

An Open Letter to the National Council for Preservation Education (NCPE) Membership

Dear Colleagues,

Following NCPE's official statement condemning police brutality and responding to the Black Lives Matter movement, I wanted to offer a more substantive call to action for NCPE as an organization and to our members. This note offers some ideas and some initiatives that NCPE's executive committee proposes, but also asks members to shape the direction of what we hope will be structural changes. We need to empower ourselves to call out white privilege and systematic racism, and develop tools to undo biases that continue to shape the history and memory of the nation.

Call to Action- Monuments and the Preservation of Negative History:

The current attention to systematic racism is precipitating some action related to the curation of our shared built heritage- the removing of monuments from public places in several cities. I have heard concerns about the removal of monuments to confederates as an 'erasure of history.' As preservation educators, let us draw from the existing and evolving literature in our field on preserving and memorializing painful pasts.¹ I hope that as educators we can help the general public and our students understand the decisions to remove monuments from their place in public spaces not as erasure but as a decisive intervention in our urban fabric's continuum. We know that statues and monuments are tributes not to one moment in history but many, including: the event being memorialized; the vantage from which the event was viewed when commemorated; and the lens of the viewer in the moment of visitation. The awakening (admittedly belated for many and uneven across the population) to how hurtful monuments to the Confederacy are for many users of public spaces means that we are now re-weighing the importance of 'the moment of viewership.' We are also acknowledging the messaging embedded in the monuments based on the motivations at the time of commemoration. Action about these monuments marks society's evolving priorities, values, and growing discontent with the mixed messaging of these monuments. People are, rightly, correcting a symbolic narrative of oppression by

¹ As one example among many, Lynn Meskell writes extensively on "negative" or "dark" heritage in Germany. She points out that certain historic sites, like Auschwitz, are preserved to remind us of human atrocities; while Nazi statuary was removed because it celebrated Nazism. She also writes that the later action happened through public and civil debate, which became a collected act of "public forgetting."

participating in their removal.² The removal of monuments is not, however, the only solution that communities may devise to address the changing values they wish to express in public space. As preservationists we need to embrace, and even amplify, the intention of bettering the built environment and its symbolic messages. As Steven Hoffman reminds us in his upcoming PER article, this work can be done through support of the removal of monuments, through interpreting the monuments' origins and their role in perpetuating white supremacy or by providing a counter monument, which celebrates new values counter to the values expressed in the older monument. We as preservationists should be engaged in helping communities discover their own best paths forward on this issue, and as educators should be speaking and teaching forthrightly about controversial topics such as monument removal.

Call to Action- Further Racial Diversity and Inclusivity in Teaching Preservation:

In the course of correcting dominant and omitted narratives, I hope that we, as preservation educators and students, reflect on the progress made in preservation to address the history and historic places of marginalized individuals and communities particularly relating to the eras of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, segregation, civil rights and continuing struggles to equality. I trust that we recognize that there is plenty of work ahead.³ I want to acknowledge NCPE's constituents who have already been engaged with this work and would like to encourage others to participate. Instead of asking preservation educators to switch their scholarly agendas (which is unethical and against the academic tradition) I encourage us to look for, make transparent, and seek to improve the racial overlays of our wide array of subjects of inquiry. Let us steer the

² Removing/relocating monuments is quite different than burning down places built with slave labor or which were part of the horrible, dehumanizing, system of slavery. Critically, the removal of monuments from public spaces is a reversible action- a tenant of preservation- as opposed to the destruction of an object, monument, building, or landscape. Differentiation needs to be made, and perhaps preservation educators can assist the public in doing so, between places which have slavery and disempowering racial relations associated with them (such as plantations) and the glorification of white supremacy in explicit symbolic messages (such as monuments).

³ Though many of us can recall or point to scholarship and professional products that examine the history and historic places of minority communities (Antoinette "Toni" Lee leaps to mind for me), Jeremy Wells' recent review of the literature shows that "diversity" within historic preservation scholarship fails to address contemporary minority groups for whom this history is important. Almost none of the preservation literature focuses on social justice, equity, or inclusion; authors who address these three topics are nearly entirely from urban planning, archaeology, and public history.

field toward a more honest, inclusive, and multifaceted representation of lived experiences through our scholarship, community engagement, service work, and the training of the field's future leaders. Let's continue the progress toward inclusivity, diversity, and social justice in what preservation "cares about."

There is work to be done in who we educate as well as whose places and histories we preserve.⁴ We have known for a long time that the student body and faculty of our collective NCPE programs is overwhelmingly white. Recruiting diverse students and faculty (in terms of race, ethnicity, family legacy of higher education, etc.) has not been our field's strong suit. I don't have a solution for how to change this reality. I hope that through a commitment towards equity and social justice, we come up with new ways of teaching, learning, recruitment, and retention. I also recognize that people of color are, and have been, doing preservation work and training through other pathways than a NCPE program. I do not wish to discount the contributions of these preservationists to the field, only to note that through our formal preservation education programs we are not educating a population reflective of the demographics of the United States. Is it important that we do? I believe so, though I am open to learning that there are other, effective paths into preservation work and that NCPE does not have to aim to be the gatekeepers to this profession. I recognize that recruiting and educating a more diverse cohort of students in NCPE programs is an ambition that has been expressed before. I express it again, now, while we, and the country at large, are focused on remedying racial disparities.

NCPE Action Items:

Beyond the rhetoric of a call to action, I would like the membership to know about, and engage with, a few initiatives that address our responsibility to fight racism.

