Preserving Tangible Cultural Assets: A Framework for a New Dialog in Preservation

ERIC W. ALLISON and MARY ANN ALLISON

Perhaps catalytic questions can serve as one type of systemic "attractor" to focus the group's or the entire system's intention toward a general area of inquiry (Brown 2002, 18).

This paper reports on the emergence of a new type of historic preservation—the preservation of sites with *cultural significance.* The term *cultural significance* requires some definition. Almost all historic sites and buildings can be considered cultural. The Burra Charter defines cultural significance as having "aesthetic, historic, scientific, and social" aspects (Australia ICOMOS, 12). Using a narrower definition, this paper is concerned with those buildings or sites important for their association with ethnic cultures, marginalized peoples, or mainstream culture heretofore considered undistinguished, which are not generally preservable using current laws and methodology. The purpose of this paper is to begin a dialog, to raise questions rather than provide answers, and to suggest a methodology for addressing potential opportunities.

HOW DOES A CITY OR COUNTRY PRESERVE THE MEMORY OF ITS HERITAGE?

Throughout its more than 150-year history in the United States, historic preservation has been concerned primarily with sites of architectural and historical interest. Increasingly, over the last fifteen years, preservationists have been attending to and experimenting with conceptualizations of sites that are quite unlike those preserved in the past, often giving special attention to sites associated with minority and immigrant groups.

Even when there is agreement that a site of cultural significance should be saved, professionals and advocates often struggle with appropriate methods. Very different from preserving rowhouses or adapting a historic train station to new uses, the preservation of cultural resources often involves intangibles—for example, historical activities—tangentially related or even unrelated to the physical appearance or history of the structure or landscape.

Understanding how and when to preserve cultural sites of this type is essential for effective historic preservation in a global society. This new focus exists in the middle ground between two different conceptual frameworks, but fits comfortably in neither. At one end of the spectrum are the successful examples of preservation of intangible cultural resources in places such as Korea and Japan. At the other end lies conventional historic preservation as it has been practiced in much of the Western World, focusing on a historically and architecturally significant structure or place.

Existing preservation efforts came into being in response to the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. This new focus arises in response to the systemic social change taking place around the world as a result of the Information Revolution. Just as the tools of the Industrial Revolution needed to be enhanced, modified, or replaced, the tools of historic preservation must be enlarged to deal with this new reality.

New York City provides a useful case study for investigating these questions. It plays host to millions of travelers from around the world and has long been a destination for successive waves of immigrants. Successful cultural preservation will add to the "rootedness" (Fullilove 2005) of the city's inhabitants, their appreciation of what has gone before, and their

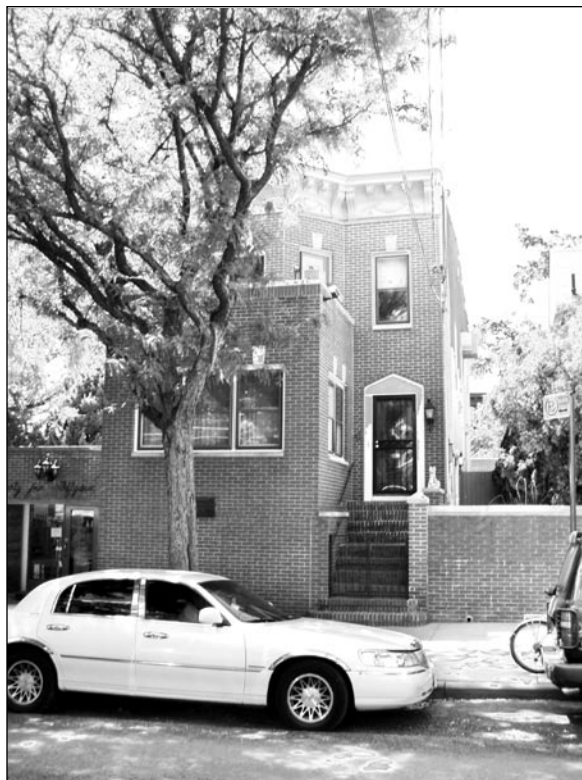Fig. 1. Charlie Parker House, built 1849, 151 Avenue B, New York, NY (all photographs by Eric Allison).

