

Toward a New Approach to Recent-Past Preservation Planning

KRISTIN HAGAR

M.S. Historic Preservation (2011)

University of Pennsylvania

OCTOBER 1, 2011

"LOOKING FORWARD" SYMPOSIUM

HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a critical examination of the ways that we assess significance and identify preservation priorities for recent-past buildings. I want to bridge the deconstruction of the significance concept that commanded the attention of historians and preservationists in the 1980s and 1990s, with the rising interest in the recent-past planning of the past decade, and make a methodological step forward for recent-past preservation planning. I will begin with a discussion of the ways that theorists and the National Park Service have redefined and broadened the concept of historical significance, and the caveats that the new concept presents to establishing priorities of highest significance. Then I will discuss how the challenges of a broadened concept of significance particularly affect *recent-past* preservation planning, briefly reviewing the literature on the challenges of assessing recent-past significance. Finally, I will propose a GIS-based method for organizations to generate city- or county-level inventories of recent-past buildings, revealing those of highest significance through the criterion of “multiplicity.” I will illustrate this discussion through my experiences working on a recent-past initiative for a preservation advocacy organization in Philadelphia in 2010.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SIGNIFICANCE CONCEPT

In 1983, historian and anthropologist Joseph Tainter and archaeologist John Lucas published a seminal study that remains one of the most important critiques of the way that the preservation field assesses significance in historical cultural resources. They argue that “there are definite limits in the extent to which significance may be used as a planning, management, and preservation tool” because, contrary to long-standing assumption, significance is not self-evident in material or fixed over time.¹

Preservation on the federal level, they assert, is steeped in a traditional understanding of significance, dating to the late 19th century and still evident in contemporary policy, which assumes significance is based on tangible attributes that are visually “observable and recordable in much the same way as its dimensions, condition and content.” A property either possesses or lacks significance.²

According to the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, significance may not be not always visually perceptible but it is assumed a stable and relatively self-evident quality. This assumed self-evidence may explain the tautological language of criteria, defining significant properties as those that possess significance.³ Similarly, National Register Bulletin 24 advises local surveyors to collect data on significance (among other types of data collected in a field survey) in order to make accurate decisions about significance.⁴

The *quality of significance* in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a *significant* contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons *significant* in our past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a *signifi-*

1 J. A. Tainter and J. G. Lucas, “Epistemology of the Significance Concept,” *American Antiquity*, 48, 4 (1983), 710, emphasis added.

2 Ibid., 710-12.

3 The tautological language is also noted in Tainter and Lucas, 709-710, and in H. L. Green, “The Social Construction of Historical Significance,” in *Preservation: Of What, for Whom? A Critical Look at Historical Significance*, edited by M. A. Tomlan (Ithaca: National Council for Preservation Education, 1998), 87.

4 A. Derry, et al, *National Register Bulletin 24: Guidelines for Local Surveys: A Basis for Preservation Planning*, 2nd ed., revised by P. L. Parker (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, 1985), 41-45.

cant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important to prehistory or history.⁵

Tainter and Lucas argue, in contrast, that the meaning signified by a cultural object is socially constructed, not fixed; based on intangible values as well as tangible attributes; subject to different readings, not objectively observable; and mutable over time. “Here...lies the flaw in the historic significance concept. We cannot speak of significance as an inherent attribute of cultural properties, waiting only to be discerned (even though this is precisely what the federal legislation and regulations require us to do). Significance, rather, is a quality that we assign to a cultural resource based on the theoretical framework within which we happen to be thinking. ... [I]f significance is assigned rather than inherent, then, like meaning, it can vary between individuals and change over time.”⁶

The Tainter and Lucas article marks an early instance of a poststructuralist understanding of significance in cultural resources. While poststructuralism may be better known as a type of literary theory emergent in the 1970s, one rather esoteric, in fact it provides a useful method for understanding historical significance. All cultural products consist of signs, and a sign consists of two parts: a *signifier* vehicle—a word, symbol, or object—and a *signified* meaning—the idea it communicates. Structuralism, a method of understanding culture preceding poststructuralism in the 1950s and 1960s, is premised on the idea that, while the relationship between the signifier and the signified is inherently arbitrary, cultural practices, languages, rules and norms function as systems of signification that keep the relationships between signifier and signified relatively stable, so that a single meaning is widely understood. For example, any assemblage of letters *could* refer to a structure in which people live, but within the system of the English language, “house,” specifically, refers to that idea. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, is premised on the idea that the signifier/signified relationship is always unstable, so there may be infinite structures, or perspectives, that generate meaning. Some cultural

5 P. W. Andrus and R. H. Shrimpton, *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, 4th ed., revised by B. L. Savage and S. Dillard Pope (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, 1997), 2, emphasis added.

6 Tainter and Lucas, 714.

practices and rules may be pervasive enough to produce *seemingly* stable, widely understood meanings (“house,” for example), however, there is always the possibility that other cultural practices and rules could provide additional meanings.

The historical significance that people attribute to buildings operates at the level of connotation. In addition to denotative meaning, a sign may carry connotative meaning, which derives not only from the signifier/signified relationship but also from a particular sociocultural context, which imbues it with a second level of meaning. Take the Vanna Venturi House (Venturi and Rauch, 1959-64) for example (FIGURE 1). “Place in which to live” is the denotative meaning of the building, while “seminal example of postmodern architecture by an internationally celebrated architect” is one connotative meaning. “Provocative house that thumbs its nose at its conservative Chestnut Hill neighbors” is another connotative meaning.



