

Summary of: "A Survey of the Public: Preference for Old and New Buildings, Attitudes about Historic Preservation, and Preservation-Related Engagement"

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Abstract

Very little empirical research exists to support and guide the field of historic preservation in the United States, particularly research related to the humanistic factors behind why we preserve. The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the social value of historic preservation in the United States and the social context within which preservationists work, specifically: 1) Do people prefer old buildings or new?; 2) What are people's attitudes about historic places and preservation?; 3) To what extent are people engaged in preservation-related activities?; and, 4) Are there demographic trends in preference, attitude, and engagement? The results of a survey of 200 adults from across the U.S. reveal that though a small number of people are active and vocal agents of historic preservation, a large majority of the public stands behind the movement. On average, people prefer old buildings over new, value historic places, and are generally supportive of historic preservation. Although there are some indications of demographic trends in preferences, attitudes, and engagement, in general, the preservation of historic resources appears to appeal to a broad demographic of people in the United States. The findings may be used to inform preservation-related practice, policy, outreach, and advocacy, and the results additionally serve as a starting point for future research.

This paper was adapted from Sandra Shannon's 2014 Master's Thesis, "A Survey of the Public: Preference for Old and New Buildings, Attitudes about Historic Preservation, and Preservation-Related Engagement," which may be downloaded from Proquest at <http://gradworks.umi.com/15/83/1583019.html>.

Introduction

More than 60 years after the formal establishment of the field of historic preservation in the United States, preservationists are still answering the question, "Why preserve?" We have provided countless, thoughtful responses to this question over the years, but more often than not, our justifications are based in our experiences as preservationists. Though these experiences are certainly valid, if our assertions were supported by empirical evidence, our arguments would carry additional weight and validity.

Unfortunately, very few scientific studies have been conducted to better understand the importance of historic preservation in the U.S. and its role in society. In recent years, those involved in the economics and sustainability of preservation have contributed empirical evidence, which preservationists have embraced and used to promote the cause, but beyond this, we have very little scientific support, particularly in terms of understanding the social value of preservation.¹

The purpose of this research was to conduct a quantitative survey of the general public to study social concepts at the core of historic preservation that have not yet been investigated or fully investigated by academic researchers, including:

- 1) Do people prefer old buildings or new?
- 2) What are people's attitudes about historic places and preservation?
- 3) To what extent are people engaged in preservation-related activities?
- 4) Are there demographic trends in preferences, attitudes, and engagement?

The answers to these questions will contribute to our preliminary understanding of the social value of historic places and preservation in the United States and offer improved insight of the environment in which the field of historic preservation operates. Further, if the findings reveal that, on average, people prefer old places and value preservation – as preservationists suspect they do – this will provide important evidence for preservation-related advocacy, policy, and planning in the United States.

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¹A complete literature review is available in the full report, pages 5-31.

Methodology

Introduction to Visual Preference Research

In order to determine if people prefer old buildings or new, visual preference research methodologies were utilized in the current study. Visual preference research, which has been practiced by multi-disciplinary academic researchers since the 1970s, is a research method by which people's reactions to environmental scenes are measured quantitatively in order to identify the types of environments people most and least prefer, and understand why people prefer certain environments over others (Sanoff 1991, 2). Although variations exist, visual preference research typically involves showing research participants a series of photographs of environmental scenes and having them indicate their preference for each scene on a rating scale.²

Image Selection

Image selection is a critical component of visual preference research. In order to ensure that participants respond to the subject building in each image and not extraneous information, a degree of visual consistency across images is important, and as such, a strict set of parameters (outlined in Table 1) was utilized in the current study to compile an initial pool of 116 photographs of old and new buildings. All photographs were of the façade of low- to mid-rise, non-descript commercial or office buildings located in North America. The buildings had little to no set-back and represented predominate styles of the time. Old buildings were defined as those constructed at least 50 years ago (in keeping with the national standard of what can generally be considered for historic designation). New buildings were defined as those constructed within the last 15 years. The images shared similar photographic and scenic conditions, such as composition, lighting, and visibility.

