this constraint, opening up the broader story of the community and its past residents and offering children a much more inclusive view of the past. Similarly, Stephanie Aylworth describes a "multifaceted approach" to the interpretation of Douglasville, Georgia, that extends beyond traditional architectural survey to more detailed research on individuals associated with the buildings and the political, social, and economic forces that shaped decisions to build, use, alter, and otherwise inhabit the district. Aylworth points out how this more holistic form of survey and research expands upon the stories that a district can convey, moving beyond mere architectural description to include a more nuanced and contextual history in which architecture exemplifies and embodies the historic political, social, and economic forces in play within the community.

Na Li's examination of the Chinese experience with historic districts suggests that in that country districts were conceptualized from the beginning as more than a collection of architecture. In China authenticity means more than the presence of historic buildings of demonstrable integrity, but also includes the "living environment" and retention of original residents. I like the idea of defining historic districts as living neighborhoods where people are as important as architecture, but this approach could become a double-edged sword, with districts serving as ghettos to confine and contain populations of certain ethnic, economic, or social groups.

There is history in every historic district. Sometimes that history is constrained and restricted, reflecting the specific goals and objectives of those who prepared and promoted the district designation, but a broader, more inclusive history always exists behind the official designation. Public historians



working within a community can try to bring this broader history to the surface and explain to promoters, regulators, residents, and visitors its relevance and significance. But all of this has to take place within the basic framework of the regulations that govern the delineation and designation of historic districts. We designate historic districts because they contain collections of architecture that illuminate and explicate history. Without the physical artifacts there is no historic district, but those artifacts need not conform to old, outdated notions of historical architecture. They may and should be as inclusive as the stories we wish them to tell. Public historians can play an important role in casting the net wide enough to include these stories.

PATRICK W. O'BANNON, a past president of NCPH, is senior manager of the History/Architecture Division at Gray & Pape, Inc., a cultural resources consulting firm. He has more than thirty years experience in cultural resources management and historic preservation, and has prepared numerous historic district nominations.