FIGURE 1: Vanna Venturi House (Venturi and Rauch, 1959-1962), Philadelphia (Chestnut Hill), PA, in 2010
Source: Wikimedia Commons <http://commons.wikimedia.org/>

A structuralist analysis of a building's significance using the National Register criteria would rely upon the established canon of architectural history, the established narrative of American history/ a locality's history, or the paradigms of the archaeology discipline; the consistencies or deviations of the given building within one of these systems of meaning would determine the significance that the practitioner sees—for example, the extent to which a building uses the language of Federal architecture, or the extent to which it tells the story of colonial American freedom. A poststructuralist analysis would emphasize not just how a building does or does not fit within an established system of meaning, but how other systems of meaning might produce a different assessment of significance of the same building, for example, the narrative of working-class history, or ethnographical analysis of building usage. A poststructuralist analysis would consider, as Tainter and Lucas note, how the “theories to which we subscribe, as well as our education and training, fundamentally influence” what we see, and don't see, in a building.⁷ The perception of significance, or non-significance, depends on the particular cultural perspective from which it is assessed.

Consider the range of possible assessments of the Mill Creek Apartments, a Louis Kahn-designed urban renewal housing complex in West Philadelphia (begun 1951, demolished 2002). From the perspective of urban planning, assessment would focus on the fact that urban renewal projects involving clearance and relocation exacerbated racially based poverty. An ethnographic assessment would focus on those people whose knowledge about the building comes first-hand, from living in or otherwise using the housing. It might emphasize the isolating effect of open spaces and high-rise living, and how neighborhood redevelopment effectively dismantled empowering social networks. From an architectural-historical perspective, assessment would be, by contrast, positive, focusing on modernist design principles and the architect as an exceptionally influential, world renowned architect. (One contemporary author assumed that “Kahn's buildings (of which there aren't many) are sacrosanct.”⁸) According to one's perspective, the significance of Louis Kahn's Mill Creek Apartments may range

⁷ Tainter and Lucas, 713.

⁸ F. A. Bernstein, “The End of 1960's Architecture,” *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/design/31bern.html (accessed Aug. 31, 2011).

from “terrible building worth demolishing” to “exceptional building worth preserving.” Perspectives vary according personal background, professional discipline, and over time. As geographer and preservation planner Randall Mason puts it, “The assessment of values depends to a great extent on who is assessing them, and on the historical-geographical moment in which the value is articulated. Thus, an economist, historian, architect, schoolchild, ordinary citizen, or elected official might have different views of the value of [an historic site].”⁹

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE’S CONCEPT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Today, the National Park Service does recognize that cultural pluralism produces different perspectives from which to assess the significance of buildings, and for this reason emphasizes the importance of the practitioner identifying at the outset the historic context, or perspective, from which s/he is assessing. As the National Register Bulletin 15, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (first published 1990, revised 1997) states, the “significance of a historic property can be judged and explained only when it is evaluated within its historic context”; without the context, the meaning cannot be understood. It describes an historic context as “an organizing structure” through which history can be interpreted, informed by broader patterns or trends in national, state or local history that provide a perspective from which to understand a particular property.¹⁰ It defines an historic context by three parameters: geographic, temporal, and thematic. The latter parameter, theme, which the NPS uses interchangeably with “Area of Significance,” is broad: “[t]o be significant, the theme should have had some level of influence on American history or culture” on the national, state, or local level, demon-

⁹ R. F. Mason, “Fixing Historic Preservation: A Constructive Critique of ‘Significance,’” *Places*, 16, 1 (Fall 2003), 68.

¹⁰ Andrus and Shrimpton, 7, 53.

strable through scholarly research.¹¹ The NPS offers a wide-ranging list of possible context themes.¹²

In the mid-1990s, the National Park Service officially confirmed the wide range of potential historic contexts by reconstructing the thematic framework that structures the NPS conception of significance for the National Register (FIGURE 2). Whereas “[t]he first NPS framework, adopted in 1936, was conceived in terms of the ‘stages of American progress’ and served to celebrate the achievements of the founding fathers and the inevitable march of democracy,” the 1994 framework viewed American history as a constellation of diverse experiences, discrete yet also interrelated. Explaining the motivation for this revision, which a team of more than thirty NPS staff members and consulting scholars undertook, the NPS cites new scholarship that “has changed dramatically the way we look at

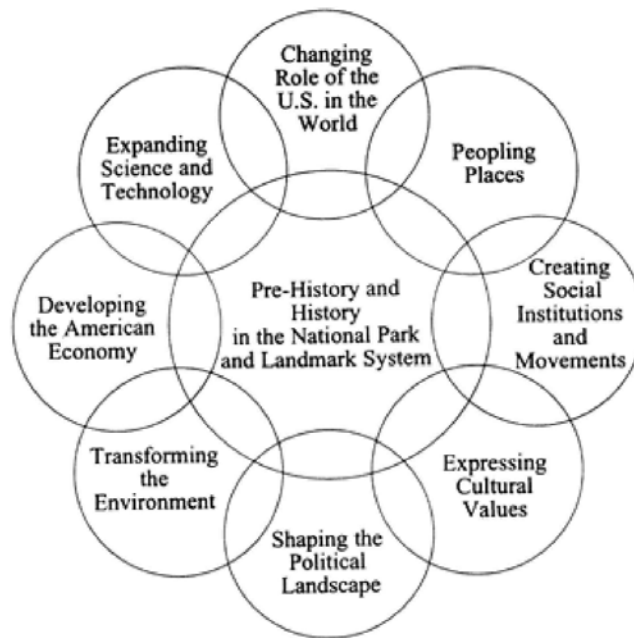


FIGURE 2: Overview of the National Park Service’s Revised Thematic Framework (1994)

Source: www.nps.gov/history/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/themes_concepts.htm

11 B. Wyatt, “The Components of a Historic Context (A National Register White Paper)” (2009), National Park Service, www.nps.gov/nr/publications/guidance.htm#drafts (accessed Aug. 31, 2011), 2; Andrus and Shrimpton, 8.

