

ABSTRACT

Title of Final Project: UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIALS AND
HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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A 2017 study of millennials conducted by American Express and the National Trust for Historic Preservation shows that 97% of millennials “feel it’s important to preserve and conserve buildings, architecture, neighborhoods, and communities.” As the preservation movement seeks to replace an aging and financially dwindling supporter base, leaders in the field must consider ways to expand and change what defines a “preservationist” and how to capitalize on millennials’ high value for preservation while responding to the unique conditions that shape this generation. This project provides strategies for preservation professionals to engage millennials and make the preservation movement more inclusive and financially sustainable in the future.

UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIALS AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Historic preservation in the United States is at an inflection point. The 50th anniversary of the groundbreaking National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service were celebrated in 2016 with countless commemorations, reflections, and calls to action, many of which directed audiences to consider the future of preservation and what it means to be a preservationist in the 21st century. The National Trust for Historic Preservation and other leading preservation groups declared “preservation is for people” and looked to community-centered preservationists like Jane Jacobs as role models for where the preservation movement should proceed from here.¹ This project is an extension of that directive and examines critical benefits and challenges that come with professionalization of the preservation field as well as the strength of its origins as a social movement.²

A national study of millennials (people born approximately 1981-1996) conducted by American Express and the National Trust in 2017 shows that 97% of millennials “feel it’s important to preserve and conserve buildings, architecture, neighborhoods, and communities.” As the preservation movement seeks to replace an aging and financially dwindling supporter base, leaders in the field must consider ways to expand and change what characteristics define a

¹ “Preservation for People: A Vision for the Future,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, May 2017, <https://forum.savingplaces.org/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=57133684-4c32-4863-5965-96476f7b4dab&forceDialog=0>.

² Norman Tyler, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles, and Practice*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009.

preservationist and what strategies professionals can employ to capitalize on preservation-friendly millennial lifestyle preferences for the sustainability of their organizations and the field.³

This project addresses these core issues and provides a set of recommendations for professional organizations to consider in how they attract millennial supporters and staff. I chose to focus the scope of this project solely on the millennial generation for primarily two reasons. First and foremost, I am a millennial (b. 1989), so naturally, I have some self-interest in researching how my own generation is faring in my chosen professional field. Secondly, much emphasis has already been placed on the importance of engaging children in preservation, evident in the host of school programs generated by thousands of historic sites and museum across the country every year. While school programs are a critical engagement tool for many organizations, I found looking at millennial trends far more compelling simply for the fact that millennials are adults with purchasing power; there is money (and therefore greater significance and consequences) behind their actions and preferences. Adjacent generations (“Generation Z” immediately following millennials and “Generation X” preceding them) were initially considered for further research in this project but were ultimately excluded from focus for several reasons, namely that having three distinct generations broadened the scope of the project considerably and demanded more study than the time constraints of this project allowed. For more reading on Generation Z and historic preservation, I suggest the work of Katie Rispoli Keotamai and her organization, We Are the Next, based in Long Beach, California. More research on Generation X is desperately needed.

³ Nicholas Fandos, “Connections to a Cause: The Millennial Way of Charity,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/giving/connections-to-a-cause-the-millennial-way-of-charity.html>.

The remainder of this chapter outlines the methods and research areas of this project, which will be discussed in further detail in the ensuing chapters. The final chapter will include the set of recommendations developed over the course of the project.

Methods

Survey Analysis

The survey that was conducted in 2017 did not include a deep analysis of the data, aside from a brief summary of key findings publicly provided by the National Trust. Several organizations, including American Express, released pieces online that referenced the survey and its findings shortly after it was published but did not delve into *why* the survey may have yielded those results. In order to determine the motivations for millennial preferences expressed in the survey, further analysis was needed and is the main focus of this project.

This analysis includes background information on the design and structure of the survey as well as an examination of some of the demographic and cultural factors that may account for these results. A number of external studies, including several conducted by organizations such as the Brookings Institution and the Pew Research Center, are used to help anchor the survey results and provide additional context for the underlying causes of millennial preferences towards historic preservation.

Interviews

To complement the survey analysis, I conducted a series of interviews with preservation professionals who either are millennials or work closely with them. The interviews serve as a qualitative complement to the quantitative data provided in the survey and addressed some of the key research questions (discussed below) that were either left out of the survey or were only

summarily covered. Interviewees were asked to react to several key findings from the survey and estimate how these findings might impact their work in the future, as well as questions about historic preservation in general (such as how they define a “preservationist”).

Over the course of January and February 2019, I interviewed 20 people individually. The conversations were held mostly over the phone (largely due to the geographic dispersion of interviewees) but several were conducted in person when available or via email due to time constraints. I felt it was important to hear from a wide swath of the preservation community on important questions relating to the future of the preservation movement and young people, so I reached out to architects, real estate agents, planners, state historic preservation office staff, historic homeowners, museum directors, and more to contribute to this project. While the median age of interviewees skewed younger (most were within the defined range of the millennial generation), a concerted effort was made to achieve racial and geographic diversity that mirrored the makeup of the American millennial generation, as well as the professional diversity mentioned above. The interviews were each approximately 30 minutes in length (aside from the few that emailed written responses) and comprised of six open-ended questions and general discussion. The open discussion was particularly important, since each interviewee had a different area of expertise that I hoped to capture.

The interviews with preservation professionals were crucial in shaping the recommendations provided in this project. A full list of questions is included in Chapter 4 of this document for reference.

Case Study: Millennials and Housing

This report also includes a case study on millennials and housing. A closer examination of millennials and housing highlights how economic and cultural factors compound on one another and influence each other to create millennials' current socioeconomic conditions, and how preservation can play a role in both alleviating some of the housing challenges millennials face and positioning older buildings as attractive, sustainable housing options. Much has already been written on millennial housing preferences, including that they are purchasing homes later, renting longer, and not moving as frequently as previous generations. Several preservation organizations have already developed programs that help mitigate the challenges and seize the opportunities that come with these circumstances, including new financing tools, ownership programs, and hands-on training opportunities. Solutions have also been proposed from outside of the traditional preservation field, including Kate Wagner's piece in *Curbed* titled "We Need a New HGTV," which calls for re-thinking how preservation and renovation are positioned in the public eye and how these challenges are being met with on-the-ground efforts by city historic preservation officers, historic homeowners, and other local organizations reviewed in the case study.

Literature Analysis

In order to understand why millennials value historic preservation, more research was required to understand the cultural factors shaping the millennial generation. Books and articles on millennial policy preferences, socioeconomic statistics, and other critical information were consulted to better analyze and contextualize the survey data and provide the basis for several interview questions. Studies and other academic research projects related to the current and future state of historic preservation, millennial engagement, and communication styles were also

collected. A full list of the literature consulted can be found in later chapters and in the bibliography.

One of the primary benefits of choosing millennials for this study is that a wealth of data exists for this generation. The Pew Research Center is a foundational source of data for this project, with dozens of articles and analyses written on millennials, but hardly any on preceding generations like Generation X and baby boomers – unless they are being compared to millennials and Generation Z. More data on these groups would have been included if more comprehensive research existed.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide the survey analysis, interviews, and literature review and shaped the recommendations provided in the conclusion of this document.

1. How is the term “preservationist” defined by people who self-identify as one (and those who do not)?
2. Why might millennials (or others who value preservation) define or not define themselves this way?
3. What language is being used, by both professionals and the public, to discuss historic preservation? Is there a common vocabulary between these two groups?
4. Given these findings, should professional preservationists change how they define “preservationists”?
5. How do millennials’ demographic patterns and opportunities for social and geographic mobility affect how they value and/or connect to cultural heritage?

6. How does preservation's presentation in the media affect how it is perceived as a national movement? Does the media representation accurately reflect what is happening in historic preservation, both in professional organizations and at the grassroots level?
7. What engagement strategies should preservation professionals pursue to increase mission support, in light of these findings?

Hypothesis

The overall hypothesis for this project was that there would be a consensus from the professional preservation community regarding the definition of a "preservationist" and an expression of general optimism for the attitudes expressed by millennials who participated in the 2017 survey. As the interviews and other research demonstrate, there are clearly many interpretations of what being a "preservationist" means and what the implications for the survey are for historic preservation in the future.

Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

Why does studying millennials matter for historic preservation? For one, millennials are currently in a “sweet spot” – between ages 23 and 38, they represent possibly the first generation of Americans that will not acquire significantly more time and money for leisure or charitable activities as they grow older, impacting the reserves of volunteers and donors on which preservation organizations have grown dependent. The current breadth of this generation includes new college graduates to families with young children, meaning millennials cannot be approached as a monolith; organizations should employ a variety of engagement tactics and programs to connect with these individuals. Even now, preservation organizations are finding that traditional methods of engagement (historic house tours, annual giving, etc.) are not bringing in younger audiences at the same rate as older generations when they were of comparable age. While numerous studies have been conducted on the importance of connecting children and youth with history and historic preservation from an early age, professional preservationists need to understand what is happening with young adults to better prepare for change ahead.

A significant portion of the current body of historic preservation research focuses on engagement of young children and young adults, general preferences and affinities Americans have for historic places, and the charitable activities of older Americans. However, very little data exists for younger adults. In 2017, American Express and the National Trust for Historic Preservation hired Edge Research to conduct a national survey of millennials to determine how (or if) they value historic preservation. While the development and results of this survey will be explored further in Chapter 3, the survey itself demonstrates that data exists for studying millennials in ways that we simply do not yet have available (but desperately need) for other groups.

