

INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *PER* on digital humanities and historic preservation was inspired by a conference we attended in 2015 called “The New Tour: Innovations in Place-based Storytelling” at Brown University’s Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage. Readers of *PER* have likely been on a good many behind-the-scenes site visits, heritage trails, neighborhood walks and open houses. Tours are a staple of historic preservation advocacy, education, and community outreach. Their content often reflects the way preservationists make sense of the past—in terms of architectural styles, dates of construction, building materials and design details, and the important people we write about in statements of significance. The New Tour conference was a revelation because it suggested how digital technologies like smart phones can bring the archive into the field and introduce a flexibility and richness to the tour experience. Participants can access additional layers of information, they can select routes and narratives to match individual interests, and they can explore places alone or with friends at any time of day or night. At the conference, we heard from activists, artists, historians, educators, and designers who encouraged us to think creatively about how the digital humanities might bring to the surface stories and experiences of places that are beyond conventional preservation concerns. We left wondering how preservationists are using these digital tools and sources in ways that contribute to and significantly expand on the field’s traditional approaches.

Preservationists have always looked to technology to aid the daunting task of identifying, interpreting, and protecting the vast collection of significant places. Chester Liebs used a New York State helicopter to identify historic resources along the Hudson Valley in the 1970s. Punch card databases helped collate and speed access to information about listed and potential historic properties. Cameras, laser scanners, and ground penetrating radar enable increasingly precise measurements and representations of buildings and landscapes. In recent years the resulting information is organized and analyzed using GIS, BIM, and other digital platforms. And of course the internet has become a powerful tool for research, dissemination, networking, and advocacy. We now take for granted the ability to access vast resources like the

Historic American Building Survey at the Library of Congress from our desks and phones. These tools along with many others helped broaden the reach of preservationists, while introducing new efficiencies and ways to make sense of historical materials.

Digital humanities is an expansive field that escapes easy definition. It encompasses everything from big data—the mining and analysis of massive amounts of information—to posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. We believe that the application of digital humanities approaches to our field is a work in progress that raises important questions about the scope, methods, and audience of historic preservation. How can digital tools help preservationists do what they already do better? How can digital approaches help preservationists do things differently? And how might the digital humanities enable us to further democratize the creation of historical narratives and interpretation, enrich the concept of significance, and blur the boundaries between creators and consumers of historical knowledge?

This special issue is a sampling of how practitioners and educators are working at the intersection of digital and heritage. Some highlighted initiatives are public-facing, where digital tools offer audiences and occupants varied means of experiencing and understand historic places. Others are directed at activities that typically occur behind the scenes—aggregating and utilizing information with greater efficiency, nuance, and rigor. All of the digital approaches explored in this issue share a common objective: they extend the potential for genuine multidisciplinary collaborations.

Sometimes the preservation process itself needs reinterpretation. Francesca Russello Ammon reexamines the history of Philadelphia’s Society Hill urban renewal project, a mid-twentieth century undertaking that combined demolition, preservation, restoration, and contemporary urban design. Among the most celebrated, or infamous, case studies in the history of American preservation, the redevelopment also forcibly displaced most of the area’s residents and businesses to make way for middle-class homeowners. Ammon invites readers to think expansively about the “act of preservation” as a project of place-based community engagement, historical knowledge production, and neighborhood activism. Her article thoughtfully

reviews recent literature and case studies to examine what the digital humanities are and how they can further publicly-accessible, community-engaged projects. The piece prompts reflective consideration of what is useful information for preservation, who it is useful to, how it is obtained, and what insights it can reveal about the actors and actions that drive urban change.

While Ammon and her students painstakingly dig through the archival records of an earlier preservation project to reinterpret the past, Jennifer Minner urges today's preservationists to carefully curate a record of their analyses and decisions for uses and users they have yet to even anticipate. Documents generated as a result of government functions and processes—everything from architectural designs to tax records, planning determinations, and code reviews—may be useful repositories of data for researchers in the future. If more of this material survived we'd have the chance to consider, in entirely different ways, the many costs and benefits of our making and remaking of historic environments.

Pedro Palazzo explores another kind of synthesis, combining georeferencing and classification strategies for architectural survey work. His case study in Planaltina, Brazil, offers a flexible approach to revealing and evaluating the historic character of a neighborhood that might initially seem to lack character. Identifying features that don't meet traditional understandings of style and relating them spatially, Palazzo's project makes legible patterns that were initially difficult to discern and argues the significance of these patterns. He illustrates how innovative, digitally-based approaches can open up previously-overlooked resource types—those of marginalized communities, for example—or permit us to reconsider known resources from multiple perspectives.