12 Andrus and Shrimpton, 8: Agriculture, Architecture, Archaeology (Prehistoric, Historic-Aboriginal, Historic-Non-Aboriginal), Art, Commerce, Communications, Community Planning and Development, Conservation, Economics, Education, Engineering, Entertainment/Recreation, Ethnic Heritage (Asian, Black, European, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander, Other), Exploration/Settlement, Health/Medicine, Industry, Invention, Landscape Architecture, Law, Literature, Maritime History, Military, Performing Arts, Philosophy, Politics/Government, Religion, Science, Social History, Transportation, Other.

the past.” Contributing to this new scholarship was historian Eric Foner, who wrote in 1990:

In the course of the past twenty years, American history has been remade. Inspired initially by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—which shattered the ‘*consensus*’ vision that had dominated historical writing—and influenced by new methods borrowed from other disciplines, American historians redefined the very nature of historical study. The rise of the ‘*new histories*’, the emphasis on quantification and cultural analysis, the eclipse of conventional political and intellectual history—these trends are now so widely known (and the subject of such controversy) that they need little reiteration. The study of American history today looks far different than it did a generation ago.¹³

In the preservation field today, the progressive notion of historical significance, as Mason notes, is “more extensive, detailed, and complicated; it suggests that there may be multiple valid arguments about the meaning of a place.” This is markedly different from the “traditional” conception, which is “succinct, clear and definitive,” and “focused on architectural and historical canons.”¹⁴ Therefore, evident in the way it conceptualizes historic context, the National Park Service assumes the progressive stance. It is evident in the addition, for example, of immigrant memorials, sites of intangible value, and roadside architecture to national, state, and local registers previously dominated by high-style houses and patriotic memorials.¹⁵

Yet while contexts have broadened, designation criteria have remained the same. There is a certain logical inconsistency in the National Park Service’s concept of significance as applied to the National Register. The National Park Service promotes a “soft” concept of significance in its elaboration of context—constructed, dependent on context, subject to possible change over time—yet continues to operate as though significance were “hard”—inherent and fixed. This is evident in the teleological National Register criteria language (paraphrased, buildings that possess significance are significant). This is reflected in that fact that a property must meet only one criterion, the implication being that each criterion alone provides strong enough justification (even though they are loosely defined). And this is suggested by the lack of periodic review for continued significance among designated properties.

13 “Revision of the National Park Service’s Thematic Framework” (1994), National Park Service, www.nps.gov/history/history/categrs/thematic.htm (accessed Aug. 31, 2011). E. Foner, *The New American History*, rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), ix, emphasis added.

14 Mason, 66.

15 See the discussion of E. A. Lyons and R. C. Cloues, “The Cultural and Historical Mosaic and the Concept of Significance,” in *Preservation: Of What, for Whom? A Critical Look at Historical Significance*, edited by M. A. Tomlan (Ithaca: National Council for Preservation Education, 1998): 37-48.

The inconsistency of using a soft theoretical concept of significance with hard operational criteria makes it difficult to determine priorities as well as to perform comparative analysis and make decisions in the face of conflicting views.

On the one hand, some preservationists have charged that in our field we have become too liberal and indiscriminate in assessing significance, resulting in properties getting designated too easily. Real estate consultant and preservationist Donovan Rypkema has discussed his concern that the broadened concept of significance is leading us to lower our standards and preserve low quality, nominally significant buildings. In a 2005 article for *Forum Journal*, written after he attended the National Trust's Recent Past Forum in Phoenix, he argues: "[I]f the preservation movement in America allows itself to abandon the measures of quality, significance, and value that have been the threshold to our saying 'this is important to save'... we will quickly lose both our credibility and the impact on the quality of cities that preservation has begun to have. [...] Mount Vernon and McDonald's are not equally important. Period."¹⁶ He continues in another essay for the National Trust's *Forum Journal*: "I'm not against designating the first McDonald's. But if an upcoming generation of preservationists thinks there is equivalence between Mount Vernon and McDonald's, I'm burning my National Trust membership card."¹⁷

On the other hand, other preservationists have found that the broadened concept of significance actually makes it harder to designate properties. For one, diversity of perspectives on historical subject matter can make consensus difficult to achieve (as Eric Foner has suggested). Two former Georgia State Historic Preservation Officers, using data culled from National Register files, found that lack of public consensus about the significance of proposed designations tended to result in failed proposals. "Where there has been a shared public understanding of the value of historic properties [...], historic preservation is successful; where their perceived value is uncertain, misunder-

16 D. D. Rypkema, "Saving the Recent Past: A Philosophical and Practical Dissent," *Forum Journal*, 20, 1 (Fall 2005), 14, 18.