The most succinct and convenient definition of millennials is provided by the Pew Research Center, which determines a millennial to be “anyone born between 1981 and 1996.”⁴ Of course, there are many factors that contribute to what defines a generation beyond a simple timeframe. In the case of millennials, demographic composition, economics, and educational achievement have shaped their generation in ways that set them apart from their predecessors and the life-cycle effect. Millennials are, so far, the best-educated, largest, and most diverse generation ever seen in American history; simultaneously, they face significant economic and environmental circumstances impacting both their present and future and uniquely setting them apart from the rest of American society.⁵

Millennials comprise the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the history of the United States. In just 50 years, the percentage of white non-Hispanic people has shrunk from 88.6% of the population in the country in 1960 to just 72.4% in 2010.⁶ During this same timeframe, the population of Latinx and Hispanic people in the United States soared from just 4% in 1960 to more than 16% in 2010, more than quadrupling in size, primarily thanks to a surge in immigration from Central and South American countries in the late 20th century. African American and Asian American populations also increased during this time, creating a significantly more diverse generation within just a few decades.⁷ With these trends anticipated to

⁴ Michael Dimock, “Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins,” Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

⁵ Richard Fry, Ruth Igielnik and Eileen Patten, “How Millennials today compare with their grandparents 50 years ago,” Pew Research Center, published March 16, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/16/how-millennials-compare-with-their-grandparents/>.

⁶ Stella M. Rouse and Ashley D. Ross, *The Politics of Millennials: Political Beliefs and Policy Preferences of America’s Most Diverse Generation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

continue at least through 2060, American millennials will spend their lives in the highest level of demographic plurality than any generation that came before them.⁸

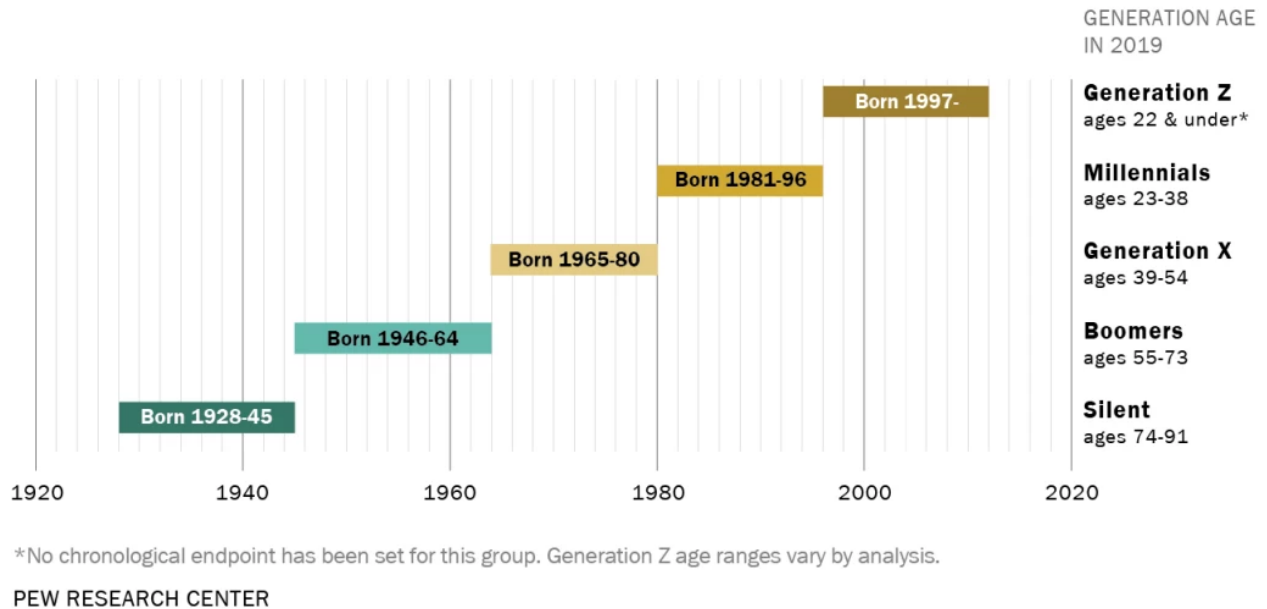


Figure 1: Pew Research Center chart showing generational spread in 2019.⁹

This highly diverse generational composition has also created a greater sense of cosmopolitanism, civic responsibility, and collectivist worldview shared by most millennials. This trend towards cosmopolitanism is likely driven by millennials’ near-constant interconnectedness. As the first generation to experience the internet in childhood, millennials have both experienced and helped shape the instantaneous communication and constant mobile connection now ubiquitous across the United States. With 92% of American millennials owning a smartphone, many researchers consider them to be the first generation of true “digital natives” and possibly even surpassing their Generation Z counterparts in adeptness for learning new

⁸ Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, “Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014-2060,” Current Population Reports, United States Census Bureau, published March 2015, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>.

⁹ “Millennials,” Pew Research Center, January 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/millennials/>.

technologies, as many millennials (particularly older millennials) came of age in the transition of analog to digital; technological adaptation and increasing connectivity has always been the norm for them.¹⁰ This ever-present access to information has provided many opportunities for most millennials, who experienced this digital environment during critical periods of social development, to “develop understanding and empathy of cultures, traditions, and ideas from around the world, and, perhaps, adopt certain aspects into...[their] personal outlooks and lifestyles,” according to millennial scholars Stella M. Rouse and Ashley D. Ross.¹¹ As many as one-third of millennials worldwide report that they are more likely to identify as “citizens of Earth” rather than citizens of a particular nation. In the United States, this cosmopolitan identity is preferred just behind “citizen of the United States” but above all other religious and similar group identities.¹² A sense of civic responsibility and collectivism are the natural partners to cosmopolitan beliefs, and millennials particularly express these ideals through social justice. American millennials are generally more supportive of issues such as immigration, rights for LGBTQ+ people, and climate crisis action than older Americans, especially as the first generation for whom climate change was always a reality instead of a theoretical exercise.¹³ Support for taking equitable action on issues like these demonstrates a more cohesive sentiment of “we’re all in this together” for millennials that older Americans seem to lack.¹⁴ This has particularly strong implications for preservation in terms of connecting preservation to larger sustainability causes and building a more inclusive professional field and supporter base.

¹⁰ Iliana Morton, “Engaging Millennials in the Historic House Museum,” Report, Harvard University, 2018,

https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/ilianamorton/files/muse_102-_iliana_morton-_final_paper-_copy.pdf.

¹¹ Rouse, *The Politics of Millennials*, 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ Rouse, 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Millennials are presently the largest generation in the United States, comprising over 75 million people as of January 2019.¹⁵ High immigration rates, contributing to the diversity figures referenced earlier, are also responsible for millennials surpassing the baby boomers as the largest generation in 2019. Demographers estimate that millennials make up 30% of today's voting population and about 20% of the working-age population.¹⁶ While millennials are gaining a larger share of the labor market, they also face significant challenges there, including underemployment and stagnated wages resulting from the Great Recession in the mid-2000s and its aftereffects when many millennials were first entering the workforce, meaning they did not benefit from the salary bump that baby boomers and many Generation X workers experienced in the late 20th century.¹⁷ Part of what makes wage stagnation and underemployment particularly challenging for millennials is that they hold more degrees (and more student loan debt), have worked more unpaid internships, and achieved more academic success than any previous generation. Decades of longer school hours, more standardized testing, and increased competition all around have led millennials to be incredibly productive workers, but job markets no longer reward workers simply for productivity. The deunionization of labor has meant that the stable jobs of preceding generations have become scarce; younger workers today are expected to produce more without the benefits, security, and income that older workers once received.¹⁸

These changes in labor practices and income also mean that millennials spend money differently than their predecessors. Fewer spare dollars to spend coupled with a high degree of

¹⁵ "Millennials," Pew Research Center.

¹⁶ William H. Frey, "The millennial generation: A demographic bridge to America's diverse future," Brookings Institution, January 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-jan_brookings-metro_millennials-a-demographic-bridge-to-americas-diverse-future.pdf.

¹⁷ Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: The Making of Millennials*, (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017), 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

educational achievement and institutional distrust means that millennials are savvy and passionate donors who want to connect with a specific project or cause, ensuring their hard-won dollars are going to something that will make an impact and complies with their values.¹⁹ This shift towards a more investment-like approach to financial support is critically important for preservation organizations, many of which rely on unrestricted donations for revenue, to recognize and means they will likely have to change their methods and messaging to catch the eye (and wallet) of millennials.

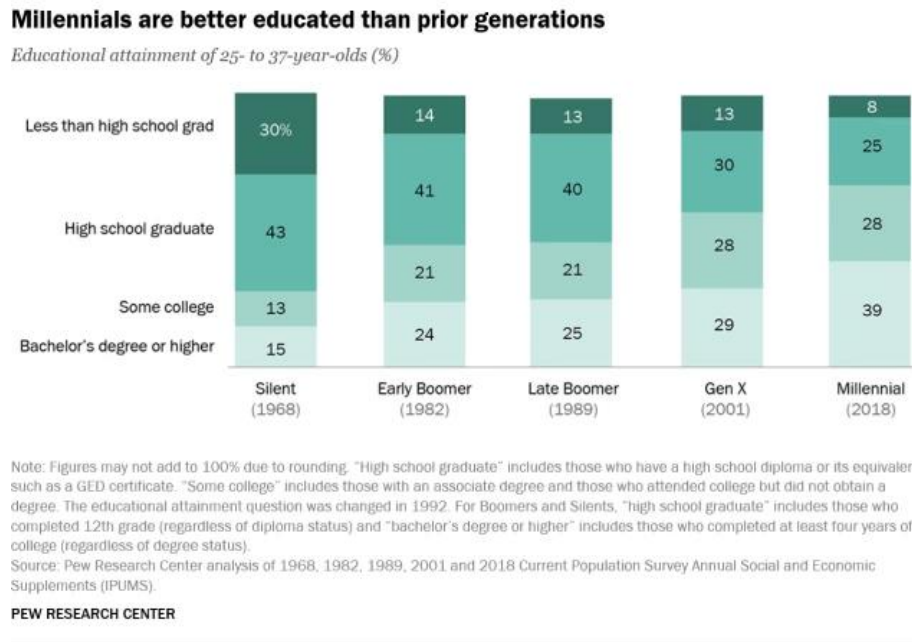


Figure 2: Chart showing millennials' high degree of educational achievement.