Fig. 2. Louis Armstrong House, built 1910, by Robert W. Johnson, 35-56 107th Street, Corona, Queens, NY.

understanding of the ways in which the past influences the present. It will affect the conceptualizations of the city and its history that those millions of visitors take home—and, often, of their own relationship to it.

Some of New York City's "places of significance" show the emerging realization that tangible cultural assets are in need of protection and highlight the problematic nature of attempting to preserve them using existing frameworks. The concept of wicked problems, which describes problems not susceptible to solution by ordinary methods, may illuminate this challenging concept; examples from UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage program are included.

CASE STUDY: RECOGNITION OF CULTURAL ASSETS IN NEW YORK CITY

For most of its one hundred years of existence, the New York City-based Municipal Art Society (MAS) has been a "good government" organization. Since the 1940s, it has included historic preservation in its mission statement. In the early 1990s, Ned Kaufman, its Associate Director of Issues, set up a committee on cultural and historic sites (Place Matters 2007; Reaven 2007). Among the other organizations interested in cultural preservation was City Lore, founded to "produce programs and publications that convey the richness of New York City's cultural heritage" (City Lore 2007). In 1997, City Lore joined with the MAS to produce a conference entitled History Happened Here. Response from conference attendees indicated that concern for the preservation of cultural sites was shared by other groups and individuals. As a result, MAS and City Lore formed Place Matters the following year. Place Matters has been conducting a census of significant cultural places in New York City since that time. To date, it has identified 580 Places That Matter in New York City (Place Matters 2006).

If these were all conventional sites of architectural or historical significance, the next step would be to secure the protections of landmark designation.

Section 3020 of New York City's charter allows the designation as historic landmarks of sites that have "a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, state, or nation" (Local Laws of the City of New York, 7). It imposes stringent review of applications for alteration or demolition of sites so designated. Signed into law in 1965, it has resulted in the designation of some 1,200 individual landmarks and more than 80 historic districts, encompassing approximately 23,000 buildings.

The great majority of these buildings have embodied architectural significance, and a smaller number are of purely historical merit. There have been few designations of sites of cultural significance without mainstream historical or architectural merit. Examples from this small group include the former residences of Charlie "Bird" Parker and Louis Armstrong (Figs. 1, 2). The vast majority of cultural sites are unprotected. The general objection to such designation has been the difficulty of regulating the sites.

Landmark regulation is generally concerned with the appearance of a building—its architectural detail. Cultural sites, however, unless associated with high culture (opera houses, theaters, museums) are often modest or nondescript—especially if they are associated with low-income groups. For instance, regulating the storefront of the Bed-Stuy Boxing Center based on preserving its architectural significance borders on the absurd (Fig. 3).

Faced with this difficulty, the Landmarks Preservation Commission has chosen to largely ignore cultural sites unless they have some architectural significance or at least provide an easy solution to the regulatory problem. The Louis Armstrong residence can be maintained in its current form as an example of a type of detached home common to the early twentieth century, with additions made over time. More problematic is the Charlie Parker Residence. Unlike Armstrong, who lived in his house from 1947 to his death in 1971, Parker lived at 151 Avenue B for only four years. He did not occupy the entire house, only the basement apartment. Unlike the Armstrong house, this much-altered 1849 Gothic Revival rowhouse is not a house museum.