17 D. D. Rypkema, "Making Historic Preservation Relevant for the Next 50 Years," *Forum Journal*, 24, 3 (Spring 2010), 16.

stood, or contested, [properties] are often lost.”¹⁸ Furthermore, to admit that significance is socially constructed, relative, and subject to change over time, can make arguments for significance easier to contest by opponents. One respondent to Tainter and Lucas’s article (which deconstructed the traditional, fixed concept of significance) accepted the theoretical critique but was dubious to the possibility of its implementation into policy. Thomas King, then a member of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, argued that significance must be a fixed determination, or the concept becomes impotent. Frequently enough, King explains, federal agencies and other organizations try to evade their Section 106 responsibilities toward National Register-eligible properties; therefore, reconceptualizing significance as malleable and refraining from proactive efforts will only strengthen anti-preservation arguments. King concludes, “While I think Tainter and Lucas are undoubtedly right, at their level of discourse, that the ‘inherent significance’ idea makes no sense, at the nitty-gritty level of dealing with agencies that seek every excuse to avoid having to identify and think about historic properties that are threatened by their actions, it has served us well. ... On such agencies, the elegance of the argument advanced by Tainter and Lucas is lost.”¹⁹

What the preservation field needs is a method for assessing significance that both acknowledges the complicated nature of historical significance and enables defensible arguments and transparent decision-making.

THE RECENT PAST

I first faced these issues while doing a project on *recent-past* preservation planning, specifically. Within the preservation field, the term “recent-past” typically refers to buildings of all types that were built within the past 35-49 years, a moving window of time. Today’s recent-past is the period from approximately 1962 to 1976, so it encompasses the architectural period of late-Modernism. In the summer of 2010, the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, the Philadelphia region’s leading

¹⁸ Lyons and Cloues, 37-38.

¹⁹ T. F. King, “If an Orange Falls in the Forest, Is It Eligible?” *American Antiquity*, 50, 1 (Jan. 1985), 171.

nonprofit organization focused on preservation advocacy, launched the city's first broad-scale recent-past initiative. The Philadelphia initiative was similar to initiatives launched in the past decade by preservation nonprofits across the country, including the Boston Preservation Alliance, Cincinnati Preservation Association, Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, Landmarks Illinois, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Preservation Chicago. The Alliance commissioned me to work with them on the following objectives:

- to compile the city's first inventory of recent-past buildings;
- to identify a shortlist of high-priority properties that warrant monitoring; and
- to select two top priorities for nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.²⁰

The challenges of a broadened concept of significance face both recent-past and distant-past preservation, yet the recent-past provides a lens through which the issues are especially pronounced. Literature on the subject of recent-past preservation planning has proliferated since the late 1980s.²¹ I have reviewed this literature specifically with an eye toward assessment of significance, and have identified three main reasons why the process is more fraught when dealing with recent-past, rather than distant past, properties. For the remainder of this section of the paper, I will briefly elaborate on these three issues, revealing how each of them only increases the challenges of assessment arising from a broadened significance concept. I will use first-hand experiences from the Philadelphia recent-past initiative to illustrate.

20 "Mid-Century Modern Architectural Resources," Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, www.preservation-alliance.com/programs/mcmar/index.php (accessed Aug. 31, 2011). This project involved both mid-20th-century and recent-past buildings, as the scope spanned 1945 to 1980. After I completed my work with the Preservation Alliance, I focused my research on a smaller sample of buildings: those of the 1960s.

21 (in chronological order) M. Jackson, guest ed., Preserving What's New, *APT Bulletin*, 23, 2 (1991); R. A. Shiffer, guest ed., Cultural Resources from the Recent Past, *CRM*, 16, 6 (1993); ICOMOS, Seminar on 20th Century Heritage, Helsinki, June 18-19, 1995" (working papers); D. Slaton and R. A. Shiffer, eds., *Preserving the Recent Past* (Washington, DC: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 1995); *Forum Journal*, 10, 1 (Fall 1995); S. Macdonald, ed., *Modern Matters: Principles and Practice in Conserving Recent Heritage* (Shaftesbury, UK: Donhead Publishing, 1996); S. D. Bronson and T. C. Jester, "Conserving the Built Heritage of the Modern Era: Recent Developments and Ongoing Challenges," and "Mending the Modern: A Selected Bibliography," both in *APT Bulletin*, 28, 4 (1997): 4-12; 59-60; D. Slaton and W. G. Foulks, eds., *Preserving the Recent Past 2* (Washington, DC: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 2000); *Forum Journal* 15, 1 (Fall 2000); *Forum Journal* 20, 1 (Fall 2005); T. H. M. Prudon, *The Preservation of Modern Architecture* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008); and *Forum Journal* 24, 4 (Summer 2010).

Lack of Historicity There is an undeniable phenomenon of emotional resistance to considering buildings of one's own generation, even one's own lifetime, as historical.²² People commonly think about recent-past buildings not as "historical" but as merely "old" and "ugly"—functionally obsolete and physically deteriorated. Preservation scholar Frank Matero describes recent-past buildings as being temporarily stuck "in that awkward teenage phase—no longer an adolescent and not quite an adult," or, in other words, no longer up-to-date but too young to have their historicity recognized and valued.²³ Historian Richard Striner notes that preservationists and the general public alike show a "proclivity for allowing our personal taste in architecture to outweigh more legitimate criteria for determining the historic significance of buildings. [...] buildings from the recent past are highly vulnerable to aesthetic ridicule."²⁴ ("More legitimate criteria" would require rational consideration of the various artistic, cultural, social, symbolic, and/or technological values in a given building.)