In addition to these parameters, since researchers have demonstrated that people's preferences for buildings are associated with the visual complexity of buildings, condition of buildings, and presence of landscape elements in the setting, it is common practice in preference research to control for these variables in the selection of images (e.g., Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Herzog and Shier, 2000; Frewald, 1989; Nasar, 1983; Herzog, Kaplan, and Kaplan, 1982). In the current study, a panel of architectural experts rated each of the 116 photographs for visual complexity, building condition, and presence of landscape. Using these ratings, a final set of 25 old buildings and 25 new buildings were selected for the study so that these variables were approximately balanced among the old and new photographs. That is, there were similar numbers of old and new buildings with high and low visual complexity, high and low building condition, and high and low levels of landscape.³ Secondary variables that may influence people's preference

Table 1: Criteria for the selection of photographs

Definition of old and new	Old	Constructed at least 50 years ago (1964 or earlier)
	New	Constructed within the last 15 years (1999 or later)
Building conditions	Type	Non-descript commercial / office buildings
	Style	Predominate styles of the time, ranging from vernacular to high styles, but excluding historicized new buildings and buildings void of style
	Integrity	All or most of the original character defining features retained
	Height	Five stories or less
	Massing	Relatively cubic in shape
	Size	Any
	Materials	Any
	Color	Any
	Signage	None to limited, avoiding large corporate signs
	Location	U.S. and Canada
Scene conditions	Setting	Little to no setback in a densely built environment
	Visibility	No large trees, foliage, vehicles, etc. obstructing the façade
	People / cars	None to limited
Photographic conditions	Composition	Close crop of building, showing all or nearly all of the building and little surrounding context
	Lighting	Front lit during the day time
	Weather	No rain, snow, fall leaves
	Sky	Gray skies avoided
	Image quality	In focus, not grainy, not washed out or too dark; no photographic filters applied, not overly Photoshopped, etc.
	Image orientation	Horizontal
	Perspective	Taken from an angle or straight on

² A review of studies comparing preference ratings for photographic stimuli with ratings obtained *in situ* revealed a high degree of correlation, meaning that photographs can serve as effective substitutes for onsite evaluations in visual preference research (Stamps, 1990).

³ Since none of the new buildings were in poor condition, old buildings in poor condition (as rated by the expert panel) were excluded from the study.

Images 1-2: Examples of new buildings used in the study



Photo credits: Sandra Shannon

Images 3-4: Examples of old buildings used in the study



Photo credits: John Chambers, Jr (top) and Brandon Bartoszek (bottom)

ratings were also roughly balanced between the old and new building sets, such as the geographic location and size of the buildings, quality of the image, presence of people and cars, etc. Sample photographs of new and old buildings used in the study are presented in Images 1-4.

Survey Administration

The survey was administered in June of 2014 to 200 U.S. adults on Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk), an online crowdsourcing platform which academic researchers have begun using in recent years to conduct surveys.⁴ MTurk users were not informed about the nature of the study as one specifically about historic preservation; instead they were simply invited to complete a survey about architecture.

The participant sample was stratified by age and gender to ensure adequate proportions of these populations were represented in the study.⁵ Despite age stratification, due to the limited number of older adults on mTurk, the participant sample skewed younger than the general population with most participants over the age of 55 being between 55 and 65 years old and not older. Further, the proportion of participants who were white was slightly higher than the general population. Geographic, educational, and political diversity, however, was good.

The study began with participants viewing a randomly ordered series of 50 color photographs of new and old buildings and rating their preference for each building on a seven-point scale. Attitudinal, preservation-related engagement, and demographic items followed. The average completion time was approximately 12 minutes and respondents were compensated \$1.00, which was in line with the market rate for research participation on mTurk at the time. Responses from participants who failed an attention check ($n=10$), completed the study more than once ($n=1$), or attempted the study more than once ($n=6$) were excluded from the final dataset, and these participants were replaced with new respondents to obtain a total of 200 completed surveys.

