



Interview with Professor Ryan Max Rowberry

By 2017 LCCHP fellow Khamal Patterson

KP: Professor Rowberry, in your scholarship, you have proposed that cities in advanced countries can protect cultural and architectural resources when cataclysms strike by developing a series of “[resiliency](#)” metrics. Local historical societies and the National Park Service recovered hundreds of artifacts after Super Storm Sandy. How do you think stakeholders can best work together to identify sources of cultural heritage and protect them before they are lost or damaged? How can they measure their progress and with whom should they share their findings?

RR: One of the challenges in cultural resource management (“CRM”) is that we don’t know what we have. We have very limited research and few registries to which we can refer and cross-check. There are places with such offices; however, the percentage is quite small. Before Hurricane Katrina hit, Louisiana had a State Historic Preservation Office that was in charge of cataloging that state’s historic resources. However, during the clean-up and rebuilding after Katrina, in the city of New Orleans alone, officials discovered that only fifteen percent of their cultural heritage had been indexed.

Most places don’t know what they have; whether it is NYC or Atlanta where I live. New Orleans didn’t know. At least not adequately enough to preserve most of what was lost during the catastrophe.

In contrast, Los Angeles has undergone a five- to seven-year comprehensive survey locating stuff on GIS mapping, putting it into databases, and slicing data. Los Angeles is the pioneer in this kind of analysis and cataloging.

KP: That is interesting. LA is vast with so many different environments and zones. You would think that they would still be developing the preservation metrics and parameters.

RR: While Los Angeles’ efforts are worthy of praise and set the standard, it is one city in an entire country. France and England and places in Europe are far ahead of us. You will see in the cleanup of Hurricane Irma, we lag behind. It will be slow because the areas affected by Irma and other recent storms will be discovering and registering cultural sites during their recovery.

Because municipalities must prioritize which resources to manage, they are faced with these questions: What do you save, and how do you save it? Even with the assistance of independent assessment and recovery teams, it used to be an expensive proposition for cities. However, now the Getty Museum and World Monuments Fund offer open-source, free tools to register and catalog historic resources through the [Arches Project](#). The question now to cities is: Do you want to do it?

Cities used to pay consultants; now you can train people using the free open source software. You can include the public to upload data they collect themselves. The British have a highly developed sense of place. As an illustration, the British Government was worried that cultural objects and archaeological artifacts on its coastline were disappearing or being submerged or swept away. It admitted that government resources alone would be

inadequate in documenting all of the incremental changes to all of the various points of historical interest along its vast coastline. Therefore, the government trained people in these coastal areas to record archaeological sites and upload discoveries to a central database. It would be no different for us in the States. There is citizen support for preservation. In the U.S., people want to learn; you just need a platform. You build civic community. It provides a way for people to work together. Most municipalities want civil capital.

KP: In the wake of tragedies like the surge of recent storms, projects like the ones you propose put goodwill, cooperation, and civic pride in a continuum. It keeps people engaged with one another and in their community as they learn more about each other, themselves, and the greater community beyond their doorsteps. It would have been great if citizens had received some CRM training before these disasters hit.

RR: The real key to making progress in cultural resource management is sharing findings with developers. It has been hard in the past. Most developers are not on the side of preserving cultural property. Sharing findings with the city and public is important, but sharing findings with developers helps them to see how existing resources can be used more efficiently and perhaps even elicit the kind of creative community development that corporate planners could commercialize and maybe even incentivize.

KP: Kind of like what was going on in Barcelona? You wrote about how developers and realtors took the initiative and found ways to address an affordable housing shortage in Barcelona through rehabilitating historic properties, right?

RR: Yes. That is what I examined in [Barcelona](#). You can put businesses in historic sites. You can use historic properties to help the disadvantaged and build up a culture of civic and entrepreneurial responsibility. People feel connected to each other and a part of something bigger. It reduces feelings of displacement; this instills pride and encourages engagement and acceptance among different levels of society. What could be better for helping a city grow? It discourages waste and can be more efficient both environmentally and socially than the alternatives.