Another historian, James Schmiechen, reminds that this tendency is not new, as the Modernists regarded Victorian architecture

as a premier example of both utilitarian ugliness and ostentatious uselessness ... Until recently [the 1980s], the judgment has been nearly unanimous: the Victorians, while giving birth to a new age of steam, empire, and 'improvement,' traded the tranquility and order of the preindustrial world for a wretched landscape of chaos.²⁵

The problem is that this assessment was based in design criticism—*design criticism* was substituted for, or used interchangeably as, *historical analysis*. "One result of this design criticism is that, for a half-century after about 1920, nearly every Victorian city [in Great Britain] fell victim to the purposeful destruction of much of its Victorian face." Yet less than a generation later, in the 1980s, this view began to undergo revision, and today lament for lost Victorian architecture is pervasive.²⁶

22 R. Striner, "Scholarship, Strategy, and Activism in Preserving the Recent Past," *Forum Journal*, 10, 1 (Fall 1995); R. W. Longstreth, "The Significance of the Recent Past," *APT Bulletin*, 23, 2 (1991); W. R. Luce, "Kent State, White Castles and Subdivision: Evaluating the Recent Past," *Forum Journal*, 10, 1 (Fall 1995).

23 quoted in A. Jaffe, "Modernist Structures Need Watchdog," Plan Philly, Aug. 12, 2009, <http://planphilly.com/node/9638> (accessed Aug. 31, 2011).

24 Striner.

25 J. A. Schmiechen, "The Victorians, the Historians, and the Idea of Modernism," *The American Historical Review*, 93, 2 (April 1988), 287.

26 Schmiechen, 289.

As I worked on the Philadelphia Preservation Alliance initiative in summer 2010, I had numerous meetings and e-mail exchanges with experts on the local built environment—architects, architectural historians, planners, critics, developers—and I was struck by how frequently they discussed recent-past buildings in terms of aesthetics. Statements e-mailed or voiced in meetings included, “It’s based on my own likes and dislikes ... but then I roughly ordered it by buildings of international standing” and “Boston’s Modernist buildings are just so much more attractive [than Philadelphia’s stock].” Such statements are overtly subjective. Focusing on such statements can lead one to neglect a consideration of specific artistic, cultural, social, symbolic, and/or technological values attached to buildings (the connotative meanings of buildings). Apparently, professionals are as susceptible as non-professionals to purely subjective, aesthetics-based assessment.

Volume Another reason why the process of assessing significance is more fraught with recent-past resources is volume. First, more recent-past buildings are extant than distant-past buildings. Urban planning professor William Baer predicted in the mid-1990s that “three times as many structures will become eligible for preservation in 2000 as became eligible between 1900 and 1950.”²⁷ I have found, using U.S. Census data, that five times as many houses were built in the 1960s as in the 1890s.²⁸ Second, among today’s recent-past buildings, often there are many examples of a building type, a consequence of the flood of federally subsidized building in the mid-twentieth century and the standardization of the construction process. A building type or construction process itself may be historically significant, but not all examples are significant.²⁹

As preservationists Deborah Abele and Grady Gammage ask, “if there are vast examples of a resource type, how do we choose which ones should be preserved?” Greater volume increases the

27 W. C. Baer, “When Old Buildings Ripen for Historic Preservation: A Predictive Approach to Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 61, 1 (Winter 1995), 84.

28 U.S. Census Bureau, Table: Series N 156-169, New Housing Units Started: 1889-1970, in Statistical Abstracts, “Bicentennial Edition: Historic Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970,” Part 2, 639-640, www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab.html (accessed Aug. 11, 2011).

29 Noted by D. E. Abele and G. Gammage, Jr, “The Shifting Signposts of Significance,” in *Preserving the Recent Past* 2, edited by D. Slaton and W. G. Foulks (Washington, DC: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 2000); C. R. Brown, “Surveying the Suburbs: Back to the Future?” in *Preserving the Recent Past*, edited by D. Slaton and R. Shiffer (Washington, DC: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 1995); also W. R. Luce (1995).

challenges of prioritizing strongest significance. The traditional preservation criteria of scarcity and rarity can make for an appealingly straightforward decision-making process: those few that retain integrity from a bygone culture, and those few that are masterpieces of artistic intent and building technology, are worth preserving. With so many more recent-past buildings to consider, the onus is on the professional to make evermore researched and detailed statements of significance.³⁰

Ambiguous Values Thirdly, and related to the issue of historicity, preservationists and the public alike know far more about the high-art architecture of the recent-past and far too little about buildings significant in social function or popular expression. With any stock of buildings, recent-past or distant-past, both scholarly and popular assessments are essential to the professional's ability to make decisions insofar as they reveal the values that people attach to buildings; they also contribute toward the social construction of contexts through which meaning emerges.

Assessments that do emerge early on tend to take an architect-centered, art historical perspective, beginning with the architectural reportage and criticism found in journals, followed by coffee table architecture books and architectural history texts. Architectural historian Richard Longstreth discusses how interest in high-art architecture, including "ideology, artistic expression, and a very limited range of technical innovations" tends to precede other historical topics such as patronage, public reception, popular symbolism, commercial architects, and practical (as opposed to spectacular) building technologies. "Our knowledge of [...] twentieth century [architecture] is far narrower in scope than could be the case, and these limitations stem in part from long-standing ties between historians of modern architecture and contemporary architectural practice."³¹

Consequently, preservation priorities, too, tend to be skewed toward overemphasis on high-art architecture. It is easier for the professional to build a case for significance, and to make a strong, convincing case to the broader public, when a building has already been widely considered—as

30 A. Saint, "Principles of Modern Conservation," in *Modern Matters: Principles and Practice in Conserving Recent Architecture*, edited by S. Macdonald (Dorset: Donhead Publishing, 1996), 17. Referenced in B. R. Beier, "Preserving the Work of Mitchell/Giurgola Associates" [Masters Thesis] (Univ. of Penna., Philadelphia, PA, 2006), 15-16.