Data Analysis

Mean and frequency analyses, proportion tests, and regression models were the primary statistical methods used to analyze the study's data. Where appropriate, the significance level of 0.05 was used throughout the analysis to determine statistical significance.

⁴ Since it is a relatively new platform for conducting academic research, it is important to note that researchers have investigated the reliability and validity of using Mechanical Turk users as research participants and the results of these studies have generally been favorable (E.g., Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis, 2010; Ipeirotis, 2010; Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). For example, researchers have found that mTurk users are, on average, as representative of the U.S. population as other online sampling platforms and the results of studies administered on mTurk closely replicate the results of the same study administered on other online platforms, in person, or via traditional student samples.

⁵ The sample was stratified according to 2010 U.S. Census figures.

Main Findings

Preferences for Old and New Buildings	
<i>People prefer old buildings over new.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, respondents rated the appearance of old buildings 0.77 points higher than new buildings. 75% of respondents rated the appearance of old buildings higher, on average, than the appearance of new buildings. 9 of the 10 most preferred buildings in the study were old buildings.
<i>But not all old buildings are equal.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Though, on average, respondents preferred old buildings over new buildings, old buildings constructed after World War II were among the least preferred buildings in the study.
Attitudes about Historic Places and Preservation ⁶	
<i>Historic places and preservation are important to people.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 88% of respondents believe that historic places should be treated as community assets. 83% of respondents indicated that historic preservation is somewhat to very important.
<i>Preservation is important to people even in comparison to other community services.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respondents rated historic preservation as one of the three most important ancillary services that communities provide their citizens.⁷
<i>People believe that preservation should extend beyond saving buildings.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 87% of respondents somewhat to strongly agreed that preserving historic landscapes is as important as preserving historic buildings.
<i>People see the relationship between preservation and sustainability.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 82% of respondents think the preservation or re-use of historic buildings is environmentally friendly.
<i>Preservationists are not alone in feeling the loss of historic resources.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 73% of respondents indicated that they have been saddened by the demolition of an historic resource.
<i>People generally believe that we can do more.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 64% of respondents believe that too little is done to protect historic resources in the United States.
<i>People do not view preservation as a hindrance to economic development.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15% of respondents believe that historic preservation gets in the way of economic development.
<i>People are supportive of preservation-related regulation.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Just 18% of respondents believe that owners of historic buildings should be able to demolish their building without any kind of legal restrictions, and 84% believe that local governments should have the ability to prevent the demolition of historic places.
<i>A majority of people are supportive of public funding for preservation, but there is much less agreement in this area than in other areas.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 57% of respondents somewhat to strongly agreed with the statement: tax payer dollars should be used to help preserve privately owned historic places because this activity benefits the public.

⁶ The reported proportions are the percent of respondents who somewhat to strongly agreed with each item.

⁷ This item was replicated from Daniel Levi's 2005 study. Whereas Levi identified preservation as the second most important service in his study, in the current study it is was third behind 1) economic development and 2) street trees / public landscaping, and ahead of 4) recreational programs, 5) architectural review for the aesthetics of new construction, 6) cultural events, 7) public art, and 8) tourism promotion.

Preservation-Related Engagement	
<i>The majority of people have done something preservation related in the last year, but for most, this meant visiting an historic site. A smaller number of people are engaged in preservation in other ways.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 79% of respondents participated in one or more preservation-related activity in the last year. • 72% of respondents visited an historic site in the last year. • 41% did something preservation related in the last year in addition to / other than visiting an historic site.
<i>Though people are generally supportive of historic preservation, these beliefs typically do not translate into significant levels of engagement.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 13% of respondents reported participating in three or more preservation-related activities in the last year.
<i>Aside from visiting an historic site, people are most likely to engage in tasks that are relatively simple to do and require few resources.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the last year, 23% of respondents "liked" or "shared" a post on social media related to the preservation of an historic place and 12% followed an historic preservation organization on social media. • 15% signed a petition for the preservation of an historic place in the last year. • A small proportion of respondents engaged in more time consuming / resource intensive activities in the last year, including: contacting a public official regarding a preservation issue (4%), advocating at a public hearing (3%), paying for a membership to a preservation organization (3%), volunteering for a preservation organization (2%), or nominating a site for historic designation (1%).
<i>A number of people would support preservation efforts locally if they had the time.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% of respondents indicated they would like to be involved in preservation in their community but do not have the time.
<i>Others would get involved, but we haven't connected with them yet.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37% of respondents indicated they would like to support preservation efforts locally, but they do not know how to get involved.