The impact of the 2008 economic crisis on millennials' financial futures should really not be underestimated. Many millennials were making their first forays into the workforce around this time and were quickly confronted with the reality that their degrees, internships, and other merits would not spare them from the wave of un- and underemployment that quickly spread

¹⁹ Fandos, "Connections to a Cause."

across the country. Many of these young people had also taken out significant student loans to fund their higher education, with total student loan debt totaling over \$1.5 trillion in 2019 and the average millennial carrying over \$30,000 in debt.²⁰ This major accumulation of debt is not without consequences. Studies show homeownership rates for people age 24-32 dropped from 45% to 36% between 2005 and 2014 alone, with only a 4% drop for the overall population. While the past two years have yielded a 2% uptick in homeownership for this age group, most of the first-time purchasers were a full decade older than their baby boomer parents, who were 25 years old, on average, when making their first home purchase.²¹ Should these economic trends continue as expected, millennials will likely be the first generation in American history to earn less income and have less long-term financial security than their parents.²²

Of course, this isn't to say that there aren't any millennials with money to spend. However, much of this project is focused on the majority of millennials who face challenging economic circumstances because they belong to more diverse audiences that preservation has often struggled to reach – younger adults, people of color, and people outside the top-tier economic groups.

²⁰ Yuki Noguchi, “Heavy Student Loan Debt Forces Millennials to Delay Buying Homes,” *National Public Radio*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/01/689660957/heavy-student-loan-debt-forces-many-millennials-to-delay-buying-homes>.

²¹ Federal Reserve, “Consumer & Community Context,” vol. 1, no. 1, January 2019, https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/consumer-community-context-201901.pdf?mod=article_inline.

²² Rouse, 47.

Earnings of young adults have only increased for the college-educated

Median annual earnings among full-time workers ages 25 to 37, in 2017 dollars

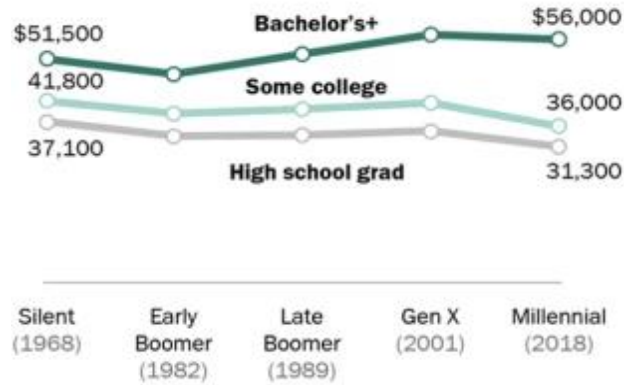


Figure 3: Earnings of millennials have not increased across the board, nor have they increased significantly over time, from the Pew Research Center.

The overall generation-defining characteristics of millennials, like their diversity and educational achievement, have serious implications for historic preservation. As the first generation to come of age with the internet and to be simultaneously conditioned for intense educational pressure and competition, millennials are extremely savvy consumers of both products and information. As one professional preservationist put it, “we don’t need to explain [the ideas behind] historic preservation to them; they already get it.” The collectivist worldview of millennials also plays a role here. The idea of preserving and reusing buildings and adapting older places to new uses is easily recognized as something that has universal benefit to both people and the environment and preservationists should emphasize the sustainability benefits of historic preservation to strengthen their appeal to millennials.

Millennials’ generational conditions have also resulted in a high degree of institutional mistrust, however. This is not specifically directed at preservation (or preservationists) but means that millennials often respond well to the philosophy or ethos of historic preservation but not

necessarily to its traditional methods and practice. This is especially significant given its history as an exclusive, restrictive movement practiced primarily by wealthy white people. As a group, most millennials are already skeptical of belonging to large, established institutions, including political parties and advocacy organizations, so the idea of membership or other formal ties lacks appeal. Coupled with a dearth of spending money due to diminishing incomes and high student loan debt, this means that millennials will be less inclined to participate in traditional donation programs than their predecessors, which has significant budgetary impacts for donor-funded preservation organizations. But despite this overall institutional detachment, millennials have proven to be very engaged and willing to participate in causes they believe in, and organizations must make these deeper connections to resonate with younger audiences to ensure they remain financially sustainable.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Analysis

Survey

In June 2017, the National Trust for Historic Preservation published the results of the online survey titled *Millennials and Historic Preservation: A Deep Dive Into Attitudes and Values*. Conducted by Edge Research with funding from American Express, the survey aimed to explore how millennials connect with historic preservation.²³

There was a strong interest from both American Express and the National Trust for examining millennial behaviors with regards to historic preservation. The National Trust, the only national nonprofit organization dedicated to historic preservation in the United States, has been challenged by a dwindling membership fundraising model and an aging donor base, a common struggle for many nonprofits and especially those focused on historic preservation and similar causes. For American Express, which develops place-based consumer programs such as *Shop Small*, understanding how millennials spend money in historic places is pertinent to their financial interests.²⁴ The two organizations hired Washington, DC-based firm Edge Research to develop and distribute the online survey from February 7-15, 2017.

In total, 636 people completed the survey. Per Edge Research's guidelines, the survey sample was balanced to be representative of American millennials with regards to race, gender, age, geography, and other key demographic factors. The average response time was approximately 10 minutes to complete the survey.²⁵

²³ American Express & National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Millennials and Historic Preservation: A Deep Dive Into Attitudes and Values," June 2017, <https://nthp-savingplaces.s3.amazonaws.com/2017/06/27/09/02/25/407/Millennial%20Research%20Report.pdf>.

²⁴ American Express, "About Shop Small," accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/shop-small/>.

²⁵ American Express & National Trust, "Millennials and Historic Preservation."

The survey results were analyzed by Edge Research and published in a public report to highlight major trends and themes. The headline and most startling statistic was the fact that 97% of survey respondents felt “it’s important to preserve, conserve, and protect buildings, architecture, neighborhoods, and communities.”²⁶ Other major findings included:

- 95% of surveyed millennials “feel the work that historic preservation organizations are doing is important”;
- 78% “enjoy travel experiences which explore the natural beauty or wonders of the area, such as to national or local parks”;
- 72% “enjoy dining at restaurants or shopping at markets that sell local and sustainable foods”; and,
- 71% “value authentically crafted products, e.g. local, handcrafted, unique items”;

The survey questions seemed primarily focused around activities that would generate positive economic benefits for cities and Main Streets. While it’s unclear if this was intentional or not, it is not surprising given the philanthropic interests of American Express and their role as a primary funder of this survey. It did not include questions regarding gentrification, displacement, or other negative factors that often are associated with historic preservation.²⁷

On the surface, these numbers are highly encouraging for the future of preservation, although it is difficult to put them in context without similar data for other generations. To date, surveys of baby boomers, Generation X, or other generations and their affinity for historic preservation have not been conducted by the National Trust or other organizations. While the results therefore cannot be directly compared to the historic preservation attitudes of other

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Donovan Rypkema, “Gentrification, Displacement, and Affordable Housing: Historic Preservation is the solution, not the problem,” Preservation Virginia, October 2018, https://preservationvirginia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Preservation-Virginia-2018_Don.pdf.

generations, therefore, they can be analyzed in the context of millennial generational demographic trends discussed in Chapter 2.

It is rather astounding to have 97% of a group of people agree on anything in 2019, but the fact that millennials value preserving and conserving old places is actually fairly unsurprising. The first generation to feel the effects of climate crisis during their childhood and early adulthood expresses a stronger pro-environmentalist attitude than generations preceding them and the notion of conserving rather than destroying fits well in with that ethos, whether that conservation is taking place in the built or natural environments.²⁸ The collectivist worldview of a majority of millennials means that they value shared experiences, ethics, and perspectives more than those of individuals.²⁹ That 95% of millennials view the work of preservation organizations favorably is also remarkable, since the majority of millennials profess a notable distrust of large institutions, largely stemming from major events and institutional failures of the 2000s like the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the still-diminishing social safety net.³⁰ Millennials showing such a strong, positive response to preservation organizations in spite of this trend underscores the value this generation place on preservation and its role in our society.

Economics is another factor that can help explain millennials' preferences for traveling, dining, and shopping in places that value preservation. Consistently overworked with less spending money, millennials want "one-stop shopping" to make the most of their limited recreation time and dollars. As the highest-educated generation in history and with the habit as digital natives to almost instantly locate and utilize information, they are able to seek out and prioritize specific locations, business practices, and people that match their cultural values and

²⁸ Rouse, 157.

²⁹ Rouse, 171.

