



# THE FUTURE IS PRESENT

LEFT: EVIDENCING THE UNION OF CARS AND COMMERCE DURING THE URBAN RENEWAL ERA: A BANK NEAR DENVER BY ARCHITECT CHARLES DEATON.

a chat with preservation's new generation

Heather MacIntosh President, Preservation Action

Tomika Hughey Deputy Project Manager, Urban Planning, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority

In the last four decades, preservation has gone from a passion to a profession, and today looks to encompass the very flashpoints of '60s activism that sparked the rise of the movement—the remains of urban renewal. Now preservation *is* the establishment, with its own rules and regulations, institutions and infrastructure. With the fights fought and the laws passed, what's left? Here two young leaders, Heather MacIntosh and Tomika Hughey, offer an answer, with views on the field's future and what moves them as preservationists. Though they don't profess to speak for their cohorts, they do give a glimpse of the road ahead. *Interviewed by Catherine Lavoie Acting Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey and Jamie Jacobs Historian, Historic American Buildings Survey/National Historic Landmarks Program*

ALL PHOTOS DAVID ANDREWS/NPS EXCEPT AS NOTED

**RIGHT: ARAPAHOE ACRES, COLORADO, THE FIRST MODERNIST SUBDIVISION ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES, EMBRACES NATURE IN THE SPIRIT OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT.**

**“YOUNGER PEOPLE ARE VERY KEEN ON THE MODERN AESTHETIC. GROWING UP IN THE '80S, WHEN IT WAS IN OUR ROOMS AND DORMS, THE STUFF SEEMED KITSCHY AND FUN AND FUNKY. NOW WE'RE PROFESSIONALS, WE HAVE MONEY, BUT WE CARRY THE SAME AESTHETIC SENSE.”**

*Catherine: Do you think preservation is seen as lacking diversity, and if so, how can we change that?*

**TOMIKA:** Oh, yes, I agree. A lot of people in African American communities are doing preservation work, but they don't call it that. They call it community outreach, or let's save this building because it's important.

In urban planning, you want planners who understand the needs of the people you're planning for, and in preservation, the same is true. To get more people into preservation, you need to identify those who are doing things that are preservation-related, and ask them, "Can you be the champion?"

The academic institutions are important, too. As I watched slides in my classes, I'd be thinking, if I were Asian, why aren't the internment camps being represented? It goes to the idea that if you don't know about it, you don't talk about it. I don't blame anyone. It's just not part of the reality. To represent a heritage, you have to have people with that heritage in the preservation programs at the universities.

*Jamie: What's the best way of getting more minorities from academia into preservation?*

**TOMIKA:** Go where the black people are. Go where the Latin people are. Go to the complementary programs like history. Everybody's trying to be a historic district these days; sell preservation as a viable field.

At Florida State, where I got my masters, the chairman asked us how to recruit more African Americans. We said go to the historically black colleges. So they sent us to Howard, Florida A&M, and Alcorn State. Preservationists have to do that, too. At my first American Planning Association conference, the keynote speaker, Bette Midler, said something that resonates with me to this day. She said you don't toot your horn. You're important to our cities and our neighborhoods, but people don't know it. And it's the same with preservation.

*Catherine: Heather, what drew you to the field?*

**HEATHER:** I was going to be a professor of German art and architecture. I decided that wasn't a good thing for me—that I could only talk to about six people about what I was working on. I was an only child brought up by a single mom, and spending a lot of money on my education. It was important to talk to her about what I did, and with anyone for that matter. Preservation was a way to bring together my education in art and architectural history in a way that was community-building, that was inspiring.

