

Historic Preservation Ideology: A Critical Mapping of Contemporary Heritage Policy Discourse

Historic preservation practitioners differ about definitions of the field. Often, those who have attempted to understand historic preservation focused on one particular definition and argued that it is more central than others. However, based on empirical evidence more fully developed elsewhere, there are discernible lines of discourse between and among the different points of view.

The resulting patterns of meaning and discursive frames are critical to understanding the practice of historic preservation. These discursive frames are mapped along two dimensions, which are developed and juxtaposed to provide a heuristic to help critically frame the ongoing professional discourse on preservation: first, whether a building, an artifact, or site is more important for reasons intrinsic to that thing or because of the associational values brought to it by those who are doing the valuation; second, how “market ideology” has affected a debate that in the past frequently ignored both the political and economic context of practice.

This mapping resulted in a Preservation Discourse Matrix (PDM), where the two dimensions (or two axes) are analyzed as four categories: identity-based, curatorial, symbolic, and property-oriented. Moreover, this matrix illustrates the relationships among these categories. In turn, the mapping is intended to contribute to future practice by providing a better understanding of interests and meaning in historic preservation.

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