³⁰ Rouse, 29.

ideals. This means that locations such as Charleston, South Carolina, recently voted the number-one travel destination in the United States and number-two in the world by *Travel + Leisure*, that have farm-to-table restaurants with sustainable agriculture practices, walkable neighborhoods, and lots of adaptively reused historic buildings, are increasingly attractive to a generation seeking prime leisure locations for their scarce resources.³¹

Interview Process

While the survey was useful in providing numerical data for millennial trends and preferences related to historic preservation, it was not the appropriate instrument to shed light on *why* these trends might be happening. Longer, more anecdotal investigations were necessary to provide context and give greater meaning to the quantitative data presented in the survey. To that end, a number of professional preservationists representing a wide range of professions (including architectural historians, state government employees, historic homeowners, and more) as well as other experiences, perspectives, and geographic locations were contacted to participate in a series of interviews. In total, 20 people participated in the interview process from January to March 2019.

Participants were contacted about the project via email and scheduled a time for a 30-minute interview over the telephone, if possible. The interviews were recorded and notes were taken by the interviewer electronically during each session. Two interviews were conducted via email due to time constraints. The list of participants was developed through outreach on the Forum Connect professional networking platform, LinkedIn, and through personal networks.

³¹ Dave Munday, “Charleston ranked #1 US city by Travel + Leisure readers for 6th year in a row,” *The Post and Courier*, July 10, 2018, https://www.postandcourier.com/business/charleston-ranked-no-us-city-by-travel-leisure-readers-for/article_f1ead056-83ac-11e8-9176-cbf9af4b2c16.html.

While not all participants were millennials, a conscious effort was made to seek out younger preservationists (or people who work to engage younger people in preservation) to share their views.

Six questions were posed to the interviewees and provided in advance upon request. The questions were developed to cover broad topics and establish baseline definitions such as “how do you define a preservationist?” as well as to expand on some of the specific survey data points. For example, the survey asked respondents about specific words and phrases they prefer, as shown in the chart below, so it was important to ask how professional preservationists are communicating with different audiences and compare the answers to the survey results.

		Total	Male	Female	18-24	25-29	30-36	White	Black	Latino
		n=631	299	322	229	194	208	459	95	137
Preserving History	Best describes	33%	34%	34%	32%	30%	38%	34%	37%	34%
	2nd choice	25%	24%	25%	26%	27%	22%	26%	24%	20%
Saving Places	Best describes	22%	27%	17%	20%	23%	23%	23%	15%	26%
	2nd choice	13%	11%	15%	12%	14%	13%	12%	12%	14%
Protecting Places that Matter	Best describes	20%	20%	21%	23%	24%	14%	19%	23%	19%
	2nd choice	24%	28%	20%	29%	19%	24%	24%	28%	27%
Historic Preservation	Best describes	16%	12%	20%	15%	16%	18%	16%	15%	15%
	2nd choice	19%	16%	22%	17%	19%	21%	20%	15%	15%
Conserving Communities	Best describes	8%	7%	9%	11%	6%	8%	8%	11%	7%
	2nd choice	19%	21%	18%	16%	21%	20%	18%	21%	24%

Figure 4: Chart from the National Trust’s 2017 survey comparing millennials’ preferences for words and phrases that best describe historic preservation. The “n=” indicates the number of people (out of the 631 total respondents) who fell into the category listed in the row above.

Asking open-ended questions that built on the survey results allowed for a greater level of interaction and led to specific follow-up questions, depending upon the response, in each

interview. Asking broad questions about what kind of words professional preservationists use to communicate with different audiences allows for many different responses, such as the language used to talk to students, recruit for boards, and write posts on social media, etc. The open-ended questions generated greater discussion and captured a much broader range of subjects than I could have developed on my own as the sole researcher.

Questions were not provided to interviewees prior to the interviews unless specifically requested in order to yield spontaneous responses to queries such as “how do you define a preservationist?” In this way, these terms were defined on-the-spot, without lengthy, complex written definitions. One of the most common anecdotal complaints about preservationists is that they frequently use “jargon” when talking about preservation, so a secondary purpose of this exercise was hearing preservationists speak extemporaneously and observing if jargon was used extensively. As the following interview analysis shows, the results are mixed: preservationists interviewed in this project occasionally used field-specific terms, but overwhelmingly realized the importance of adapting language to external audiences and frequently opted for colloquial terms over technical ones during the interviews.

The questions also aimed to address an overarching concern: is preservation truly something millennials “get,” and if, so, why? This question and its significance crystallized through the interview process. While I had initially been inspired to conduct interviews using six questions to restrict the focus on gaining deeper meaning from the survey data, the conversations quickly shed light on this larger issue. While millennials expressed an enthusiasm for preservation in many of their lifestyle choices, shown in both the survey and the interviews, why aren’t they participating in historic preservation in the same way as earlier generations? The demographic analysis in Chapter 2 identifies a number of external factors that play a role in their

capacity to be involved, but the interviews highlighted specific issues within the field that may be causing millennials, supportive as they may be of preservation as a philosophy or a “way of living,” to feel isolated from the actual practice and from professional practitioners the field.

The following analysis of the six questions includes quotations and anecdotes from each interview that particularly relate to answering this overarching question. After concluding the interview portion of this research project, it became clear that millennials really do support and value historic preservation in their lives, but there are several key barriers in place that prevent them from participating fully in the movement. The “Recommendations for Further Research” section at the end of this chapter addresses some of these issues, as does Chapter 5 at the conclusion of this work.

Interview Analysis: Question-by-Question

The responses to each of the six interview questions are summarized below.

1. Do you identify as a preservationist, and if so, why?

Do you consider yourself a preservationist?

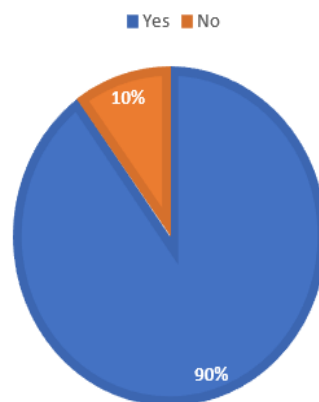


Figure 5: Graphic representation of interviewees who self-identified as preservationists.

Surprisingly, two respondents said that they did *not* identify as preservationists. As one interviewee who works as an architectural historian put it, “I don’t [define myself that way]...when asked what I do, I usually never use the word ‘preservation’ because people don’t often know what it means,” regardless of their generation. Several interviewees also commented on how experiencing preservation in their early lives and/or childhoods influenced their self-identification as preservationists as adults. One interviewee enthusiastically responded, “Yes! I think it’s in my blood,” and another explained, “I absolutely do. I’ve known that I wanted to be a professional preservationist since around 8th grade, when I found out that preservation was a career option that existed.” Others commented on the uniqueness of using the term “preservationist” as opposed to something more specific like “historic preservationist” or “preservation planner.” This was further discussed when interviewees were asked to define “preservationists” in the second question.

2. How do you define a "preservationist"?

Many interviewees defined “preservationists” broadly and spoke to the need for the field to have an “open arms” approach to who is considered a preservationist. One interviewee, who works at an arts-focused nonprofit organization that participates in preservation projects, stated that “a lot of people don’t understand what a preservationist is [so] we push it as a community-building piece.” Others from the technical preservation sector seconded this sentiment, with responses like “I think that anyone who has an interest in and an appreciation for historic buildings is a preservationist, whether they know it or not!” and that it applies to “Anyone, whether consciously or subconsciously, that appreciates old buildings.” One of the interviewees who did not consider themselves a preservationist said that the “idea of being a preservationist is that anyone can be a preservationist [but there is a] very distinct definition between professionals

(architects, developers) who can say they're preservationists but are not really unless they meet the Secretary [of the Interior's Historic Preservation Professional Qualification] Standards." While others commented that they recognized a distinction between someone who practiced preservation professionally and someone who believed in or engaged in preservation, that did not seem to restrict their *definition* of a preservationist. As one interviewee described it, "I mean, you don't have to be a sommelier to know or like wine."

Interviewee Sarah Marsom offered her own definition of "preservationist," which she previously published in an online zine and on her professional website:³²

historic preservationist

/hi'stôrnik/ /,prezər'vâSHənəst/

noun

An individual who believes in saving the physical or intangible elements of the past for the betterment of the future. There are three types of historic preservationists.

1. Passive preservationists do not intentionally support preservation, but they enjoy its benefits. For example, they prefer eating at a restaurant in a Main Street community rather than in a strip mall, but they have not articulated the underlying reason.
2. Active (or recreational) preservationists, on the other hand, intentionally support historic preservation. They may show their support by visiting historic sites or volunteering for local preservation events, but they are not paid for their efforts.
3. Professional preservationists are financially compensated for their work in historic preservation. This work can include construction, advocacy, marketing, architecture, heritage interpretation, surveying, etc. Professional preservationists are interwoven into all aspects of community building.

"Historic preservationists believe that old windows are part of the historic integrity of a structure and advocate to repair and retain them."

synonyms: building hugger, Tiny Janes, place savers, haus freund, building buddy
antonyms: Robert Moses, vinyl window salesperson, home wrecker

Figure 6: Capture of Sarah Marsom's tiered definition of "historic preservationist."

While this definition is instructive for professionals defining their preservation audiences, the lack of general awareness around the word "preservation" and what it means to people without professional training was cited as a leading cause for why many interviewees don't

³² Sarah Marsom, "Historic Preservationist," www.sarahmarsom.com.

necessarily use the term “preservationist” or describe themselves that way publicly. The use of language and techniques with different audiences was discussed extensively in the following question.