- **Direct Recruiting:** Julee Johnson, the NCPE Internship Coordinator, attends the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAAHP) conference annually to solicit applicants for the positions coordinated by our internship program. If there is a student representative from a NCPE member program who would like to attend

⁴ As Erica Avrami notes in her recent book, *Preservation and Social Inclusion*, in the preservation field, "an increase in narrative diversity is being conflated with participatory diversity."

the conference (which will be held virtually this year) in a recruiting role--not for their program specifically, but for preservation education in general--please contact Amalia Leifeste (aleifes@clemson.edu).

Preference will be given to African American student ambassadors.

- **Conversation Starting Point:** On October 9th Brent Leggs, Executive Director of the National Trust's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund and author of *Preserving African American Historic Places*, will give an online presentation on the broad topics of: challenges facing African American cultural sites in the United States; how to expand awareness of such sites; and the role historic preservation plays in both supporting and combating widespread structural racism. This presentation is offered to NCPE member programs as potential content to be used in courses (as faculty may be looking for course content to start conversations about race-related issues in preservation AND as faculty may be looking for online learning opportunities for students as we redesign our curricula for virtual learning this Fall). Individuals associated with a NCPE program (students, faculty...) may also tune in for the presentation and discussion, even if it is not part of a course. If not able to attend the Zoom meeting at the time of the presentation, the recording of the presentation will be posted to the NCPE website after October 12th.
- **Task Force:** NCPE is forming a special task force on Increasing Racial Diversity in Preservation Education, and is soliciting task force members. Please contact Amalia Leifeste (aleifes@clemson.edu) to nominate a task force member (self-nomination is also welcomed). This task force's main objective is to diagnose shortcomings and outline a concise and planned strategy for addressing opportunities for structural change to address racial inequity in NCPE's work. Projects the Special Task Force may undertake include:
 - Potential partnerships with groups like Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASLAH), National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (NATHPO), The National Association for the Preservation of African-American History, The Society of Black Archaeologists, United Negro College Fund, and the American Indian College Fund.
 - Investigation into the lack of membership from HBCUs, HNACUs, and others educational institutions with larger racial minority populations engaged in, or perhaps beginning, preservation education.

- Develop a list of courses, projects, and scholarship currently part of the preservation education cannon which addresses racial (and other) diverse lived experiences. Certainly, it will not be possible to generate a comprehensive list, but perhaps we will discover a dearth or plethora. It may prove useful to have readily available talking points on what we have done, places and their stories we have saved, so that we can share what we do now, instead of reacting to what some think we do.
- Look at other (non-NCPE) paths to preservation and form alliances if beneficial to our partners (perhaps by looking to expand the associate membership category) such as architecture programs at HBCUs that cover classical architecture and restoration, and do preservation work. The American Conservation Experience has a Cultural Resources Diversity Internship Program, the Historic Preservation Training Center's Traditional Trades Apprenticeship Program, and the Latino Heritage Internship Program of the Hispanic Access Foundation are some examples.
- **Dollars Toward Diversity:** the line item in NCPE's annual budget, reserved as "preservation diversification," will be made available to the Special Task Force. Use of the fund will be in line with Special Task Force findings and recommendations, but may include:
 - Scholarship for a racial minority student (or students) entering a NCPE program, or a stipend for those needing assistance with relocation costs to attend a NCPE program.
 - Scholarship for a racial minority high school senior or 4th year undergraduate student in a Historic-Preservation-related field to conduct research or a service-learning project on a preservation topic as part of their high school or undergraduate education.
 - Grants to cover the expense of a program or partner becoming a NCPE Member or Associate Member, consulting on membership standards etc.
 - Grants to develop Historic Preservation curriculum in a related discipline (history, etc.) at a HBCU or NHACU.
 - Grants to update existing courses in NCPE member programs to include lenses of race, class, gender, etc. to history, theory and practice of Historic Preservation curricular content.

In addition to these action items, there are many ideas of what NCPE as an organization, or member programs, or individuals might productively put their energies toward. Might we revisit the curriculum in preservation programs to ensure that topics of equity, inclusion, and social justice inform the courses? Though perhaps a fool's errand, might we petition our University and College Boards of Trustees to commit to all Black students paying 87 cents on the dollar of tuition to reflect the wage gap in earning potential of these future alumni of our programs? Might we form stronger partnerships with faculty at the HBCUs in our regions as we work on grants, individual research, and course projects? Might we reach out to young non-white learners earlier in their education to share the importance of being stewards to historic places? Might we dream big and advocate for state or federal reparations to come in the form of full tuition payment for the descendants of enslaved individuals for bachelors and master's degrees, including studying in our NCPE programs? I am sure you have other 'mights' to add to the list. If you are so inclined to share them, please do (Aleifes@clemsun.edu).

As an organization of educational programs, I know that this call for growth is layered over what has already been a challenging time in higher education with the dramatic shift to virtual learning necessitated by the global pandemic and precautions against the transmission of COVID-19. I acknowledge that the actions proposed here may appear too modest to some. I hope we can all recognize that it is alright to begin with initiatives that we believe we can sustain, and that change is slow and incremental. We need to commit to staying on the right path even without the expectation of a fast or easy solution. These are 'wicked problems' we are seeking to address. Let us examine our levers of power and consider what we can do better as preservationists and preservation educators to recognize our own privilege and remedy biases that have shaped preservation practice.

Thank you for each of your contributions to advancing our field of historic preservation. I trust we are all surging in a direction we will be proud to have championed.

Sincerely,

Amalia Leifeste

[Recognizing the contributions to this letter and evolving thinking from: Doug Appler, Manish Chalana, Steven Hoffman, Carter Hudgins, Paul Kapp, Sue Ann Pemberton-Haugh, Barry Stiefel, Michael Tomlan and Jeremy Wells.]