The Alice Austin House Museum or Green-Wood Cemetery are easily protected using existing criteria (Figs. 4, 5). Others, such as the Lisanti Chapel and the New York Tenement Museum (Figs. 6, 7) have been protected by stretching current concepts and legislation. The Lisanti Chapel was built in 1905 by Francesco Lisanti, an Italian baker in the Bronx, as a private family chapel. It "today reveals much about the challenges turn-of-the-century Italian immigrants faced and the creative solutions they devised to meet their spiritual needs" (New York Folklore Society). It has, however, no special architectural merit, and no great historical events happened there. It is simply a small chapel built by immigrant masons. The New York Tenement Museum building is on Orchard Street in Manhattan and is identical to scores of other tenements built in the 1880s. Occupied by
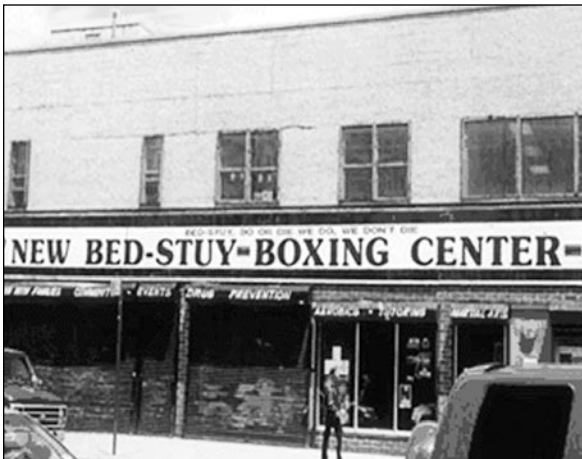
Fig. 3. Bed-Stuy Boxing Center, date unknown, 275 Marcus Garvey Boulevard, Brooklyn, NY.

immigrants for more than eighty years, it has been developed as a museum with its peeling paint and worn-out staircase intact. Period rooms have been reconstructed with the help of photographs and the memories of those who were children there. It has no special architectural significance or grand historical value; rather, its importance lies in what it represents of the cultural history of the United States and of New York City in particular.

Both these buildings are intact physical survivors of the past and can be regulated with a view to preserving their appearance. This leaves a substantial number of culturally significant sites that are more problematic, none of which are covered by existing preservation criteria.

CASE STUDY: THE DIFFICULTY OF DESIGNATING CULTURAL SITES IN NEW YORK CITY

Since the regulatory framework envisions the preservation of the physical building or site, even the most stringent design review of purely cultural sites will fail to address what is often most important: the ongoing activity associated with them.

Many of these sites are related to the immigrant experience in New York City. New York has been and continues to be the destination of immigrants. Some New York neighborhoods have been ethnic enclaves since the early nineteenth century, with a succession of immigrant groups replacing one another. How does a city preserve the memory of that heritage?

Bohemian Hall in Astoria, Queens, was founded by immigrants from central Europe (Figs. 8, 9). The hall itself is a modest building housing a small auditorium and offices. Next to it, a heavily altered storefront gives access to a walled courtyard. At one time, more than a thousand beer gardens dotted the immigrant neighborhoods of New York: German, Polish, Czech, Bohemian. They were restaurants, cultural centers, and catering halls, places to stop after work or to spend a family summer afternoon. Bohemian Hall is the last of these and still serves the descendents of those who first spent time there over a hundred years ago. Bohemian Hall could be landmarked as a physical object. But without the people using it, especially the ethnic group for which it was created, it would simply be a restaurant with an outdoor patio.

Even more evanescent is the Bed-Stuy Boxing Center. Unlike Bohemian Hall, the Boxing Center cannot even claim antiquity. It is twenty-seven years old and housed in a nondescript storefront in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, a historically Black neighborhood. Heavyweight champion Riddick Bowe trained at Bed-Stuy, as did Olympic gold-medal-winner Mark Breland and several Golden Globe finalists. It was the subject of an Academy Award-

Fig. 4. Alice Austin House ("Clear Comfort"), built 1690, 2 Hylan Boulevard, Staten Island, NY.

Fig. 5. Green-Wood Cemetery gates, built 1861 by Richard Upjohn, 500 25th Street, Brooklyn, NY.