31 R. W. Longstreth, "The Significance of the Recent Past," *APT Bulletin*, 23, 2 (1991), 13. See also D. Upton, "Architectural History or Landscape History?" *Journal of Architectural Education*, 44, 4 (August 1991): 195-99.

in the case of Eero Saarinen's Dulles International Airport, granted National Register eligibility only sixteen years after its 1962 opening (FIGURE 3).³² Conversely, it is all too easy to dismiss significance in those buildings for which historical contexts have not yet been articulated. We must remember that the great architectural advancements of an age are only a part, not the whole, of the built heritage that the preservation field aspires to protect, curate, and respectfully reuse.



FIGURE 3: Dulles International Airport (Eero Saarinen, 1962), near Washington, DC, in 2008
Source: Wikimedia Commons <http://commons.wikimedia.org/>

Former National Register Keeper Carol Shull and NPS historian Beth Savage found this tendency reflected on the National Register, where “[b]y far the most listings [from] the post-1950 period are in the area of architecture”; they found the fewest significant in the areas of “commerce, transportation, and engineering.” “[L]istings and determinations of eligibility reflect scholarship and advocacy in some aspects of our history and their dearth in others.”³³ (It has been preservationists,

32 Longstreth, particularly 12-14.

33 C. D. Shull and B. L. Savage, “Trends in Recognizing Places for Significance in the Recent Past,” *Forum Journal*, 10, 1 (Fall 1995).

note Shull and Savage and others, who have helped to augment the knowledge gap.³⁴)

The Preservation Alliance expressly wanted to take an inclusive approach to the creation of inventory and shortlist, considering buildings valued from perspectives other than the art-historical perspective. Yet an historic context statement produced for the initiative by a local architectural historian in the preceding year presents an art-historical, particularly architect-centered, perspective of the development of Philadelphia in the mid-twentieth century, focused more on contemporary ideas of quality design than on Philadelphia history. The essay includes discussion of the Mill Creek, Southwark, and West Park low-income housing projects but in the context of, respectively, the history of Modernism, the typologically analogous but upscale Hopkinson House and Society Hill Towers, and the *Siedlungen*³⁵ of 1920s Germany. It excludes discussion of consumerist trends in banks, storefronts, and shopping centers (apart from the Edmund Bacon-proposed Gallery at Market Street East), and dismisses the postwar swell of development in Northeast Philadelphia, when neighborhoods such as Mayfair and Rhawnhurst doubled and tripled in size, as “interesting more as a sociological study than as quality design.”³⁶ Despite the Alliance’s progressive desire to consider buildings valued from a variety of perspectives, the historic context for use in this initiative remained art-historical and conventional. Consequently, when considering the shortlist of buildings for possible nomination to the Philadelphia Register, several staff members’ suggestions for non-canonical but locally valued landmarks—for example, Stein Flowers (George Neff, 1950), a family-owned business and landmark in the Mayfair section of Northeast Philadelphia (FIGURE 4)—were rejected as “not notable enough.” Read from within the art-historical context, the connotative meaning of Stein Flowers was negligible. Stein Flowers was included in the inventory but excluded as a priority for further preservation attention.

34 See A. Hess, *Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986); C. H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little Brown, 1985); R. W. Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

35 innovative Modernist housing estates

36 M. Clendenin, “Thematic Context Statement: Modernism: 1945 to 1980” (Philadelphia: Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, 2009), Preserve Philadelphia, www.preservephiladelphia.org/wp-content/uploads/HCSModernism.pdf (accessed April 28, 2011).



FIGURE 4: Stein Flowers (George Neff, 1950), Mayfair, Philadelphia, PA, in 2009
Source: Betsy Manning

I proceeded to e-mail our group of experts to solicit their perspectives. Given a shortlist of architecturally noted, recent-past buildings not yet designated, I asked each of them to identify the “most notable.”³⁷ I did not define “notable” and deliberately offered no criteria or context to use, though I did reveal that the purpose of this exercise was to provide the Alliance with advice on mid-century buildings to nominate to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Another, unstated goal of this exercise was to help me to better understand the perspectives from which varied experts on the urban built environment assess historical significance.

37 (in chronological order) Apalogen Road Houses (Montgomery and Bishop, et al, 1950s-mid-60s); Parkway House (Roth and Fleischer, 1953); Foerderer Pavilion (Vincent Kling and Associates, 1954); Pennsylvania State Office Building (Carroll, Grisdale, Van Alen, 1958); Hill Hall, University of Pennsylvania (Eero Saarinen and Associates, 1960); 1500 Walnut Street Addition (Bower and Fradley, 1963); Police Administration Building (Geddes, Brecher, Qualls Cunningham, 1963); Vanna Venturi House (Venturi and Rauch, 1964); Rohm and Haas Building (Pietro Belluschi, 1965); Municipal Services Building (Vincent Kling and Associates, 1965); Anne Tyng House (Anne Tyng, 1967); Philadelphia Electric Company Building (Harbeson, Hough, Livingston, Larson, 1970); United Fund Headquarters (Mitchell/Giurgola Associates, 1971); ISI Building, Drexel University (Venturi, Rauch, Scott Brown, 1979).

