

## From Nicety to Necessity: Building Public Will for Preservation

..... *Eric Friedenwald-Fishman*

What is the problem? Why are we here? What I'm seeing around the country and what I hear from my colleagues who work for local, state, and national preservation organizations is that many of us are encountering that preservation is viewed by many Americans as a nicety rather than as a necessity.

So what are the current frames that we're using and hearing about preservation? What are we hearing as we talk to members of our legislature, members of our city council, members of our congressional delegation, foundation funders? When I testify to legislatures or commissions I often hear the legislator or county commissioner saying: "Don't get me wrong, I'm all for historic preservation. But we have more important things to fund like police and fire and public health."

What are some of the other things we hear about preservation? It's expensive and doesn't make money. It's elitist; you're only preserving dead white guy's houses. It's not a voter priority or a constituent

priority. It blocks development. It's used for dodging taxes. It's part of gentrification, and it raises the rents. It goes against property rights. They're just old buildings.

If this is what we're hearing as we're out seeking funding, seeking policy change, seeking support for our projects, what's the solution? To counter this set of existing frames we need to reframe how we position preservation; we need to reframe preservation as a priority need that makes individuals, organizations, and communities stronger. And from a tactical standpoint, we need to create relevancy and ownership for this new frame by integrating grassroots outreach and traditional media outreach.

When you look at the communications put out by preservation groups around the country, you see that we have a habit of assuming that our audiences see the relevancy of preservation. We often in our messages jump right to the issue—we need to save these buildings, or we have to support this tax, and here's the



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action we need to take. We tend to assume that everybody in our audience already believes that preservation matters and that it's a good thing and that it has benefits to individuals, organizations, and the broader community. But it's very important as we look at the solution to this issue of nicety versus necessity that we don't take relevancy for granted.

I'm going to talk about key strategies to advance this new frame.

## Identifying the Audiences

The most important strategy is to invest in audience understanding. We need to understand the underlying existing values that audiences hold and to which we can link so those audiences make choices for us.

### *Segmentation and Prioritization*

If we had infinite resources and infinite time we could indeed effectively communicate with every single American, but we don't. So to create change it's very important that we first focus on which segments of the community are going to have the greatest opportunity to create change for the issue that we're work-

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ing on. (The key word here is "first" because I believe eventually all segments of the community do make a difference.)

It is important that we segment and prioritize our audiences in the following terms: Who has the ability to take the immediate action that we are looking for; who has the ability to influence those who are going to be able to take the immediate action; who are the audiences with whom we have the greatest connection and pathway; and who are the audiences with whom we do not have existing strong pathways but who can create the greatest impact for the change that we want? Identifying and prioritizing the audiences can then help us in developing the messages that will be effective and determin-

ing the delivery vehicles that will be effective.

For example, a lot of preservation groups across the country are saying we need to diversify our audience, but our A-1 priority is going to be the baby boomer generation. Although they now are not the majority of our members, baby boomers are the most powerful force in terms of advocacy, and they may soon be the most powerful force in terms of potential donor dollars and membership dollars.

My point isn't to tell you who you need to prioritize. My point is to say that, to begin with, we want to see how can we divide the audience, because it's easier to reach them that way.

### *Influence Mapping*

A lot of times in marketing work, people do a good job of segmenting and prioritizing their audience and then jump immediately into saying, now how do I get the message out to that audience?

But it is worth taking an additional step to do influence mapping—to look at that set of prioritized audiences and ask the questions: Who are the trusted advisors for that set of audiences? What are the mediums through which these audiences already get their

information? What channels can we use that influence these audiences? For example, there are many projects where we will find that the business community can't make the decision that we need to have made, but that the business community is in many ways the most influential audience in terms of being able to influence the decision-makers we need.

### *Needs Identification*

Once we've prioritized audiences and done our influence mapping, it's then very important that we understand the needs that these people have.

Let me explain the difference between a need and a value. A need in a lot of communities is economic development. "We need more storefronts that are leased out than are sitting vacant." Or, "We need more family wage jobs in our community." Family wage jobs are not a value. Economic development is not a value, but it's an absolute direct community or human need. Now, there are underlying values that can connect to those needs—fair opportunity, prosperity—but we'll talk about those later.

For example, when I'm lobbying the legislature, I know that a need of my

primary audience is getting reelected. So I'm going to make the effort to identify and map every preservation project that's been done in the legislators' districts. I also identify three or four of their major donors who are involved in preservation projects in their community who'll they need to get campaign contributions from again. And I'm going to design my presentation to emphasize the interests of major donors and other constituents, more than talking about the incredible value of this particular covered bridge or that particular old school house.

What are some of the needs that we encounter in the preservation community? Developers need to make a profit. Communities need economic development. So we talk about preservation serving their need of providing an economic development catalyst to transform a main street or a community, to bring more family-wage jobs into an area, to create space that can be an incubator for new businesses.