KP: The Barcelona program you described there sounds like community trusts that have been humbly operating in some U.S. cities to expand affordable housing options. Community trusts for blighted or neglected neighborhoods could be used as a way to innovatively reorient space that is conducive to communal living and restoring social bonding.

RR: You are right. Post offices are rarely used anymore. Many of these often grand buildings are left vacant but could be repurposed as residences. They were constructed with marble, granite, stone, etc., which are all durable materials that would make for beautiful and desirable homes. There is a big movement to turn them into affordable housing. We need to get creative instead of knocking things down. We are often too quick to knock them down.

Where I live in Atlanta, planners are not good about preserving the area's history. Atlanta is very pro-new construction rather than rehabilitation. The law school where I teach is in downtown Atlanta, and historic preservation is something that is a possibility, but the probability of rehabilitation of historic structures being given priority over new development is unlikely.

KP: I always thought of Atlanta as a place that was so proud of its history and position as a pioneer of the "New South" spirit that it would try to do what it could be slow down

development disruptive to the past. A couple of years ago, my girlfriend bought me Tom Wolfe's 1996 novel *A Man in Full*, where Atlanta was portrayed as a city on the move erecting shimmering glass buildings with the names of Yankee conglomerates congregating there for the cheaper land and laxer regulations. I guess in a push to be a modern commercial hub, the city planners tout the ethos of genteel old Atlanta to attract business but aren't going to stand in the way if developers need to remove parts of old Atlanta.

RR: Well, that's what the thinking has been among stakeholders. Atlanta is a city with many fathers and has always moved in a new direction once they were replaced. It has always been on the move. Atlanta was a railroad town beginning in the 1840s. During the Civil War, it was burned to the ground by General Sherman and had to be rebuilt. In the 1920s, a modernizing, or as you said, "New South" period began. During the 1920s, the Southern Bell Building, a beautiful 3-story neo-classical Art Deco building originally erected in 1907 became the first place that women in Atlanta could get professional work as telephone operators. The building is right near the Georgia State University College of Law.

[Georgia State University has purchased the Southern Bell Building](#), and they want to turn it into a parking lot. However, it is one of the few pre-WWII buildings left in downtown Atlanta. It was one of the first places where women could work in Atlanta outside of the home. It has a history. There is no reason that you couldn't rehabilitate the building and still build above it. The debate over the Southern Bell Building is just one example of Atlanta's struggle. We are a city without a nucleus. Unlike other cities, even other Southern cities, Atlanta was not planned with a central square from which development spreads; rather, it was simply the junction of two railroad lines. We don't have a "proper" or distinct downtown area. What we do have we should share.

KP: Even in the midst of further development?

RR: Especially, in the midst of further development. Some things need to be preserved because they illustrate how Atlanta came to be Atlanta. Once these things are gone, they are gone. Vital pieces of the city's identity are gone; a photograph would never do it justice.

KP: Wow! You would think that the University would want to do its best to preserve the building and maybe plan for some mixed use. Turning it into a parking lot seems like a waste or at least a severe undervaluing of the property.

RR: Well, you also have to try and think about it from the University's point of view. The building, cultural value notwithstanding, may not generate enough revenue to make it an asset attractive enough to rehabilitate. It will likely bring on debt anyway, so the University needs to plan for a way to maximize profitable use. A parking lot would certainly be a straightforward use whose profitability could be measured because of the location in the downtown area.

However, I agree with you. The building doesn't need to be razed to for the University to fulfill its desire for a profitable parking lot or other use. The building, by current standards, isn't very tall; parking spaces could be put on top or underneath the building, and the Southern Bell Building itself could be put to new, productive uses.

KP: So, it seems that historic preservation in Atlanta is not well integrated into development planning for the city as a whole? It's limited to areas where there are designated or popular attractions?

RR: Unfortunately, preserving much of the city's historic fabric doesn't appear to be something that the majority of city officials nor private developers are interested in, even when cost-benefit analysis leans in favor of preservation and planning around the past.

KP: That is unfortunate. Cities are like organisms; they have life phases to which they can never return. Distinct periods of a city's evolution have distinct features and impact how citizens, live, work, pray, and play. It should be important to developers to preserve as much as practicable. Features of a city's past, whether they are building facades or fixtures, are important to understanding the psychology and culture of a community and how they hope their tastes and values will shape a future society.