3. How do you talk about old places in your work? What kinds of words or techniques do you find most effective?

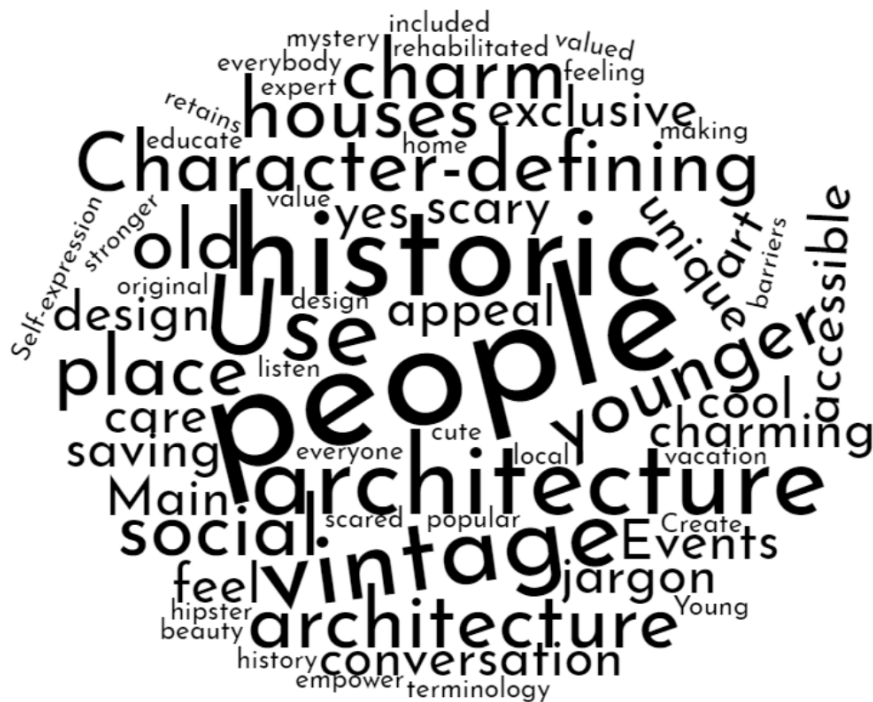


Figure 7: A word cloud showing the most commonly used words and phrases in answers to this question from the interviews. Top words and phrases included: people, historic, use, architecture, and vintage.

Interviewees were almost unanimous in their agreement that they discuss old places and preservation differently depending on the audience, with one interviewee answering with an emphatic “Oh God, YES” (capitalization added) when asked in a follow-up question if they use different words with different groups. The rationale provided was “when speaking with [the] general public, you can’t cloud the conversation with a bunch of jargon.” Others agreed,

explaining that “words like ‘preservation’ and ‘landmarking’ can be scary to people that don’t understand the technical pieces, so we try to talk about things that doesn’t necessarily bring those terms into the conversation.”

Many interviewees commented on using a variety of terms to capture different entry points to preservation. An interviewee who works at a historic cemetery said that their visitors “don’t care about historic architecture, they care about their family,” meaning their relatives interred at the cemetery. A real estate agent described using words like “charm, character, old-world appeal (even when it’s not)” during their interview to convey an apartment’s historic status to prospective buyers. However, another interviewee, an architectural historian, issued a word of caution against using words like “vintage,” instead preferring “character-defining” or “historic,” since “[words like vintage] can kind of denigrate what these places actually are” in terms of significance.

Having the linguistic fluency to discuss preservation in non-technical terms to meet audiences where they are was consistently referenced by many interviewees as an important skill set. For one community artist, that means “the way we communicate is different; for example, at cleanups, we still talk about the history piece but we’re creative [about it]. We still [talk] about history, but we don’t beat you over the head with it, since you’re probably here because you care about the environment. We just put it on the literature, and then let you move around the site and interact at your own comfort level.” Another summarized their views by saying they simply “don’t want to feel people are left out of the club.” And finally, another interviewee mentioned “people feel there’s a bit of a barrier there, [that they] don’t fit in the ‘box’ of being a preservationist because of the restraints and restrictions within the ways that they’re able to work [in preservation] and so it tends to be a kind of an insular world.” The same interviewee went on

to say that “whether we like it or not, this is how people are communicating. If you want millennials, you won’t get anywhere writing like a white paper.”

This linguistic fluency was also cited as instrumental to getting people, especially millennials, to realize they already *are* preservationists. Again, this key difference between millennials *philosophically* valuing historic preservation while not fully participating in the practice was raised. One interviewee recalled that “the beginning of the movement was more organic, about empowering the community,” and another said “what matters is how we feel. That kind of plain language is there for us to use...even our founding documents have it,” referencing the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 that created much of today’s regulatory preservation infrastructure. Another cited the need for directness, claiming “there’s a time and a place for flowery language, which is usually more at home in academic journals where you have to be specific, but for popular appeal we have to use something clearly defined and everyone feels included.”

One interviewee described borrowing language from the environmental sustainability movement, which is quite resonant with many millennials as discussed in Chapter 2. The interviewee stated that their neighborhood has “totally usable houses that are getting torn down just because they’re targeted by developers and people don’t know how to do better...we should be focused on reuse of the materials and building deconstruction as a part of preservation outreach.” Another interviewee described the power of social media as a medium to communicate about historic places, particularly with young people, sharing that “it’s important to use new media and speak the ways that [millennials] speak. It’s not necessarily assuming they’re going to show up to a community board meeting or understand a historical survey of a place.” The interviewee went on to say, “Look out the window in ‘hipster-land’...everyone is wearing

vintage clothes and using vintage filters on their Instagram, what the heck is preservation getting wrong about this? Young people LOVE one-of-a-kind things. And yet we're [preservation professionals] sitting here talking with them about windows?!"

4. Have you been involved with any professional preservation organizations? Do they impact your work?

This question had a wide range of answers. Some described a laundry list of professional memberships from prominent organizations like the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, Association for Preservation Technology, and the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions. Others mentioned serving on or working with local historic preservation commissions or historical societies. A few spoke directly about the involvement of young people participating in those institutions, with mixed reviews. One interviewee described their personal experience by saying they were "asked to be on so many [historic preservation organization] boards...just because I was young, and just that mere presence is not going to mean that young people are going to really be a part of something." Another interviewee who served on and even chaired their local board for several years mentioned that there was "no one else my age on the board; now there might be two or three people that are younger" and also cautioned that there are "many organizations where you have to be a donor to be on a board and that feels silly with high student loan debts and rents [to pay]." The interviewee also recognized that "nonprofits need donations, but I feel like saving seats [on a board] for younger generations gets you different neighborhood representation, more diversity." While there was no clear consensus on the value of professional historic preservation organizations engaging millennials in preservation, there were no recommendations to *stop* pushing for these organizations to include young people in their membership or leadership either. One interviewee described their early

career experience working in a city with long-established preservation groups, sharing that many of these organizations are “not even engaging the millennial generation because they need to make money. I have felt very unwelcome sometimes and maybe not seen as an asset...it makes me think that maybe they don’t want millennials to be involved.”

Some interviewees also discussed the importance of “young preservationists” groups, like the Rust Belt Preservation Coalition, recommending that “organizations need to be more thoughtful about how they integrate the young preservationists into their long-term planning and have it be more substantial than just a committee or seat on your board. How do you have them be part of your ethos?” Many of these young preservationist groups originated out of contention with established groups, with some splitting off due to conflicts over engagement strategies, lack of recognition and leadership opportunities, or disagreement over preservation principles altogether. Another interviewee discussed their leadership of a special young professionals council as part of membership in a statewide preservation organization and volunteering to be “involved with their pro bono easement monitoring [program],” a real-life example of millennials volunteering time instead of money. A lingering question remained regarding the future of young preservationist groups: when these members are no longer “young,” are they going to flock back to the traditional groups? What is their incentive for doing so? Several interviewees speculated that the differences were less about age and more about shifting priorities and expertise, but this will certainly be an issue to watch going forward.

Other volunteer-based programs mentioned included the National Trust’s HOPE Crew program, which empowers young people (and particularly young people of color) who may not have the financial means or other opportunities to learn about preservation, to learn critical

preservation trade skills at historic sites across the country.³³ The “hands-on preservation experience” model utilizes both community volunteers and paid trainees to assist in preservation projects. This model has been replicated by several other preservation groups and a key example will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

5. Let’s discuss a couple of key stats from the results of the survey regarding millennials and historic preservation that the National Trust conducted in 2017, such as: 97% of millennials feel it’s important to preserve and conserve buildings, architecture, neighborhoods, and communities. What does that mean to you and your work? What kind of potential do you see there?

The most common response to this question was to express gratitude that this survey exists at all. As one interviewee said, “in the digital age, it benefits us to create statistics to show people on paper that it’s not *just* about the emotion” [emphasis added]. Another added that “more people should be doing this” [meaning collecting data], with a third sharing “it means I have a new stat to cite when communities tell me they can’t find anyone to sit on their historic preservation commissions.” Many interviewees also noted that the results mirrored what they see in their own work, including: “This is a frequent topic of discussion in our house. The results of the survey align with what we see firsthand. Millennials come into our [historic] house and are awed by it. The scale, the craftsmanship etc. They are impressed. The disconnect, however, is in the way we’ve told millennials they should interact with historic spaces. The thought of going to a house museum to listen to an ancient tour guide drone on and on is not appealing. NOT EVEN TO US — and we are the most nerdy preservationists around! The entire industry needs a major shift to keep millennials engaged. The desire to experience these spaces is there, we just have to

³³ “HOPE Crew,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, accessed May 2019, <https://savingplaces.org/hope-crew#.XNhqEY5KhPY>.

do a better job about the experiences we present in these spaces” [emphasis theirs]. Another interviewee stated that even the questions in the survey were useful for demonstrating “*that’s* preservation, these places are there for you to flock to” [emphasis theirs] and that seeing all of the questions about locally made crafts, heritage travel, walkable cities, and historic sites all in one survey helps show the connections between all of these activities.