People glow about preservation, they're really proud of what they accomplish. They get passionate when places are threatened. That's





**LEFT: THE RUINS OF THE BETHLEHEM STEEL WORKS, ONCE THE VORTEX OF A ROLLICKING BOOMTOWN, A WILD WEST OF THE EAST. WORKER HOUSING AND A CEMETERY RISE UP THE HILL AT THE TOP OF THE PHOTO, JUST OUT OF VIEW.**

**“THERE WAS A CONGRESSIONAL HEARING LAST YEAR ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF BROWNFIELD SITES, NOT IN DC, BUT IN PENNSYLVANIA—AT THE BETHLEHEM STEEL WORKS. THIS TREND WILL LIKELY CONTINUE, ESPECIALLY IN THE RUST BELT AND OTHER PLACES WHERE INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS ARE PART OF THE LOCAL IDENTITY.”**

something I wanted in my life. And I believe that preservation plays a key role in creating a civil society. I think people are nicer to each other if they have a sense that where they're walking has depth.

*Jamie: What's your take on perceptions of preservation?*

**HEATHER:** A lot depends on the place, the history, the people. In Seattle, where I spent six years, there's a legacy of activism, so many in their 20s and 30s are politically engaged. That translates not just into preservation, but into perceptions of what preservation can accomplish.

I've had conversations with people my age all around the country. Leadership is on their minds. We're seeing older leaders retire, and others move on. There's change afoot. Though we haven't laid it on the table as a group, we're definitely thinking about it. Not just the work to be done, but reshaping the public's view, rethinking our image.

*Jamie: What are the big ideas, the big pressures today?*

**TOMIKA:** Here in Washington, a lot of communities want to be historic districts, to block the McMansions. They're trying to use the designation as a NIMBY tool, without the architecture to support it.

In a rapidly developing area near Capitol Hill is an arena where the Beatles played and Malcolm X spoke. The residents are trying to keep it from being torn down. Yes, the Beatles were a pop culture phenomenon, and Malcolm X was important. But is the place really that significant? What's the best use? I could easily see 400 units of affordable housing or a nice retail store.

*Jamie: Community building and preservation are at odds?*

**HEATHER:** I think it's a case of trying to protect everything, compared with a big-picture approach thinking about smart growth and the community's best interest. The first way gives ammunition to the other side—the idea that preservationists are a bunch of reactionary kooks. Preservationists need to break out of the property rights issue when they can, because they will not win that fight.

*Jamie: Any other issues preservation needs to address?*

**HEATHER:** I'd really like to see a lot more sophistication on the web. If your website looks like something you did at home, how can you be taken seriously? How can you raise money? You might as well not have a site at all.

**TOMIKA:** You can be grassroots, but you don't have to look grassroots.

*Jamie: Who's got a good website in your opinion?*

**HEATHER:** The L.A. Conservancy has one of the best. And it has a spinoff site on midcentury modern with its own distinctive look. If you want a poster child for preservation advocacy, that's it.

*Jamie: What makes the site good?*

**HEATHER:** Strong graphic design. They put new information right on the home page—you get issues and events up front, so you know

immediately what the organization's about, without having to read a bland description. Image is a big part of that community, and the conservancy realizes its importance—they have Diane Keaton and Ben Stiller as advocates. The site has quite a bit of content, too. There are lots of layers, and it's updated frequently, not a cobweb.

*Jamie: Is the recent past getting bigger now?*

**HEATHER:** Yes, largely through mainstreaming in magazines like *Dwell*. Younger people are very keen on the modern aesthetic. Growing up in the '80s, when it was in our rooms and dorms, the stuff seemed kitschy and fun and funky. Now we're professionals, we have money, but we carry the same aesthetic sense. At least, that's the way it is for me.

*Jamie: So we're talking midcentury in terms of time. Do different types of buildings catch your eye these days?*

**HEATHER:** Preservationists, because we don't have the big money, buy places that others devalue. Like bungalows a decade ago, midcentury modern is now the thing. In Seattle, the Northwest version is probably as ubiquitous as craftsman. You have a view from many homes in Puget Sound; having a lot of window is beautiful. And there's something about the tech community and the identity of the place as progressive that fits well with the midcentury aesthetic. Los Angeles and areas around San Francisco feel somewhat the same.