RR: If no tangible evidence of your past remains, or if what remains is poorly managed, then how can you expect to improve upon what once was?

KP: With devastating and record-breaking storms like Harvey, Irma, and Maria battering down on much of the U.S. and its territories, how do you think technology can best help cities better preserve historic infrastructure? You have written about [Istanbul's efforts](#) to use technology in city planning and preservation in the face of disaster. Are there any lessons from the Turkish experience from which U.S. cities could benefit?

RR: Turkey is ahead of the U.S. in using online GIS databases to record the heritage they have. That is the first step: having a list of what resources we have and how we can use them creatively to bring people together. Istanbul has a municipal database. That city's preparation demonstrates a two-fold lesson: First, it shows it's not impossible to do. Second, it shows it's financially feasible to do. Again, the Istanbul experience should compel American cities to ask: Is this something that we want to do? Do we want to commit the resources and spend the time?

There are benefits to putting in the work to create an online GIS heritage register. It allows for cities to draw upon the past for social capital and a celebration of the stories and history made there. I could see a city administrator and his social media savvy staff discussing in the meeting, "Once we have everything mapped out, we have Women's Day coming up. How can we celebrate culturally significant events to women and raise awareness of these sites on social media?" Furthermore, when you create registries, city managers and administrators can overlay floodplain data to see what needs to be protected before a storm hits and where you need to do your reinforcement or even removal if it is practical in the face of severe weather.

Before the Arches program, consultants would have to build a customized system for each city or state. City budgets vary greatly, and each city's interest in improving its capacity to predict which areas would be most affected was directly proportional to how much of the budget the project would eat up. It was expensive, so the priority of preservation was low or certainly seen more as a luxury than a necessity. Now, the barrier is much lower because of the development of free GIS software and other tools. The barrier is only high if you lack willpower.

KP: And manpower.

RR: That's certainly true to an extent, but as I said earlier, people want to help preserve remnants of the past and retain what they can of it. Cities just need to be aware that they can train people to do some of the work, even if they bring in outside consultants to assist in the training. Those who learn will share this knowledge with others. It will bring individuals and civic groups together. That's your manpower right there. The government

does not need to do all the work because the people determine how they see the past fitting into the present and future. Their work would outlast any one administration.

KP: Has the public perception of historic preservation increased or improved? Are people more willing to hold their local governments accountable for failing to preserve cultural heritage or democratize the process of historic preservation?

RR: Good question. Certain states are better at prioritizing preservation than others, and those states are better at gauging the public interest and responding to it. I cannot say on the whole that public perception has improved. Some states such as Utah are better at coordinating and deploying resources towards preservation. Iowa is another. Outside of Atlanta, Georgia is not bad. Consciousness, however, is not rising, particularly among young people. The challenge is that it is largely limited to fifty- to sixty-year-old white people. Everyone has a voice and to engage communities of color in the preservation process and let them tell their stories is an important and often missing component of our communities.

Preservation has marginalized communities of color, and it should change. Every community has a role to play. We need to have a more inclusive process even if it forces cities to confront some things that happened that it would prefer not to address. Preservation has played a role in perpetuating a history or culture of exclusion. Learning from events that are discomforting or unsavory is important. Preservation is an educational tool; it's an invaluable one.

KP: In the current climate, we need more social capital, as you said earlier. Historic and cultural preservation projects can at least rouse people to face what they think they know about the places, faces, and spaces around them.

RR: Different people and different communities weave social fabric. We have a lot of fabric, but a lot of it isn't woven together. African-American strands are here. Latino strands are there. English and Irish threads are in another place. There is a rich tapestry, a quilt unmade — though we are all bound together.

Take slavery, for example, there are ways to enrich people's understanding of the dimensions of slavery in a particular place. There are ways to illustrate the degrees of how one could be a slave and relate that to the present day, like sex trafficking.