6. Anything else you think would be helpful to include or factor into this project and its end product?

As predicted, this was another question with wide-ranging answers. Almost every interviewee mentioned the need for an increased (or improved) social media presence for preservation more generally, and for preservation organizations specifically. One interviewee said “a lot of these organizations aren’t really using social media that well. They could become stronger if they could just get someone in there that could engage with people where they are, in an accessible way.” Another interviewee said, “that is the crux of social media: not just how many likes you get in one post, but the build-up of trust in posts over time and when you ask for something, [your audience] will follow.” The same interviewee asserted that their organization has “been able to effect great change in a lot of ways by taking a more casual approach.” Finally, another interviewee shared that “a place needs a social media platform. Whenever you hear about a place, you go to their Instagram account and say ‘looks beautiful, let’s go’...just having it there is essential.”

Other suggestions included:

- The need for continuing education for both preservation advocates and professionals - “it’s not just about masters degrees.”

- “It would be fun if they could just turn old houses into like a viral podcast – what sort of crap went down at the Biltmore? The underbelly of the Newport cottage scene? That takes a lot of work, a lot of time, a lot of money, but wow, talk about engagement!”
- “People view historic preservation as being a little bit frivolous, not a main issue that’s talked about with politicians, but because of the impact on the environment, it should have more of an emphasis and incentive for people.”
- “There is a financial piece here. If the historic tax credit could be revived, other programs like revolving funds could allow for lower-income folks or first-time buyers to be able to get into historic buildings, but you need the funding to help facilitate that; you don’t want [preservation] becoming something where financial burden makes it a challenge to get in there.”
- “There is a professional vocabulary and practice that’s still there - don’t lean on technology too much, because it will become antiquated more quickly.”
- “Public events - we’re almost coming to the end of ‘just do a historic tour.’ We’re better than that now.”
- “Get your disparate groups cross-listed in your email outreach – birders aren’t coming to art installations, art folks might only come once for an installation, but we can remind [them all] that they’re preservationists together.”
- “When we really sit back and think about all the amazing places that we lost and that we still have...we’re in the process of passing the torch, and we need to make sure we’ve bridged the gap early enough so that this generation takes [preservation practice] seriously. Emphasize that no one is pushing anyone out but [rather] picking up the torch. How do we get them to interact and work towards the same goals?”

- “Traditional and nontraditional [preservationists] should be under one umbrella. We have to figure out how to bridge that gap.”
- “I don’t know that a traditional membership model needs to be abandoned. I like the idea that anyone who wants to can give what they can afford. There are typically membership ‘levels’ that range from \$25 to \$10,000+. That being said, I think a lot of historic sites should revisit what membership includes. I am a member of countless preservation organizations and couldn’t point to a single ‘benefit’ of any of them, outside of perhaps discounted admission to the site itself, which isn’t much of a perk since I’m obviously familiar with the site if I’ve decided to become a member.”
- “I’ve been in my job about a year now and am seeing more and more younger folks in professional preservation positions, which I love! Typically they are engaged and excited about their jobs, which makes my job a lot easier. They make up for the lack of experience with that engagement. Of all the types of positions I’m seeing this in, the majority are Main Street positions, which makes sense to me. Millennials want to see the results of our hard work and Main Street jobs provide that opportunity, while connecting folks to their communities on a personal level.”
- “We hire a lot of new grads because frankly, our salaries are awful...we just did an agency-wide study about millennial retention. Basically, it said pay us more if you want us to stick around for a long time.”

While these reactions are varied, some of the common themes from these suggestions and comments align with trends discussed earlier in this paper. They also help form the basis for recommendations for further study.

Reflection of Interview Process

After the interviews were completed in March 2019, I completed a reflection on the interview process. This reflection was composed of short assessments of several topics, including:

- a) Were the six questions successful in providing a qualitative component to the National Trust 2017 survey?
- b) Did the interviewees represent a diverse array of perspectives and professions?
- c) What other questions might be asked to better capture these perspectives and additional information?

I concluded that the six questions succeeded in validating the survey results and providing a broader, deeper meaning to the data. Many anecdotes and examples were provided that concurred with the trends provided by the National Trust during the survey analysis and, more importantly, gave further insight into why these trends might be happening.

While the pool of interviewees represented a wide swath of professions associated with historic preservation, from State Historic Preservation Offices to house museums to real estate, it was certainly not complete. More participation from sectors like planning, developers, environmental conservation, and other public-facing professions would have been useful in eliciting information on how those fields are engaging with millennials and whether the survey results are meaningful within those fields as well. The slight bent towards interviewing public history professionals and individuals/organizations with a strong social media presence was directly related to the fact that most young people engage with historic places (consciously) through historic sites and museums and that digital engagement was identified as a critically important method of communication by millennials in other studies.

As for other questions to ask, more *time* to ask questions would first have to be allotted for the interviews. The 30 minutes set aside for each interview was always filled with discussion but I was diligent about keeping the sessions strictly to 30 minutes to accommodate busy schedules. The first change to the process would actually not be a modification to the questions at all but rather allowing more time for deeper discussions on these topics, particularly around the use of the term “preservationist,” and if interviewees considered themselves to be “professional preservationists.” As one interviewee described it, “preservation is weird this way, no professional conservationist describes them self that way...it’s always ‘I’m a biologist’ or ‘I’m an arborist’ so this notion of ‘professional preservationists’ is very unique.” The term “professional preservationist” continued to be used in this work, but it is intriguing to consider how we use the word “preservationist” and the connotations it brings to mind, especially as the field continues its attempt to become more inclusive of people who practice preservation, the kinds of places worthy of preservation, and techniques employed to preserve these places. Entire interviews could easily be conducted on that topic alone given the level of interest and success in using (or not using) these terms.

Recommendations for Further Research

More research is needed for professional preservationists to fully capitalize on millennials’ affinity for historic preservation. The National Trust’s 2017 survey and these interviews have yielded three primary areas of focus for further research: defining terms, using technology, and strengthening alignment with related causes. While more national surveys would be useful, it is important to consider that all three of these areas of focus are more specific at the local level. Organizations with a more local or regional focus should consider conducting

research within their targeted area for more specific results. Consideration of regional specifics will yield more detailed and useful results. Organizations that promote cultural heritage, heritage travel and tourism, conservation and the environment, local business, and other related areas could be considered as financial sponsors/partners for research projects that would be mutually beneficial for both audiences. Research that links preservation to sustainability efforts, climate change mitigation, and similar causes is critical to demonstrating the full breadth and impact of preservation to millennials and should be prioritized accordingly.

The use of technology is important to study not only in terms of how it can be used to promote historic preservation, but also in how we reach millennials to collect data. With 92% of American millennials owning a smartphone, researchers should continue studying the importance of social media and on which apps/sites millennials are spending their time. A February 2017 survey conducted by Harvard University graduate students determined that 75% of millennials were influenced by their personal networks online to determine which museums and cultural institutions to visit.³⁴ Targeted research in these digital spaces is necessary to gain a better understanding of how millennials respond to historic preservation and how social media can be best used to engage with them. While social media alone isn't the solution, its power is currently underutilized by the preservation field and merits further investigation.

With the consequences of climate change already negatively affecting everyday life, preservation would be well-served to position itself as part of the climate change solution. While preservation has made some headway on this front, with organizations like the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Urban Land Institute teaming up to publish studies on the environmental benefits of building reuse, more can be done to bring preservation to the forefront

³⁴ Morton, "Millennials."

of the climate change and sustainability conversation. How knowledgeable are people about preservation and where it fits into climate change solutions or helping the environment in general? Further study on what people know and where they are getting their information will help preservationists improve how they market and communicate their findings.

Chapter 4: Millennials and Housing: A Case Study

The state of millennial homeownership and its significance to this generation and the American economy has been the subject of much debate over the past few years, as millennials reach the peak age of homeownership of their baby boomer and Gen X predecessors. Housing makes a compelling case study for this project for several reasons. For one, the survey conducted by the National Trust and American Express in 2017 found that millennials prefer to live in walkable urban neighborhoods, “with greater urban amenities and job opportunities.”³⁵ These areas are often also more expensive, leading to higher costs of living and real estate. Another compelling reason is that preservationists have a real opportunity to position preservation as a solution for both the abundance of millennial renters looking to improve their properties and homeowners who are seeking affordable homes in desirable urban areas.

Background

Several factors are responsible for lower rates of millennial homeownership. The most critical factor is the number of millennials with high student loan debt, clocking in at over \$1.5 trillion in 2018, with the average millennial carrying around \$30,000 of personal debt.³⁶ High monthly payments (which cannot be defaulted on as discussed in Chapter 2) are a barrier to many millennials accruing enough wealth to save for a down payment, leading to high levels of renting and some millennials still living at home with parents or other family members. In 2016,

³⁵ Jung Hyun Choi, Jun Zu, and Laurie Goodman, “The state of millennial homeownership,” *Urban Wire: Housing and Housing Finance*, Urban Institute, published July 11, 2018, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/state-millennial-homeownership>.

³⁶ Yuki Noguchi, “Heavy Student Loan Debt Forces Many Millennials to Delay Buying Homes,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, published February 1, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/01/689660957/heavy-student-loan-debt-forces-many-millennials-to-delay-buying-homes>.