Some respondents chose to take an urban planning/urban history perspective, assessing according to the impact that a building made on the streetscape and surrounding built environment. Others took an architectural perspective, noting buildings that were particularly influential on the mainstream architecture profession and inspired trends in materials and techniques. Others examined buildings through the lens of art history, ranking the shortlist according to artistic achievement. One, an architecture critic, avoided consideration of historical value altogether, using current threat as her criterion. These individuals presented almost as many perspectives as there were them, and championed different priorities for designation.

Consequently, I found it difficult to identify points of consensus, or “general historical significance” (as if such exists), about Philadelphia’s mid-century buildings. Moreover, the lack of consensus suggested to me that respondents felt uncertain as to what exactly they were being asked to evaluate—what *kind* of significance should they be looking at? In short, the different criteria that our experts chose for assessing significance resulted in different perceptions of significance. This outcome underscores Tainter and Lucas’s point that significance “is a quality that we assign to a cultural resource based on the theoretical framework within which we happen to be thinking.”³⁸

There was, however, one building on the shortlist that nearly every expert ranked first unequivocally: the Vanna Venturi House (FIGURES 5, 6, 7). Architectural historians have called this one-and-a-half story house in leafy Chestnut Hill “the biggest small building of the second half of the twentieth century” and “one of the great buildings of the last half of the twentieth century.”³⁹ The response of one of our experts—“Venturi’s Mother’s House is at the top for obvious reasons”—epitomized the others, and it appeared indisputable that the Vanna Venturi House should be the Preservation Alliance’s top candidate for designation to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Yet a public poll that the Alliance conducted around the same time, inviting Philadelphia-area pres-

38 Tainter and Lucas, 714.

39 Respectively, V. Scully, “Everybody Needs Everything,” in *Mother’s House: The Evolution of Vanna Venturi’s House in Chestnut Hill*, edited by F. Schwartz (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 39; and D. G. De Long, “Seeking a Rational Mannerism,” in *Out of the Ordinary: Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Associates*, edited by D. B. Brownlee, et al (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001), 122.



FIGURE 5 (top):
Vanna Venturi House, front/side, in 2010

FIGURE 6 (middle):
Vanna Venturi House, rear, in 2010

Source: Wikimedia Commons <http://commons.wikimedia.org/>

FIGURE 7 (bottom):
Vanna Venturi House, first floor, in 2006

Source: JPMM on [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jpmm/) Creative Commons

ervationists and others to vote on their favorites among “a mix of well-known [mid-century modern] buildings and hidden neighborhood gems from across the city,” found the Vanna Venturi House to be one of the *least* noteworthy houses. The Dorothy Shipley White House (Mitchell/Giurgola Associates, 1963) received the most votes in the single-family house category of the poll.⁴⁰ This outcome perhaps exemplifies the ambiguous values of recent-past buildings: the Vanna Venturi House is a complicated, pivotal building whose enduring significance may not yet be comprehended outside architecture circles, whereas the Shipley House is a white, boxy, archetypically “Modernist” house. Yet even the Weise House and Studio (Frank Weise, begun 1954), an eccentric project in the conservative Rittenhouse Square neighborhood, fared better than the Vanna Venturi House among poll respondents.

The point here is not that the Vanna Venturi House does not deserve designation for its tremendous artistic value, but to highlight the fact that significance is not self-evident and fixed, not even in the “very best” buildings. To encounter an example of such pronounced disparity among perspectives underscores the difficulty in choosing priorities, as well as the theoretical conundrum facing the preservation field following our adoption of an “inclusive” concept of significance.

EXCEPTIONALITY VERSUS MULTIPLICITY

If we accept that any range of values can produce cultural significance worth preserving (or can present equally valid reasons not to preserve, which we must consider, too), and we accept that all perspectives are potentially valid, then we are left with potentially endless points of significance. They are all essentially “separate but equal” significances. “Good and bad criteria for significance do not exist,” archaeology professor Bernard Knapp wrote in 1996, describing the archaeology field under an atmosphere of postmodernism, “and all interpretations become equally valid.”⁴¹ The description applies to the preservation field equally. Nevertheless, we have to choose priorities. We cannot preserve everything, and

40 Field Notes from the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, fieldnotesphilly.wordpress.com; “Philadelphia Likes Mod,” fieldnotesphilly.wordpress.com/ilikemod (accessed Aug. 31, 2011).

41 A. B. Knapp, “Archaeology without Gravity: Postmodernism and the Past,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 3, 2 (June 1996), 136.

we should not preserve just anything. How are we to dig out of this conundrum? We have accepted an inclusive concept of significance in theory but have yet to formulate a methodology for rational, comparative analysis of a given heterogeneous, polysemous stock of buildings on the city or county level.