I actually see very few advocacy materials for preservation that don't do a good job of communicating about the needs—talking about the economic impact, about how many units of housing have

been sparked, about the multiplier of the resources that are expended. We have to be aware of those needs, and we have to design our messages to show that we understand those needs and can address them—but we also have to understand and talk about our audiences' values.

### *Values Identification*

Let's look at likely voters, because likely voters are a really powerful constituency in this country for preservation if you want to influence local legislation. Let me give you some examples of closely held values that have influenced campaigns for other issues—values that we see come up again and again with voters—and look at which of those may have a strong correlation with preservation.

One of them is the desire for prosperity and opportunity. That is a closely held value for virtually every American, regardless of class, ethnicity, or generation. It's something that we don't see that much of in the way that we communicate about preservation. When we talk about all the economic development impact, that's more about addressing a broader community need. But we have the chance to touch a closely held personal value in

terms of people's interest and desire to have equal opportunity and to have the ability to create prosperity.

There's sense of belonging, sense of community, sense of identity. We can see this value when it gets wrapped in the idea of patriotism, when we look at the incredible investment voters are willing to make to bring the Olympics or other major events to a community. Look at great values-based positioning that professional sports franchises, which are big private businesses, have done in garnering significant amounts of tax dollars based upon both a civic pride and local identity frame. This is a closely held value that could have huge strength and relevancy for the preservation movement.

One of the values that we don't talk about as much is a sense of belonging, and I think that's a place where the preservation community has an opportunity to adjust its positioning. To many, preservation has been positioned with a sense of belonging...if your family came here on the Mayflower. But I believe that we can develop a frame that says that preservation creates a sense of belonging for everyone.

There's environment and

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conservation—this one isn't easy because it's a double-edge sword for us, but I don't think we should let go of it. A large portion of citizens strongly identify with the value of conservation, but they see conservation through more of an environmental frame. They think of conserving natural systems, and human and health systems. But I would argue that everything we do in historic preservation is conservation. We have a very strong connection to effectively using the existing built environment and conserving resources, but we need to look at how we frame that connection more effectively.

Health and safety. This is the single strongest value in terms of moving people to make change. If you look at all the research that's been done by the environmental commu-

nity, the choices that swing voters make in terms of the environment are based upon perceptions of impact to their health and their family's health, not based upon love of fish and birds.

And finally, diversity and beauty. I find that the beauty argument in particular is one that we tend to run away from. When that county commissioner or that state legislator says, "Hey, I'm all for the arts and for heritage and for culture and historic places—I think they're beautiful buildings—but I've got important things I need to fund like health and safety," we generally gallop away from that. And if the legislature was our only audience, we would say, "Well, that maybe is not the strongest closely held value." But people do have a need for beauty, people do have a need for stories, people do have a need for culture and for identity and for the aesthetic, and we do fulfill that need very, very strongly. So it's a value we should not run away from, but we need to be cautious about how we express it.

## Reframing the Message

So we've got a great list of key values that we're seeing consistently working in other arenas

with a broad cross-section of American voters and that have a strong correlation to what we do in preservation. Once we've got that sense of who the audiences are, what their needs are, and what their values are, we then need to look at reframing the message.

When I talk about framing a message I'm not talking about Machiavellian spin. I'm talking about choosing the words and images that will predispose our audience, when they hear our message, to see it in a certain light. Framing is the use of images and words to intentionally associate an issue with certain deeply held values, thereby providing a context that predisposes an audience to accept a particular definition of the issue.

I believe that there are two core things we need to focus on as we frame a message for preservation: to demonstrate the relevancy of preservation to people's lives, and to identify benefits that link to the strongly held values and the needs that we fulfill through preservation. If we do these two things, we'll move the idea of preservation from being something that's nice to something that's critical and necessary.

I'm going to suggest a relevancy frame—that preserva-

tion makes life better, that preservation improves people's lives—followed by supporting benefits messages that reinforce needs and values.

Benefit message number one: Everyone's history matters. Our personal histories are the stories that make up the shared history of the country. Historic places provide tangible connections to our history that help us understand our past, appreciate our triumphs, and learn from our mistakes. Our historic places help define and distinguish our communities and build a strong sense of identity.

Benefit message number two: Preservation supports vital communities. By reinvesting in neighborhoods and business districts and by reusing existing structures to meet contemporary needs, we create stronger communities and spark economic activity. From addressing the housing needs in rural and urban communities to revitalizing downtowns to strengthening tourism and energizing main streets, preservation is a smart investment. (Here, we're connecting to the need for economic development and the values of opportunity and prosperity.)

Benefit message number three: Everyone values a beau-

tiful community. Nationwide we want safe streets, shopping districts, walkable neighborhoods, and quality architecture. We appreciate the unique traits of our hometowns and the distinctive buildings of our downtowns. We value the diversity and human scale that historic buildings add to our streetscapes. We enjoy visiting historic sites and vibrant communities. We treasure the connections we find with our past and with other people through the places that tell our stories. (These reinforce the desire for a sense of belonging, sense of community, sense of identity, as well as the values of beauty and diversity.)

