

Human Environment Conservation in 2066

An Interview

JEREMY C. WELLS

In preparing this essay, I wanted to create a window into the future of a practicing “historic preservation” professional in the year 2066. I have chosen to do this through an interview of “Jimena,” who I believe represents the future of our discipline.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about your profession and what you do?

Jimena: Yes. I work as a place conservation manager, where I help to conserve human environments. I protect the authenticity of place for the benefit of people and to improve human flourishing. Really, what I do is to work as a facilitator to help communities identify heritage places and then devise ways to protect the authenticity of these places. What I call myself is very important in my work because I need to build rapport with my community—we all think of ourselves as equals and try to understand and respect each other’s values, although this can be a lot harder than it sounds. In research over the past few decades, we’ve discovered that people who like old buildings, places, and landscapes don’t identify at all with the academic terms “historic,” “heritage,” or “conservation.” Instead, most people use words like “charming” and “quaint” to describe built heritage and landscapes. So, when meeting with the public, I often describe my work as helping communities to identify, protect, and utilize “charming” places and refer to myself as a “charm manager,” which I now understand is increasingly being used by the public to describe professionals like me. I think one of the first organized efforts to make this “charming”

connection was in Mexico back in the 2000s when they created their “Pueblos Magicos” marketing campaign for their heritage towns. You know, there’s more than a tangential connection between the words “charming” and “magical.”

Interviewer: So what do you need to know to do your job?

Jimena: Well, I need to know a little bit about what seems like almost everything, from materials conservation to social science research. A couple of decades ago, heritage conservation degree programs began mandating social science research methodologies in their curricula, a change from which I benefitted immensely when I was in my degree program. I often wonder how professionals before me did their work without understanding the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of the ways people value place. Even when my discipline was called “historic preservation,” it focused on valuing place in some way. How universities could produce graduates who had no firm understanding of how to assess people’s value of heritage places seems really odd to me, although it might explain why, before this change, there was a lot more hostility toward professionals who worked to conserve the historic environment. A professor from my graduate program referred to this as the “orthodox” versus “heterodox” heritage divide of the early twenty-first century. Apparently too many people were resistant to the idea that the primary beneficiary of conservation of the human environment should be people. The natural conclusion was that to do our work well, we needed to understand people better. Seems pretty simple to us nowadays, but it took decades for the change to happen.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit more about your work with your community.

Jimena: Sure. While I am employed by my city, technically I work for my municipality’s citizens. That’s actually the way my contract is worded—that my overall performance is directly assessed, in part, by the community members I work with. A few years back, my town changed from the old-fashioned design review process—you know the heritage commission thing—to an adaptive regulatory framework. Under this new system, I conduct participatory research with my community members—we like to call ourselves “coresearchers”—to

review and make suggested changes to properties that might negatively affect their authenticity. As opposed to the old system, the applicant simply becomes one of the coresearchers and participates in roundtable discussions and storytelling along with everyone else. It really equalizes the power dynamics that used to plague how we did things before. In the end, the group jointly agrees on how the property should be treated. While we were originally concerned that this new system would take more time, we've found that we're actually saving time because there is a lot less staff prep needed. I can tell you that I do not miss writing "staff reports" anymore! I also never liked our old "heritage list," which was not able to adequately accommodate changing community values. I never relished having to tell a member of the community why, for instance, the Smith House's entry on our register only listed its significance as being architectural even though we now know that it's far more important as the home of one of the most significant members of the marriage equality movement. Now we have a simple formula that dynamically assesses the heritage potential of a property, on a case-by-case basis, and all of these properties are then sent to my community group to work on. So no more static lists, because we now assume that the values people attribute to places in our community constantly change.

Interviewer: What's your reaction to those who claim that what used to be known as "historic preservation" has lost its way because nowadays it focuses too much on people?

Jimena: I have a one-word response: trust. I know that some professionals and academics think that we're focusing too much on people to the exclusion of the actual historic buildings and places that people value. The concern, of course, is that the material authenticity of these buildings and places is being compromised. But what we're finding is that by focusing on the intrinsic value of the historic environment, most people are actually conservationists at heart but don't think of themselves as such. There's a lot of good social science research out there on this topic, which I use a lot. It helps me to communicate using the language of most stakeholders—the use of the word "charming," for instance. In my work with communities, I'm finding that more of the actual fabric of buildings and places is being conserved than was

happening with our old heritage commission, but it's happening in a way that more holistically encompasses the cultural and natural environment. This is especially true with landscape elements that our old preservation ordinance and design guidelines pretty much ignored. So, my advice is to trust that most stakeholders will do the "right" thing. But this can only happen in an environment of respect and empowerment, which is why I really like the adaptive regulatory framework that my town has adopted, because it accomplishes all of these goals. When I look back at how my grandfather practiced preservation fifty years ago, it seems like he talked only to other historic preservationists, and it all seems so lonely. I couldn't imagine that world today.

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