

Preserving Tangible Cultural Assets: A Framework for a New Dialog in Preservation

This paper reports on the emergence of a new type of historic preservation—the preservation of sites with cultural significance. The term cultural significance requires some definition. Almost all historic sites and buildings can be considered cultural. The Burra Charter defines cultural significance as having “aesthetic, historic, scientific, and social” aspects (Australia ICOMOS, 12). Using a narrower definition, this paper is concerned with those buildings or sites important for their association with ethnic cultures, marginalized peoples, or mainstream culture heretofore considered undistinguished, which are not generally preservable using current laws and methodology. The purpose of this paper is to begin a dialog around the questions of if and how these sites may be preserved. Some of New York City’s “places of significance” highlight the problem and serve as a case study.

The concept of wicked problems, which describes problems not susceptible to solution by ordinary methods, is described. A study of a related wicked problem—the development of both a consensus and a methodology for preserving intangible cultural heritage internationally through UNESCO—suggests that the framework may work equally well for preserving tangible cultural assets.

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