Demographic Trends	
<i>With minimal demographic trends identified in participants' preferences, attitudes, and levels of engagement, preservation appears to appeal to a broad demographic. Some exceptions include:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older respondents preferred old buildings more than younger participants.⁸ • Women preferred old buildings more than men.⁹ • Politically conservative respondents preferred old buildings more than those who identified as liberal, however, conservatives were generally less supportive of preservation than liberals.¹⁰ • Respondents from urban areas were more likely to engage in preservation-related activities than those from rural areas.¹¹

⁸ The estimated mean difference between older and younger respondents' preferences for old buildings (in comparison to new buildings) was 0.57 with a p-value of 0.0029.

⁹ The estimated mean difference between women's and men's preferences for old buildings (in comparison to new buildings) was 0.35 with a p-value of 0.0229.

¹⁰ The estimated mean difference between conservative and liberal respondents' preferences for old buildings (in comparison to new buildings) was 0.39 with a p-value of 0.0445. The estimated mean difference between conservative and liberal respondents' attitudes about preservation was -0.37 with a p-value of 0.0389.

¹¹ Respondents who lived in urban areas participated in 0.41 more preservation activities on average than those who lived in rural areas (p-value = 0.0314).

Discussion

The results of the current study support the findings of previous researchers who have identified that, on average, people prefer old buildings over new (e.g., Herzog, Kaplan, and Kaplan, 1982; Frewald, 1989; Herzog and Gale, 1996; Herzog and Shier, 2000; Levi, 2005) and the results further support the theory that people generally have positive attitudes about historic preservation in the United States. The findings indicate, though, that these preferences and attitudes do not commonly translate into significant levels of engagement in preservation-related activities. This does mean, however, that while there are a small number of individuals actively engaged in historic preservation, there is a much larger group of people who support their efforts. Additionally, although there are indications that demographic trends in preference, attitudes, and engagement exist, particularly in terms of age, gender, and political orientation, overall, preservation appears to appeal to a broad demographic.

We can begin to use the results from this study, coupled with the results of existing research, to support the field of historic preservation in the United States. Now, when asked, "Why preserve?" The answer could be, "Because 75% of people prefer the appearance of old buildings, on average, more than new, 88% believe that historic places should be treated as community assets, and 89% of people believe that with proper planning, both development and preservation goals can be achieved (State of Hawai'i Historic Preservation Division, 2012)." There is undeniable power and clarity in that response.

Beyond using the findings of the current study as a tool in advocacy, they can also be used to make informed decisions in policy, planning, and outreach. The results of the engagement items, for example, offer ample opportunity for strategic action. For instance, we know that 72% of people visited an historic site in the last year, which is a substantial proportion of the population. We need to find ways to translate this casual interest in historic preservation into more involved action and developed beliefs. Since historic sites have the most access to the general public, private and public preservation agencies should collaborate with popular sites so that they too may have the attention of this audience. If we work together and meet people where they are and when they are engaged, rather than waiting for them to come to us, we will be more effective.

Given the complexity of the field of historic preservation and its role in the U.S. at the local, state, and national levels, the opportunities to use data in this way are endless; however, the findings from the current body of research only begin to offer insight and direction. In order to advance the field with data we must continue to promote the development and dissemination of empirical research.

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