If portions of vanished landscapes and buildings are to be recreated based upon rigorous research and documentation, what philosophy should guide this type of work? The field has long relied upon a collection of charters and standards to make preservation decisions principled, ethical, and consistent. Kimball Erdman and Angie Payne offer two case studies that apply design standards to the virtual reconstruction of two lost landscapes in Arkansas: the Rohwer Relocation Center, a Japanese American internment camp, and a site within Rush, a

largely vanished mining town. Through these projects he asks readers to consider the functions and the limitations of “analog” guidelines when they are transposed to a virtual context.

The digital world is marked by frenetic innovation. Developers launch open-source and proprietary applications and update existing ones at a remarkable rate. How do we choose one tool from among many to get the job done? Ella Weber and Christopher Beagan provide a framework for the comparative analysis of database software the National Park Service uses to organize natural plant records. Their evaluation process considers ease of use, cost, capability, adaptability, and longevity, characteristics that matter in a large bureaucracy like a state or federal agency distributed across multiple sites, each with its own staffs and priorities. While the paper provides one organization's perspective on evaluating digital tools, the approach is widely applicable to other circumstances where software users must reconcile, or at least consider, multiple factors and competing platforms.

All of these articles reveal the potential of digital humanities to transcend established disciplinary boundaries and anticipate what Minner calls “future scenarios for historic resources.” Yet the types of circumstances and objectives described by the authors will be familiar to most preservationists: survey, mapping, archival research, legal and administrative processes, and assessing significance. Digital humanities can enrich these traditional preservation tasks. But they may also make possible entirely novel ways to think about, implement, and ultimately expand what we call historic preservation.

Finally, in an effort to broaden the topics considered in this thematic issue, we contacted several scholars and practitioners to ask how digital humanities influence their historic preservation work. The resulting “Perspectives” briefly discuss issues including diversity and inclusion, electronic gaming, mapping, and storytelling. Each points to case studies and secondary literature that readers can pursue for additional information and to generate ideas. And they all raise critical questions about the pace and trajectory of digital development, suggesting why it matters for the preservationists of the present and future.

While a single volume cannot fully address the intersection of digital humanities and preservation, we hope

this sample stimulates discussion and prompts additional inquiries. There is still much to talk about. The digital world is often represented as a virtual one, an electronic imaginary made up of zeros and ones that is separate from our everyday “brick and mortar” environment. Images on a smartphone screen, virtual reality, and digital simulation will never fully substitute for a complete experience of place—the feel of a room, the sensation of walking the brick streets of a surviving historic neighborhood on a balmy summer evening, the smell of old wood. But these technologies can expand considerations of historic spaces and designs, evocatively recreate demolished places, and provide access to environments made inaccessible through loss, disability, or distance.

Digital humanities approaches also have pedagogical implications. They expose preservation students to skill sets that may increase the range of career opportunities they seek out after graduation. They also present the real challenge of fitting new forms of technical training into already crowded preservation curricula. What falls out of the curriculum when we add alternative content? And although smartphone ownership is nearly ubiquitous, the financial resources of academic programs and their students is increasingly constrained. Can we afford (and afford to maintain) the infrastructure necessary to create and teach digitally?

The internet and social media have already unsettled authorship, challenging established arbiters of what is

important to whom and who has the ability to say so unfiltered, uncurated, and unregulated by the expert. The contingent nature of digital authorship (cutting and pasting, versioning) points the way to experiments in creativity and considerations of meaning. Cities are becoming more playful. Pokemon Go and other location-based digital games, pervasive games, and live-action role playing games (LARPs) are blending physical and digital spaces in ways that we are only beginning to consider.

Framed in statements of context and significance, in rehabilitations and restorations, preservation has always been about telling stories. This volume emphasizes the potential of emerging technologies, but the promise of digital humanities extends far beyond issues of hardware and software. For these tools don't necessarily compel preservationists do things differently. A digital camera can capture the same scene shot on 35 millimeter slide film; a dropdown selection in an electronic survey form may register the same information as a ticked box on a paper form. So as we think about doing things differently, we ask readers to consider what one speaker at the 2015 New Tour conference told us: “the imagination is the most immersive technology.” The approaches explored in this volume offer a provocation to seek new narratives and new ways of teaching. In doing so, we may reimagine our field.

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