Fig. 6. Lisanti Chapel, built 1905, 740 East 215th Street, Bronx, NY.

Fig. 7. Lower East Side Tenement Museum, built 1863, 97 Orchard Street, New York, NY.

nominated documentary *On the Ropes*. Its ten-year-old martial-arts program was founded by Ronald Duncan, who has coached celebrities such as Wesley Snipes for movie roles.

Boxing has historically been a route to fame and, occasionally, riches for immigrants and minorities in the United States. A glance at the names of professional boxers reflects successive waves of migration: Irish, Italian, Black, Hispanic, and now Russian. Bed Stuy is the latest in this long tradition of "up from the ghetto"; it uses sports to keep young people away from crime and drugs. Preservationists and public and cultural historians struggle with whether—and how—to preserve something like this, other than by noting it on a website. The cultural significance lies not in the building but in the center and its programs. The center's existence has become even more important in recent years as higher rents in Brooklyn have driven many other boxing clubs out of existence (Rahimi 2007).

Although it possesses a longer history, Casa Amadeo offers little that relates to traditional preservation (Fig. 10). It opened in 1927 in Harlem as Casa Hernandez and is thought to have been the first Puerto Rican music store in the continental United States. Rafael Hernandez, co-owner with his sister Victoria, is considered among the most important Puerto Rican composers. In 1941, the store was moved to its present location in the Bronx and later became Casa Amadeo. It is still an influential part of the Latin music scene. However, without the sale of Latin music, without the gatherings of local musicians, without the enthusiastic promotion of the music by successive owners, Casa Amadeo would be just another music store.

The recognition of Bohemian Hall, the Bed-Stuy Center, and Casa Amadeo is a feature of the Information Age; these challenging situations are not likely to be addressed effectively using processes and methods developed during the Industrial Age. Fortunately, two urban planning scholars identified and described this challenge in 1973.

Fig. 8. Bohemian Hall, built 1910-1919, 29-19 24th Avenue, Astoria, Queens, NY.

Fig. 9. Bohemian Hall, outdoor "Bar and Park."

Fig. 10. Casa Amadeo, date unknown, 786 Prospect Avenue, Bronx, NY.

USING WICKED PROBLEM THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK

Horst Rittel, Professor of the Science of Design at the University of California at Berkeley, and Melvin Webber, Professor of City Planning, also at Berkeley, published a paper titled "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," describing the challenge of developing public policy in the area of urban planning:

> The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail, because of the nature of these problems. They are "wicked" problems, whereas science has developed to deal with "tame" problems. Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in a pluralistic society there is nothing like the undisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about "optimal solutions" to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed first. Even worse, there are no "solutions" in the sense of definitive and objective answers (1973, 155).

Since the publication of this seminal paper, the concept of the wicked problem has been seen to be increasingly applicable to the Information Age. There is a growing body of work (e.g., Buckingham Shum 1997; Madron and Jopling 2003; Roberts 2001) that supports this distinction between tame and wicked problems and explores the parameters of wicked problems. While tame problems may be complicated and require considerable resources, they can be understood and have definable outcomes. On the other hand, wicked problems, as defined by Rittel, have quite different characteristics:

• There is no definitive statement of the problem because it is embedded in an evolving set of interlocking issues and constraints.
• You only begin to understand the problem when you have developed and tested an interim solution.

- There are many people who care about, or have something at stake in, how the problem is resolved. This makes the problem-solving process fundamentally social rather than technical.

- Because there is no objectively "right answer," what is important is that the stakeholders work out and accept whatever solution looks most promising.

- The constraints on the solution, such as limited resources and political ramifications, change over time. The constraints change—ultimately—because we live in a rapidly changing world. Operationally they change because many constraints are generated by the stakeholders, who come and go, change their minds, fail to communicate or otherwise change the rules by which the problem must be solved.