Pew Research reported that 15% of young adults ages 25-34 were still living with their parents, a 5% increase from their Gen X predecessors and almost twice as much as the 8% of late Silent generation/early baby boomers who lived at home in the same age bracket in 1964.³⁷ Millennials who have purchased homes on par with earlier generations have often received assistance from parents or other sources to fund their down payments. While this behavior is not specific to millennials, economists predict that this is buoying numbers of millennial homeownership at greater rates than previous generations practicing the same behavior.³⁸ This circumstance is most commonly observed in white families, as many families of color (particularly black and African American) are still constrained by the legacies of exclusionary housing practices like redlining that depressed homeownership rates throughout the 20th century and continues to affect communities of color today.³⁹

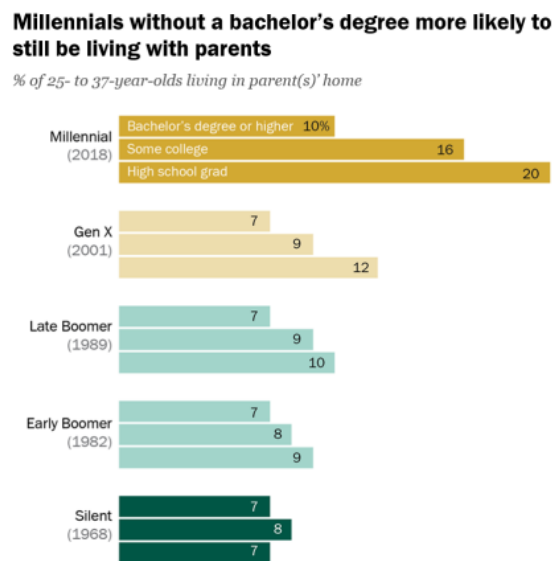


Figure 8: Chart comparing the rates of millennials living with their parents with previous generations at roughly the same age (25-37), from the Pew Research Center.

³⁷ Richard Fry, “It’s becoming more common for young adults to live at home – and for longer stretches,” Fact Tank, Pew Research Center, published May 5, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/05/its-becoming-more-common-for-young-adults-to-live-at-home-and-for-longer-stretches/>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Choi, “The state of millennial homeownership.”

Education further contributes to millennial homeownership trends, and not just in terms of student loans. As the most educated generation in American history (again, see Chapter 2), millennials are staying in school longer than the generations that came before. This is causing many millennials to delay marriage and higher-earning jobs, two factors that heavily influence homeownership rates, until their degrees are complete. Researchers estimate that this delay in other life milestones may be true for homeownership as well, meaning we may begin to see this trend swing upward as millennials get older. However, millennials that do not finish school and are burdened by heavy debt without the higher wages that reportedly follow a degree are not expected to follow this trend. With an estimated 40% of students who start college leaving without a degree within six years, that leaves a significant portion of the population in economic doubt.⁴⁰

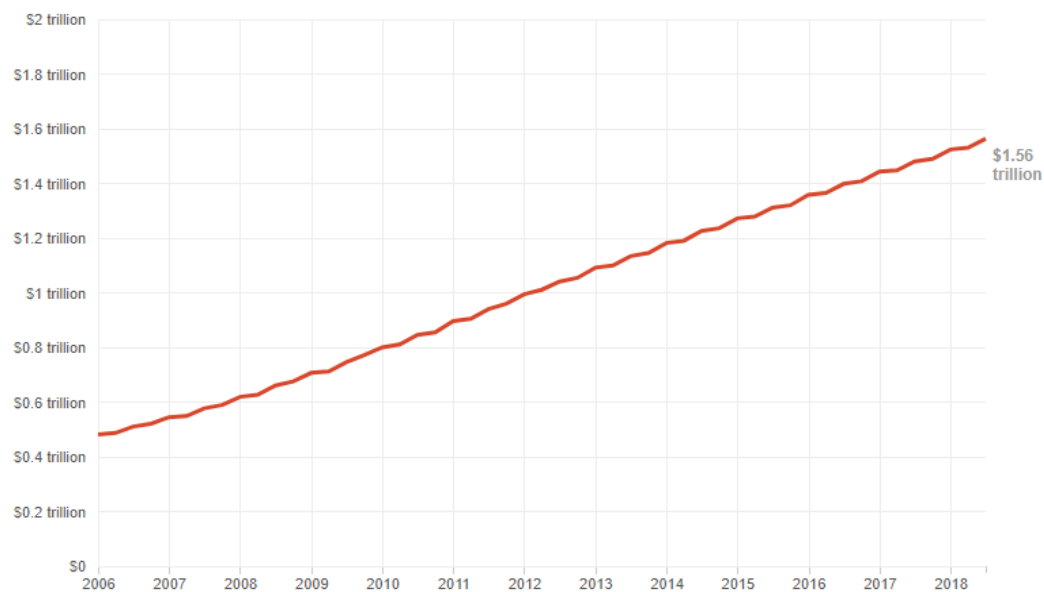


Figure 9: Graph showing dramatic increase in overall national student loan debt, 2006-2018.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Noguchi, “Heavy Student Loan Debt.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

For millennials not living with their families, delaying the purchase of a home means spending more years renting. Renting provides this frequently-mobile generation with more opportunities to find housing that meets their needs (often walkable, transit and amenity-oriented locations, as mentioned earlier) and allows them to follow whatever employment or other opportunity comes their way.⁴² Even poorer millennials without this mobility will spend many years as renters as well. The prevalence of renting for young people provides a crucial outreach opportunity for preservationists. With much of today's consumer audience (millennials included) heavily exposed to newly-built, "open concept" construction and material acquisition generally incompatible with apartment living, preservationists who promote smaller living and an emphasis on craftsmanship and authenticity will resonate deeply with a generation who largely shares these values, by choice or by circumstance. This chapter will highlight several examples of preservationists who are leveraging these opportunities and some of the challenges of operating in this space.

"We Need a New Kind of HGTV"

In 2018, architecture critic and founder of the blog, *McMansion Hell*, Kate Wagner authored a piece for the online outlet, *Curbed*, titled "We Need a New Kind of HGTV." Wagner's piece takes a critical look at the television network's extremely popular shows like *Fixer Upper*, which star Texan couple Chip and Joanna Gaines in a seemingly never-ending pattern of helping couples purchase "fixer uppers" (usually, modest midcentury ranches) and altering their character while tossing around catchy designer buzzwords like "shiplap" and

⁴² Derek Thompson, "Millennials: The Mobile and The Stuck," *The Atlantic*, published May 24, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/08/millennials-the-mobile-and-the-stuck/497255/>.

“rustic charm.”⁴³ While these buzzwords might sound a bit like some of the non-jargon phrases discussed in Chapter 3, Wagner argues that shows like these actively contribute to Americans’ ideas of consumerism and the sense that renovation is necessary for satisfactory homeownership. With homeownership currently out of reach for many millennials, these shows do not serve as “realistic” reality shows in any sense of the word. Wagner satirically encourages HGTV to consider more practical shows that would actually be useful to their (primarily younger and middle-aged) audiences:

Here’s an even simpler idea: instead of House Hunters, I’d like to see Reasonably Priced Apartment Hunters. I can picture it now: Colleen (24) is a graduate student in Global History at a private university, has to live on a puny stipend, and is \$60,000 in student loan debt. Her roommates are Nicole (23), who is currently job searching, and Jared (25), a line cook at a local bistro. They’re looking for a three-bedroom apartment close to public transit, and their rent budget is an absolute maximum of \$700 per person. Colleen wants an apartment with a dishwasher. Nicole has a cat, so the apartment must accept pets. Jared insists on a second bathroom. Can [they] find a compromise?

Other examples include “a relaunch of *Decorating Cents*, with its budget of a mere \$500, which would be the perfect fit for young adults and college students. If HGTV is wondering about corporate sponsorships for shows peddling to people looking to style on a budget, I’m sure Ikea would love to lend a hand,” and the directive to “forget tiny houses—teach me how to make a 400-square-foot studio a place I can actually invite friends to without them having to complete

⁴³ Kate Wagner, “We Need a New Kind of HGTV,” *Curbed*, published May 2018, <https://www.curbed.com/2018/5/30/17390302/hgtv-fixer-upper-renovation-shows-house-hunters>.

an obstacle course of tightly packed pieces of furniture. (Oh, I also can't paint anything, and everything has to be hung with Command strips.)”⁴⁴

While it's difficult to say if a show meeting the conditions Wagner describes would ever make the airwaves on HGTV, her pitch *does* offer ideas for scalable, mission-driven engagement strategies for preservationists seeking to engage younger audiences and an opportunity for preservation to be leveraged as a reasonable solution to a societal problem. Many people, even those who support or work in historic preservation, often position preservation as a “secondary” cause, seen as a lesser-priority than solving world hunger or other societal ills. This is a chance for preservation to be *the* solution to a societal problem and it is one that preservationists should strongly consider addressing in their work. Wagner's pitches also touch on a key communications strategy for preservationists. Her jargon-free verbiage chock-full of references like “Command strips” and “tiny houses” is far more relatable and intuitive to younger audiences as an initial engagement strategy. Preservationists should consider how they might emulate Wagner's casual approach in communicating with new, younger audiences.

How Preservation Can Help

Preservation organizations and businesses across the country are returning to their roots of helping people maintain their historic properties, from offering trainings on restoring historic windows, to hiring appropriately skilled repair persons, to practicing incremental development in cities, to providing affordable housing in rehabilitated historic and older buildings through revolving funds. These kinds of outreach programs also usually involve partnerships with other organizations or businesses in the community, providing opportunities to connect with new

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

audiences through their networks and leverage resources for greater benefit. Social media also plays a key role in communicating and marketing these programs to their intended audiences.