And benefit message number four: Preserving the earth's natural resources is vital for our lives. We need clean air and drinking water and green spaces where we can play and explore. By reusing and revitalizing existing infrastructure and buildings, we reduce demand for building materials and development on farmland and other green spaces. Preservation helps create better health for people and the planet. (This ties into the value of conservation, connected to our desires for personal health and public health.)

These are not meant to

be the messages that you walk away with and use verbatim, but are examples to spark your thinking and conversation. Obviously for each of your groups, once you look at who your audiences are and what their existing closely held values are, you're going to make your own list of values that you need to convey in your message frame. Maybe your audience already gets the relevancy and you just need to go to the benefits, or maybe they already have the benefits down but they're not getting the relevancy—or maybe they need both. But the key is not to get caught on the needs-based arguments but to be able to link with the closely held values as well.

### Conveying the Message

Now let's talk about how we can convey these messages in a way that engages and creates ownership with this new relevancy. I've distilled this down to four key tactics.

#### *Heal Thyself*

The first is heal thyself. We need to ensure that the choir learns the new music. We have to make sure that once we have our message frame down that we invest in training our

staff, our volunteers, our donors, and our members—our existing choir—to own that set of messages and be able to put that into their own words and to say it consistently.

#### *Create an Environment for Discourse*

Two, we need to create a fertile environment for the discourse, and this is where I really see the use of traditional media.

When a lot of us think about a media outreach campaign, we're thinking about how we can change public opinion. That's the right strategy if on next Tuesday you need 50 percent plus 1 to vote this way. The downside with being focused on a public opinion-based strategy is that the very next day someone who has more money than you do can run just as many ads that send the exact opposite message and move people right back.

Mass media is difficult to use to communicate about values, because most of us don't want to engage in a conversation about our values with the television set. We engage in those conversations with other people. But what mass media is incredibly powerful at doing—and I'm including not just advertising but your website, your brochures, your Power-

Points, newspaper articles and editorials—is creating an environment that’s fertile for the discussion.

In other words, once we know the message frame that we want to be delivering to folks through grassroots direct and personal outreach, it’s much easier to do if there’s been an editorial or ad or feature story in the paper saying the same thing, and if our written materials and our websites emphasize that frame over and over.

It’s more comfortable for your board members or volunteers to have that personal conversation if the person they’re talking to might have already heard some of these same frames. Or, if after you leave that legislator’s office, or a meeting with a funder, or your church group, the people you have had personal contact with get your message reinforced by seeing it in the media, seeing it in your materials, and seeing it online.

Yet when you look at the websites of most preservation organizations, you’ll see that they have beautiful pictures of buildings, but when you see people they’re small dots in the background or they’re grinning and handing over a check. We see very little powerful photography show-

ing people actually benefiting from preservation—shopping in those revitalized districts, living in those houses, attending renovated schools, etc. So if we’re saying some of our real values are that preservation creates opportunity and prosperity and that it increases people’s sense of place, sense of belonging, and quality of life; then how are we conveying that in our writing and in the pictures that we use?

#### *Convert Investors Into Activists*

The third piece is really where I think the most power lies, and that’s in converting investors, to use a stock market analogy, into activist shareholders. We need to convert people from being on the sidelines (saying, “I’ll send a membership check”) to saying, “I’ll not only send you a membership check but I own the messages and I’m willing to go out and share this message with others. I’m going to talk about it at work, with my family, at church, in my neighborhood. It’s going to become a frame of reference for me.”

And we make that happen by investing in the tools and the training to make sure that all of our volunteers, our donors, and all of our board members see that as a part of

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their role, and see the power that that role can have when they have the messages that work and they deliver them consistently.

### *Use Consistent Reinforcement*

Many of us do a great job of getting our message framed and getting it out in our website and media and through grassroots contact. What we don't do is follow up. We don't make sure that once somebody has made that commitment that we continually reinforce it.

We need to make that part of our grassroots strategy: We're going to put you on a list and make sure that you hear from us every few weeks in a way that's personalized and that says thank you for what you've done. And we'll ask you to tell us what's happening in the field, and give you tools to handle questions and objections that come up. And we'll celebrate what you are doing and tell others.

It makes people a part of a movement, a part of a family, and it gives them ongoing motivation to do more than just send a postcard to a legislator one time.

To conclude, I think everyone in this room is a true believer that preservation is a necessity, not a nicety. We believe it makes people's lives better and it makes communities more vital. It's a part of the ethos of who we are as a people that binds us together. We do not get up and work every day for a nicety. We fight for ourselves, for a community, for a family, and for a national necessity. We fight to make sure that our shared story moves forward and that it uses the places of the past in ways that create a more vibrant, vital, and equitable future. That's why we're in this fight. That's why preservation is a necessity, and why we must frame it in terms that connect to critical needs and to bedrock values.



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