- Since there is no objective version of the problem, there is no definitive solution.

- The problem-solving process ends when you run out of time, money, energy or some other resource—not when some perfect solution emerges (in Madron and Jopling 2003, sec. 3).

The preservation of tangible cultural resources is a wicked problem. Wicked problems do not have "solutions" in the conventional sense, but they can be *addressed* in a continually evolving process that often produces widely satisfactory results. This process produces coevolutionary "solutions," which will require adaptation as circumstances—culture, society, and needs—change. This process of considering wicked problems offers a framework or context within which historic perseveration may address the issue of tangible cultural resources.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION OF INTANGIBLES

Because the field of historic preservation has attended to—indeed, *meant*—preservation of something physical, it is important to place the rise of the idea of *intangible cultural preservation*—the preservation of crafts, folkways, dance, etc.—in context with the rise of many similar mental constructs in the Western World.

In a mutually reinforcing feedback loop, globalization and the Information Revolution are triggering systemic changes in society. It is comparatively easy to see the consequences of globalization in the proliferation of shipped products and global supply chains, the instant media reports from around the world and the diffusion of music and film, and the flow of travel and immigration. While sometimes less obvious, it is equally important to distinguish and comprehend the changes in conceptual frameworks, which organize our understanding of the world. The shift from a strategic emphasis on the physical production of goods in agriculture and manufacturing to an emphasis on intangible products and assets such as business models, service, and ideas is well documented (Castells 2002; Friedman 2005; IBM 2006; Sassen 1999, 2002). In 2006, only 2% (USDA 2006) of the United States workforce engaged in farming, 21% (USDL 2006) worked in manufacturing, with the vast majority (77%) working in services, information, entertainment, and other intangible "products." It is not that we can live well without food, housing, and manufactured goods, but over the past half century there has been an increasing recognition of the usefulness and profitability of intangibles: information, entertainment, and services. Concomitant with this shift is an increased recognition of the competitive advantage to be gained from such intangibles as social capital (Buckingham and Coffman 1999; Lin 2002) and customer good will (Barlow, Maul and Edwardson 2000; Johnson and Anders 2000). This shift is taking place throughout society (Allison 2005).

Historic preservation in the Western World is no exception. Gradually, in many places, often with UNESCO serving as a focal point, a consensus arose that intangible elements and locations of culture (what we are terming cultural spaces) should be preserved. The questions soon became the same ones preservationists face with tangible cultural heritage: which elements and how? Because this was a wicked problem, arriving at some agreement took time. At the start, there was no consensus on the scope and nature of the problem, nor was there agreement about how to address it. The way to go forward with a wicked problem is to try *something*. If the process is effective,

learn from it and, where it seems appropriate, consider repeating some of the same elements and processes. As no two situations are identical, flexibility, adaptation, and learning from failures as well as successes are key elements. The participants and stakeholders, the definitions, and the means all change many times.

In 1997, UNESCO, sponsored by Morocco and Guinea, initiated a program to preserve *cultural spaces*–places where representatives such as traditional storytellers and artists practice their arts. These spaces were seen as centers of culture—containers and platforms for the performers and performances, which would keep alive valuable oral traditions. One such, in Morocco, was

> The extraordinarily animated Jamaa-El-Fna square, a historic market-place where jugglers, dancers, itinerant healers, and hlaiqui—reciters of tales and holy legends—vie for attention in the constant bustle…. More than just a square, Jamaa-El-Fna is a stage where the people of Marrakesh create their identity, says Mr. Goytisolo (UNESCO, 1997).

The terminology, elements to be protected, and the players continued to change. By 2005, a total of ninety Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity had been established (UNESCO b, n.d.). These included the nominee from Jordan, The Cultural Space of the Bedu in Petra and Wadi Rum and The Cultural Space of the Yaaral and Degal in Mali, recognizing that sometimes a large a physical area is necessary for the rituals and culture of a people to survive.