KP: Interesting. You mentioned New Orleans at the beginning of our conversation and how so little of its history had been cataloged before Katrina hit. Storyville, the vice-laden district that was torn down in the early twentieth century, was the birthplace of jazz, but was also a place that could be considered unsavory. Though misery and sexual servitude resided there, there are also surprising stories of an entrepreneurial spirit that suffused the brothels there. Several madams and sex workers became successful and prominent in their own right, including those living and laboring under increasingly uncivil Jim Crow laws, like the women of the Creole community.

Storyville was a place in defiance of both mores and morals, but its existence is a touchstone of how we conceive of New Orleans, even though many have never heard of the district's name. Do you know if there were any efforts by the city to preserve some parts of the buildings after the district was raided and closed, at least so people would know what went on there and who lived there?

RR: Yes. Unfortunately, I don't know if any structures from Storyville remain, but if not, it is a shame because the community does flesh out the city's story and reminds us that there

are vulnerable people in society, but that even vulnerable people can find a voice and use it. Those women were resilient.

KP: You are the co-author of *Historic Preservation Law in Nutshell* (2014). Have there been any developments in the law since the last edition have caught your attention?

RR: The big one is what the Trump Administration will do about national monuments in the West. There was a memo from Secretary Zinke about decreasing the size of national monuments or possibly eradicating some, to allow for more oil and gas extraction. Eliminating a national monument has never been done under the [Antiquities Act](#). Designated national monument areas have been enlarged and rarely shrunk, but never eliminated altogether. I am from the West. I grew up in Colorado and Idaho. It is mostly federal land out there, unlike in the East. Monuments are rarely made out East because there is no federal land. "Can the Federal Government relinquish its control over some of the land in the West?" is the question that a lot of people have for President Trump.

As a specific example, [Bears Ears National Monument](#) created by President Obama is under the most scrutiny from the Trump Administration. Bears Ears Monument is sacred land for several Native American Tribes.

KP: A colleague of mine wrote an article about the process of Bear's Ears designation as a National Monument and how vital the site is to local Native American Tribe's identities, especially their religion and spirituality. She details the looting and desecration that occurred on these sacred lands, and it is obvious that it warranted federal protection as a National Monument.

RR: There is an interplay between the Federal Government, the state government, various Tribal governments, and private landowners when these national monuments are created. There are several stakeholders. Sometimes their interests are completely in conflict. At other times, they conflict in subtle but significant ways—enough for one party to vocally assert a right or privilege that is implied by the duty of another party. Bears Ears seems to be a flashpoint. If Trump decides to decrease the size of Bears Ears or eliminate it altogether, there are teams of litigators ready to fight it.

KP: It is possible that the legal wrangling challenging the diminution of Bears Ears and other national sites will go on past President Trump's first term in office. It may be years before any adverse action can be taken. Hopefully.

KP: I read in a recent [New Republic article](#) that President Trump, in anticipation of his border wall, has waived something like twenty-eight different environmental, archaeological, and religious freedom regulations. Some of these regulations are the Antiquities Act, the [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#), the [Native American Religious Freedom Act](#), the [Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act](#), and several others. That is major executive activity and has to lay the groundwork for some major business activity.

RR: They want to make it easier for developers to do business. The flipside is that some environmental regulations *are* probably overly burdensome. The Trump Administration's approach is that these regulations frustrate the functioning and expansion of industry at a time when technology has made it *more* efficient to extract, so there is pressure to excavate on land traditionally reserved for scenic or historic or cultural preservation and enjoyment. In some ways, this is a fight about federalism. Many states in the West believe they are getting a raw deal. For example, Nevada is eighty-two percent federal land, and that means

there is a lot of lost state revenue when it comes to grazing permits, well permits, licenses, oil and gas permits, right-of-way permits, etc.

KP: The federalism fight seems to be coming to an end through executive orders. We will see how many constitutional challenges there are to the Administration from individuals asserting third-party standing and associations claiming prudential standing. Historic and cultural preservation of some irreplaceable natural spaces are at stake; its good to know there are a lot of people ready to engage the Administration if it looks like those interests are being trampled.

KP: Thank you for your time today, Professor Rowberry. I hope that people are inspired to go out and discover what is unique about where they live and work and ask how they can work with others to raise awareness about preserving these special spaces.

RR: My pleasure. Thank you.