One example is the Rehabber Club, an initiative of the city of San Antonio's Office of Historic Preservation. Formed in 2016, the Rehabber Club's mission is "to build and support a network of do-it-yourselfers, craftsmen, contractors, historic homeowners, realtors, and everyday citizens to revitalize San Antonio's historic buildings. We accomplish this through networking, training, certification, and plain ole encouragement."⁴⁵ The organization offers a number of programs primarily aimed at historic homeowners, including an annual Historic Homeowner Fair, workshops and certification courses, and the S.T.A.R. (Students Together Achieving Revitalization) Program. A combined effort of the Office of Historic Preservation, the University of Texas at San Antonio College of Architecture, San Antonio College, the Historic Preservation Association (HPA), and local contractors, the S.T.A.R Program provides complimentary "minor exterior home repairs and maintenance to homeowners within local historic districts" and "assist[ing] property owners with repairs to windows and screens, siding, and porches, as well as provide general yard maintenance and exterior painting."⁴⁶ Other community events include "Donuts & DIY," monthly workshops geared towards homeowners, Historic House Specialist certification programs, and "Power of Preservation" On the Rocks happy hours, which occur in conjunction with the city's First Friday community events and are designed to "engage young professionals and students to become the next generation of preservationists," although preservationists of all ages are welcome to join.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "What We Do," Rehabber Club, City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation, <https://www.sarehabberclub.com/what-we-do>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

While the program has been successful in engaging and connecting preservationists throughout the city and could serve as a model for other communities, renters are still being left out. What about workshops for renters to help them learn how to properly hang something on a plaster and lath wall? Or learning techniques for reversible cosmetic changes that won't damage character-defining features? Given the success and prevalence of the "historic homeowner" engagement model, organizations should consider adapting this to fit a younger, more rental-prone demographic. Social media, again, can play a key role here. With the popularity of the sustainable living and "tiny house" movements to reduce waste and environmental impacts amongst younger people, initiatives like these could have real traction. Advertising on Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and other visual platforms could be especially transformative. Instagram accounts like @cheapoldhouses and @thecraftsmanblog have attracted hundreds of thousands of preservation-minded followers by featuring preservation projects and techniques on their channels. Even if their followers cannot or do not wish to participate in person, the opportunity for professionals to show that preservation is a part of these housing solutions can be transformative. As one of the interviewees for this project stated, "It's a simple, easy way to reach a huge audience and they're all addicted to it – use it."

Challenges

While there are many opportunities for growth in this area, there are also challenges. Programs like these require investments of time, money, and expertise, and interestingly, it may be the expertise piece that presents the greatest challenge for preservation organizations in this case. One consequence of the broadening of the preservation field is that there are preservation organizations today that don't necessarily have any building conservation or materials experts on

staff. Rather, these organizations would have to fill the role of organizers and facilitators and understand *how* to contact the professionals who could actually provide these trainings.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

This project was developed to provide a practical overview of American millennials and how they engage with historic preservation. Through a deeper analysis of a survey of millennials conducted by the National Trust and American Express in 2017, a series of interviews with professional preservationists (many of them millennials themselves), and a case study examining how preservation can offer solutions for millennials and housing, the project determined multiple methods and levels of engagement that could be applied by preservation organizations of various size and programmatic scope.

Professional preservationists know that the preservation field is changing; the clarion call was sounded as recently as 2016 with the 50th anniversary commemorations of the NHPA. Millennials, and likely Generation Z, will be the generations to shape preservation to perhaps its greatest extent since the professionalization of the field in the 1960s. The generation-defining characteristics of millennials – their demographic diversity, their economic predicament, their use of technology, and their unifying cultural practices and beliefs – make them well-suited to value and practice preservation in their lives. Professional preservationists have a real opportunity to transform and truly embody inclusive, “big-tent” preservation and capitalize on millennials’ capacity and interests in preservation for the long-term sustainability and growth of the field.

The following recommendations serve as the culmination of this project and provide a starting point for future investigations. Chapter 3 includes suggestions for areas of further scholarly research, but the following recommendations are intended to serve as scalable, short-term ideas that could be tailored and implemented quickly for different preservation organizations.

A Toolkit for Understanding Millennials and Historic Preservation

1. Meet millennials where they are: social media.

Whether we like it or not, social media is how millennials connect with one another and with what they care about. Maintaining an active social media presence is essential for demonstrating the relevance of preservation. A February 2018 survey of millennials showed that 45% of millennials “were influenced to visit [house museums] by what historic house museums were posting on social media,” meaning that social media was responsible for attracting almost half of millennial visitors to those sites.⁴⁸ Beautiful images on Instagram are what get people to want to go and experience historic places (we can save the event postings for Facebook) and building an audience that finds your cause attractive is the first step in garnering buy-in that you can cash in later when you need fundraising or advocacy asks. Social media (and Instagram in particular) doesn’t have to always be used for an “ask.” Before you can ask, you need to build momentum so you can then “flip the switch” to crowdsource participation when needed after that brand trust and recognition has been established. Younger audiences are already active online and organizations should have a meaningful, substantial presence in order to connect with them.

2. Accommodating changes in visitation and fundraising to allow for individual experiences and varied (often lower) financial giving capacities.

The nature of visitation and fundraising are changing. Hour-long guided house tours are far less appealing to a generation of people who have already looked up your site or city on Wikipedia on the way over. For a generation short on time and money, visitation is more likely to take place in the form of unique special events and programs, or coupled with routine, “non-mission” visits like walking a dog or having a picnic. Tailoring your organization’s programming

⁴⁸ Morton, *Millennials*.

around this shift in preferences can help ensure relevancy with younger audiences and financial sustainability. Examining the new membership and subscription models that have become increasingly popular with millennials in other areas of public life – think Netflix and Uber – and how those can be applied to preservation organizations is also useful. Do you offer a programs-only membership package? What about an annual dog-walking pass? Thinking about other ways to monetize visitation and get people to your property in ways other than tours and membership fees will be necessary to get millennials' dollars.

Traditional fundraising methods are especially challenging for a generation expected to be the first in American history to fail to out-earn their parents. Because millennials are more guarded with their spending money, they require a higher level of certainty that their money is going where they feel it should. Crowdsourced, cause-based, and project-specific fundraising models like GoFundMe and Kickstarter are likely to become the norm, with these kinds of targeted, small-dollar amounts helping to close fundraising gaps. Organizations will likely have to look towards corporate or other large philanthropic donors to fill larger fundraising gaps if millennials' capacity for charitable giving maintains its current trajectory.



Figure 10 and 11: Two flyers at The Grove Museum in Tallahassee, Florida successfully implement some of the strategies described above, including: leveraging to align preservation with an allied cause (transportation), an “after hours” event, a note to help The Grove “go green” and take a picture of the flyer to share with their networks, and providing relevant hashtags and social media information.

3. “Preservation is cool,” but how (and where) you talk about it matters.

Preservation also doesn’t always need to be educational. It’s okay that not everyone who is a “preservationist” knows all of the “correct” terms for something. It’s fine if people come to an event at your site, have a good time, and learn nothing about it. They may connect in another way, or simply have a good time at the event and hopefully return for more of the same kind of events. They may eventually convert to your mission, or they may just remain engaged in peripheral activities without preservation being their main focus. Using common language – “old,” “beautiful,” “character” – as opposed to technical terms can be best way to communicate and build interest about preservation and historic places with these audiences.

As for defining a “preservationist,” it’s truly only professional preservationists who are having that conversation. No one outside of the field seems to be wringing their hands about who gets to be a preservationist and what it might mean, so perhaps we don’t have to dedicate as much time and energy to debating this moving forward. Current definitions, like Sarah Marsom’s mentioned in Chapter 4, are useful for an organization’s marketing and audience segmentation purposes, but defining who “gets” to be a preservationist is not a fruitful exercise.

4. Take advantage of the “service generation”.

Millennials are more likely to donate their time than their money. Board seats, leadership roles, volunteer programs, and other action-oriented opportunities are more likely to appeal to this generation. The challenging economic conditions reshaping fundraising are creating new opportunities for preservationists to position preservation as a solution to other societal problems. Creating programs that address millennials’ housing challenges and assist renters or

first-time home buyers like revolving funds, incremental development, and renter/steward training programs can be extremely lucrative for preservation organizations. Renter training programs in particular merit further experimentation, especially due to the high value millennials place on craftsmanship and authenticity and the impact these programs can have on renters. Many young renters in the United States are disproportionately economically disadvantaged and people of color, and these are two groups that are foundational for preservationists to engage with to build a truly inclusive and sustainable preservation movement. The popular resurgence of historic homeowner workshops can serve as a model for how these trainings might be designed, implemented, and monetized.

Millennials also bring perspectives, skill sets, and fresh vision that is increasingly valuable and different from older generations. Expertise beyond technical skills is often necessary to communicate to new audiences or bring different ideas to the table. Preservation organizations will need to invest in millennials to thrive, and not just by saving a board seat or two. One person does not make “diversity” and preservationists should seek ways to make deep, meaningful connections with younger people to ensure the sustainability of their organizations in new ways, particularly given the vitality of the separatist “young preservationists” movement.



Figure 12: A screenshot of an Instagram post from Historic Charleston Foundation's fundraising campaign for a preservation project at the Nathaniel Russell House. The foundation piloted a social-media based campaign to crowdfund \$5,000 from small-dollar donors to provide financial support for the project in 2019.

Final Thoughts

Where does this leave us? I would like to think that this project is simply the tip of the iceberg – as preservation grows more data-driven, sophisticated, and further embeds itself with other causes like environmentalism and social justice to broaden its scope and impact, we will hopefully see more targeted research projects to help position preservation as a solution to societal problems. One of the most inspiring findings in this project was seeing that in the right hands, preservation can be an engine of social change and there is a meaningful commitment from many of the millennial preservationists that I interviewed to ensure preservation is practiced in that way. Given the high value millennials expressed for historic preservation in the National Trust survey and echoed again by the preservationists interviewed in this project, I predict we will see a resurgence and evolution of preservation practice in the near future.

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