In 2006, this program was superseded by the now-adopted 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding Of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The consensus had moved far enough to adopt a common language and a common approach—and to establish definitions, an important step.

> The intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, know-ledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and,

in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

> For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development (UNESCO 2003 Definitions, Art. 2).

CASE STUDY: APPLYING THE WICKED PROBLEM FRAMEWORK TO NEW YORK CITY'S CULTURAL RESOURCES

Whether or not the UNESCO groups who participated in the sixty-year process resulting in a consensus that intangible cultural resources should be preserved consciously applied a wicked problem framework, they allowed such a problem to be addressed and opened a process for considering the preservation of tangible cultural resources.

- Recognize there is some common interest in the problem or issue. In New York City, this began with the History Happened Here conference and the subsequent compilation of the Places that Matter by Place Matters.
- Build tools for considering the issue and work toward consensus. Ten years after the History Happened Here conference, while there are increasing expressions of interest, there is no consensus among New York preservationists that tangible cultural resources are worth saving or that it is the business of historic preservation to do so. It is not that the work of Place Matters is unappreciated. There is

simply no framework that enables preservationists to see buildings such as Bohemian Hall in the same light as, for example, the Alice Austin House, a late-nineteenth century country home whose owner had been a photographer of extraordinary merit. Arriving at such a consensus requires new ways of thinking and language that can lead to community support. The international effort to save or at least memorialize intangible cultural treasures—which was stretched to include living people—took decades to develop.

Should there be consensus concerning the importance of preserving processes and memories, taking into account the nature of wicked problems, experimenting with several different approaches will help the field to better understand the issues. One next step would be to provide legal protection for the buildings. Again, consensus would have to be built (O'Donnell, 2004). Because stakeholder participation in reaching consensus is essential, no set of questions developed by one group should be simply adopted by another. Nevertheless, related experiences can facilitate points to be considered. The following questions discussed by 2004 UNESCO participants on intangible cultural heritage are instructive (O'Donnell 2004, 9).

- What legal measures are appropriate?
- Who are individual, group and collective holders?
- What are the domains of the intangible cultural heritage?
- What organization will be responsible for the system?
- What are the procedures for designation and recognition?
- What are the criteria for designation and recognition?
- What are the rights and obligations of individual and group holders?
- When should designation and recognition be annulled?

This last, annulment, is interesting and, perhaps, should be part of any regulatory scheme. Because the value of many intangible heritage sites depends on the participation of a particular community, if the community changes, the site may lose its meaning. UNESCO faces such a problem with the cultural space of the Yaaral and Degal. The Yaaral and Degal are festivals associated with seasonal river crossings by cattle herds being driven to different pasturelands:

> The huge attachment of the communities in the region to these festivities ensures their continuity. However, the Yaaral and the Degal are now weakened by recurring droughts affecting the pastureland and the herds and disrupting the pastoral calendar. Rural exodus of the young, causing a loss of knowledge and know-how associated with animal breeding and the organization of the festivals, and the often inappropriate intervention of the central authorities also have an effect on these cultural expressions (UNESCO b, n.d., 1).

If these festivals end, the cultural space would have no meaning other than as a location with a history.

A comparison arises with experiments communities associated with UNESCO have used in working to preserve intangible cultural heritage. For example, based on efforts to preserve the traditional practices associated with the Philippine Cordilleras, Phillips (summarized in O'Donnell 2004, 9) highlights contrasting considerations:

- As it Was—versus—As it is Becoming
- Set aside for conservation—versus—Run also with social/economic objectives
- Valued as wilderness—versus—Recognition of the cultural importance of wilderness
- Managed against local people—versus—Run with or by locals
- About Protection—Also Restoration and Rehabilitation
- Developed Separately—versus—Part of regional/national/international system

In addition to looking at experiments in related fields and conducting original experiments in this area, exploring the literature and looking at research and theory will increase understanding of this complex area. Preservationists might consider studying effective

dialog in business and conflict resolution (Issacs 1999), which describe how both physical and social containers affect the quality of the human interaction that occurs within them.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

There is more than simple normative merit in cultural historic preservation. Preserved districts and individual buildings or sites contribute to the way cities are seen by their citizens and visitors. Visible history generates tourist dollars and civic pride, and cultural landmarks of the type discussed here can and do contribute.