*Jamie: What about the split-levels and faux colonials?*

**TOMIKA:** There's a nostalgia associated with them, too.

*Catherine: And the buildings of dying industries?*

**HEATHER:** White elephant structures provide some interesting opportunities. The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, in North Adams, is a vibrant art community in what was once the teenage pregnancy capital of the United States. Look at how Congress is responding. There was a congressional hearing last year



**ABOVE LEFT: CLOSE UP ON THE FURNACE COMPLEX AT BETHLEHEM STEEL, ONCE THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE IN THE WORKS. ABOVE RIGHT: A VACANT HULK LOOKS DOWN ON TRAFFIC FROM INSIDE THE FENCE ENCIRCLING THE RUINS.**

on the development of brownfield sites, not in DC, but in Pennsylvania—at the Bethlehem Steel Works. This trend will likely continue, especially in the Rust Belt and other places where industrial buildings are part of the local identity.

**Jamie:** *Let's talk about developers a bit. They're savvy these days, often coming to the table with preservation in mind. Do preservationists give up too much as a result?*

**HEATHER:** I think alliances with developers are going to help preservation get to the next level all around—with our image, our voice in Congress, the kinds of projects we do. When developers started getting into adaptive reuse, a lot of the designs were really clunky. There just wasn't a lot of sophistication in responding to historic forms. Today the architectural community is talking about it a lot more. I just wish more people making calls on additions had a design background or at least could see what the Europeans are doing.

**Jamie:** *Could you elaborate?*

**HEATHER:** In varying ways, preservation is not preservation over there.

**BELOW LEFT:** ROMAN RUIN, NIMES, FRANCE, WITH THE CARRE D'ART BY FOSTER & PARTNERS. **BELOW RIGHT:** APARTMENT BUILDING GASOMETER B, BY COOP HIMMELB(L)AU, IN VIENNA. **RIGHT:** EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE, ZAMORA, SPAIN, ADDITION BY MANUEL DE LAS CASAS.

In Germany and the Netherlands, you see this old building, older than I don't know how many generations of my family, and people still use it. It's remarkable, and next to it is a McDonald's. They make it work.

**Jamie:** *Are Europeans more concerned with community than with looks?*

**HEATHER:** Europe has a history of wars and destruction. When you have countries constantly being bombarded by their neighbors, there's a symbolism in adding something new to something old. Until recently we didn't have to think about defending our assets.

**Catherine:** *Is creating strong public schools crucial to keeping the middle class in metropolitan areas?*

**HEATHER:** On the West Coast at least, people are having fewer kids,

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It's just continuing a tradition. I've seen sites in Spain and Italy where a very contemporary design is attached to something that's nearly a ruin, and they're really well integrated. There's less timidity. I'm not going to win a lot of friends saying this, but it's a peeve of mine.

**TOMIKA:** I'll be your friend, Heather. What we do here is compartmentalize. We don't see the story that's told when good design of the current period is next to good design of 100 years ago. That's something that needs to be eliminated for the field to attract more people with broader views of architecture.

**Jamie:** *Tomika, what's your experience with developers?*

**TOMIKA:** Here in the Washington, because the market is so hot, they go where people would never be caught dead. Former light-industrial areas are now commodities—you get a great floor plate and the architecture to make lofts or what have you. But preservation loses an opportunity when developers do a shoddy job. They want to get in and out quickly, often altering so much that what was valuable is no longer valuable. So in that regard, I think we follow the developers, instead of being out front.

or none at all. The cities are having a depopulation of people under 18. San Francisco is the least-kidded and Seattle after that.

What's critical are the amenities—a grocery store, a decent coffee shop, a dry cleaner, take-out places, neighborhood restaurants—so a professional who works 40 or more hours a week doesn't have to drive around everywhere to get their act together.

**TOMIKA:** When you look at the resurgence of downtowns, most moving here don't have kids. In the District, we're paying for a new baseball stadium while some of our schools are about to close.