Fulton Mall in downtown Brooklyn is a low-to-mid-income shopping area. One of the authors, having been introduced at a conference to a colleague from Glasgow, Scotland, answered one of the typical get-to-know-you questions by saying she lived in Brooklyn. Surprisingly, this prompted a further question: Did she live near Fulton Mall? The colleague's teenage son had saved his money for a trip to the United States; his destination was not New York City, or Manhattan, or even Brooklyn. It was Fulton Mall. He was traveling there because, even in Scotland, he knew Fulton Mall as a center of hip-hop culture, a place to rub shoulders with the "real people," to find clothes and jewelry often unavailable elsewhere. For him, it was a pilgrimage to the source.

How—in fact, whether—to preserve this center of a culture with its social and economic contributions to the life of the city is a question with few answers other than the easy one: "Don't." "Don't" has many implications, especially for a field like historic preservation that has been fighting "Don't" since the beginning.

Asking powerful questions and gaining a consensus that a problem exists is a first step. Albert Einstein once said "if I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper questions, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes" (Einstein in Vogt, Brown and Issacs 2002, 1). Recognizing that preserving tangible cultural assets is a wicked problem gives access to the ways to address it, while showing us the futility of looking for one big solution.

As an example, return to Casa Amadeo, the Puerto Rican music store, What is the goal? One approach might be to encourage the local market while helping to develop a global market, as a significant number of people purchase collectable records online. Perhaps preservationists might inventory the music and find old pictures to document the store, publishing both online. There is a short history on the store's website (http://www.casaamadeo.com/index.htm), and Place Matters has supplemented this commercial site with photographs and history on its own website. But more could be done. Perhaps if the store's history is documented, even if the building is lost, technology can keep its memory intact. The building might hold a plaque containing an RFID chip that will communicate with your phone, displaying images, history, and playing samples of the music, or a pair of augmented reality glasses would allow you to take a virtual tour, or perhaps new solutions will emerge.

Although New York City has been used as a case study, the problem will affect how historic preservation defines itself on a broad canvas as the twenty-first century unfolds. The overarching question is whether historic preservation wishes to address this problem or if it is better left to the domains of cultural studies or public history—and if the choice is the latter, does preservation, as a field, risk becoming less relevant in the future?

ERIC W. ALLISON
Pratt Institute, New York, New York

Eric W. Allison, Ph.D. Urban Planning, Columbia University, M.S. City and Regional Planning, Pratt Institute, is academic coordinator and adjunct associate professor of Historic Preservation at Pratt Institute and a member of the American Association of Certified Planners. He was an American Planning Association representative in New York New Visions (the consortium of Architects, Planners, and engineering and design professionals) that sought to influence the design and rebuilding of the World Trade Center, as well as a member of the APA Downtown New York task force. Allison was the representative of the APA (a consulting party) in the World Trade Center Section 106 Review. He is the vice chair of the National Council for Preservation Education.

MARY ANN ALLISON
Hofstra University, Long Island, NY
Allison Group, Brooklyn, NY

Mary Ann Allison, Ph.D. Culture and Communications, New York Univeristy, M.B.A. Long Island University, is an assistant professor of Media Studies at Hofstra University and a principal of the Allison Group. Her approach combines rigorous academic research with community development and sixteen years experience as a Citibank vice president of emerging technology. She conducts research into the nature of community and social change and teaches Media Studies at Hofstra University. Allison is currently the Principal Investigator of a study of community revitalization for Hofstra's National Center for Suburban Studies.

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