**HEATHER:** Many of us want to make a statement by living downtown with our families. We're pro-city living, pro-urban density.

**TOMIKA:** My suburban friends bring me their kids for the city experience. I put them on the Metro and we go to the museums and the Mall. One colleague, when we brought his kid to U Street, explained, "Now, son, this is the 'hood." It puts a value system on a different neighborhood and lifestyle. That starts to polarize views of urban life.

The resurgence has been good for downtowns, but people are trying to build them into suburbs. Like the New Urbanist communities, creating nostalgia for a false past.

PAR LEFT OFFICE DE TOURISME DE NIMESILIAN MARTORELL, NEAR LEFT GERALD ZUGMAN, RIGHT HISAO SUZUKI







**Jamie:** *Do you think preservationists need to market historic communities?*

**TOMIKA:** Any religious group promotes itself. In preservation, we don't do that. It's like what I do here in community planning; in order for people to come out to a hearing, they have to know what's going on. And often we have to go to them instead of waiting for them to come to us.

**HEATHER:** It has to do with the age of a place, too. Communities that look like nothing are hard for residents—not modern, sort of traditional, the ramblers of the world. People think oh, a Brady Brunch house. I have no compunction about ripping that down.

**Jamie:** *Will that change over time?*

**HEATHER:** I assume so, but the same community in a relatively young place, say Salt Lake City, might feel more historic.

**LEFT:** SPRINGHILL LAKE, A SLICE OF MARYLAND MODERN SLATED FOR DEMOLITION, WILL BE REPLACED WITH A COMMUNITY BY NEW URBANISTS DUANY PLATER-ZYBERK & COMPANY. **BELOW:** "BELAIR AT BOWIE," A PLANNED SUBURB BY LEVITT AND SONS FROM THE LATE 1950S, IS CATCHING THE EYE OF YOUNG PRESERVATIONISTS WITH ITS WINDING, PICTURESQUE STREETS AND MINIMALIST TAKE ON TRADITION.

**Jamie:** *Ideas about the future of preservation?*

**HEATHER:** Green. Preservation is green. From a tax standpoint, I'm hoping for connections with green incentives in the same way that the low-income-housing tax credit has been coupled with preservation.

**TOMIKA:** The challenge is identifying the profit to the developer. They're not so much concerned with the end user and the benefit to the environment.



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**Jamie:** *Let's touch on gentrification.*

**TOMIKA:** We're all gentrifiers.

**HEATHER:** That's our rap. If it were easy to reconcile gentrification, it would've been done already.

**TOMIKA:** Black people, Hispanic people, Asian people, we're all gentrifiers if we move to an area that's depressed, buy a home, and the median income changes. We contribute, too, if we shop at a store in a gentrified neighborhood.

We talked earlier about race and diversity in preservation. People say oh, it's white people moving in. But it's a class thing.

**Jamie:** *Class is downplayed.*

**HEATHER:** It's a topic we don't talk about much. We ask people to rehabilitate a place sensitively, but what we're asking is to spend 25, 40 percent more than they would for the special down at the big-box store. Often a person's sensibility is tied to how much money they make, how much money they came from. They shift their spending to go with that. Whereas a family of four without that sensibility thinks it's ridiculous. They get angry having to conform to a standard imposed by someone else.

**TOMIKA:** Your class determines your choices, clearly. If you're of a certain economic scale, you can choose between the authentic casement windows and the box store special. Whereas if you're a family of four, the last thing you worry about is how it looks from the outside as long as it's warm on the inside.

**Catherine:** *Is the interest in green a marketing opportunity for preservation?*

**HEATHER:** It would help politically, and help get rid of the image issues. But it's a another matter to have the public understand it—that not only is preserving your house green, but rehabbing it can be, too.

**Catherine:** *Sounds like a media campaign.*

**TOMIKA:** Yes, like the National Trust getting on HGTV. Now if we could get the National Association of Realtors to partner with preservation, that would be a marriage.

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