A 2007 essay by National Park Service deputy director John Sprinkle provides an historical context through which to better understand our own matter in discussion. Sprinkle reflects on a notably similar “preservation paradigm shift” that happened in the mid-twentieth century “[i]n view of the changing complexion and increasing complexity of preservation needs, especially in urban areas,” and which culminated in the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

One general characteristic of the new preservation was the broadening of the program’s mandate and scope and its flexibility to accommodate new property types. The boundary of historical importance was expanded to include state and local level of significance. Areas of consideration were enlarged to include properties more representative of the total American experience and sites that had intrinsic aesthetic values. So it is not surprising that the chronological boundaries of the program were also stretched. Inclusiveness was geographic, topical, ethnic, and chronological.⁴²

At the end of the 1960s, the National Park Service observed that more than half of a sample of new designations were for properties whose periods of significance fell within the past fifty years.⁴³

A fifty-year standard has existed in federal-level preservation since 1948, but with “the new preservation” it relaxed from a rule to a guideline, allowing for exceptions. If the well-documented concerns throughout the earlier twentieth century are any indicator,⁴⁴ we can surmise that concern continued to arise over protecting the integrity of the designation process against contemporary trends and undue political and economic pressures. Likely, concern increased in reaction to the inclusive spirit of this period’s broadened significance concept—just as we find today in essays by Donovan Rypkema and others. Ultimately, the National Park Service introduced the criterion of *exceptionality* for assessing the National Register eligibility of properties under fifty years old, codified in a 1979 National Register bulletin: “Properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years may be listed in the National Register of Historic Places, according to the National Register

42 J. H. Sprinkle, Jr., “‘Of Exceptional Importance’: The Origins of the ‘Fifty-Year Rule’ in Historic Preservation,” *The Public Historian*, 29, 2 (Spring 2007), 96-99.

43 Ibid., 99.

44 Ibid., 83-96.

Criteria for Evaluation, only if they are of ‘exceptional importance’....”⁴⁵ The criterion of exceptionality provides a filter that allows through only those sites whose significance is especially well-researched and documented and/or widely known among a local or national public.

However, the criterion of exceptionality does not adequately address some of the challenges to which recent-past properties are prone. Firstly, some types of properties tend to accrue historical value at a faster rate than others. It may, in effect, privilege high-art masterpieces, to which more popular and scholarly attention has been given early on. Secondly, buildings devalued today on the basis of fashion, particularly vernacular commercial buildings, may not survive to reach the fifty-year mark, given the typical thirty-year amortization rate of commercial mortgages and business pressures to cosmetically update every ten or so years. Thirdly, the criterion of exceptionality ignores the inverse implication of its own logic: it aims to protect the National Register against trend-based fads of cultural significance, but it offers nothing against trend-based *insignificance*.

In short, the criterion of exceptionality calls for *deeper understanding of a site from one perspective*. A criterion of multiplicity, by contrast, would call for *broader understanding of a site from various perspectives*. I propose multiplicity as a primary criterion in assessing priorities among a stock of recent-past buildings. All buildings contain multiple values, but some buildings actually have multiple layers of significance, each layer a discrete summary statement of why it should be conserved. Such buildings can be recognized as significant from various perspectives. They are more likely to retain their significance over time, for even if one significance-layer diminishes, as often happens, at least one other will remain, and any protective measures already made (e.g., designations, easements) will have reason to remain. Such buildings warrant primary attention from the professional.

45 M. Sherfy and W. R. Luce (1979), C. D. Shull (rev. and ed., 1996), *National Register Bulletin 22: Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance within the Last Fifty Years*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, 1998), 1.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

After researching Philadelphia's recent-past buildings and compiling an inventory of several hundred for the Preservation Alliance, I turned to ArcGIS to experiment with methods that might work toward revealing buildings that meet the multiplicity criterion. I created a new shapefile and set up a range of attribute fields in which to record my inventory information. (As this was a sample, I limited myself to Philadelphia buildings built between 1959 and 1970, i.e., the 1960s.) I established the first few fields for recording basic information such as address, architect, and year completed, and the remaining fields (limitless) for recording types of significance that some of the buildings have acquired over time (FIGURE 8).

Attributes of 1959-1970_ALLBUILDINGS						
Id	NAME	ADDRESS	TYOLOGY	ARCHITECT	YEAR	PHILA REGI
27	Clarence Pickett Middle School	5700 Wayne Avenue	Edu-Primary/Secondary	Geddes, Brecher, Gualls, Cunningha	1970	unprotected
28	Robert Brasler House	4122 Apalogen Road	Resid-SingleFamily	Joel Levinson	1966	unprotected
29	N William Winkelman Jr House	4141 Apalogen Road	Resid-SingleFamily	Montgomery and Bishop	1959	unprotected
30	Hasserrick/Sawyer House	4030 Cherry Lane	Resid-SingleFamily	Richard Neutra	1959	2009, individual de
31	Free Library of Phila, Lovett Memorial Bran	6945 Germantown Avenue	CivicBuildings/CommunityCenters	Montgomery and Bishop	1959	unprotected
32	Society Hill Townhouses	281-93 Locust Street	Resid-SingleFamily	I M Pei and Associates	1962	1999, within Societ
33	1500 Walnut Street Addition	1500 Walnut Street	Commerc-Retail/Office-Highrise	Bower and Fradley	1963	unprotected
34	Moore College of Art	1916 Race Street	Edu-University/Laboratory	Carroll, Grisdale, Van Alen	1964	unprotected
35	James McClennen House	127 Pine Street	Resid-SingleFamily	Louis Sauer Associates	1968	1999, within Societ
36	Perkins House	401 Cypress Street	Resid-SingleFamily	Mitchell/Giurgola Associates	1968	1999, within Societ
37	Anne Tyng House	2511 Waverly Street	Resid-SingleFamily	Anne Tyng	1967	unprotected
38	Five Penn Center	1601 Market Street	Commerc-Retail/Office-Highrise	Vincent Kling and Associates	1970	unprotected
39	United Fund Headquarters	1709 Benjamin Franklin Park	Commerc-Retail/Office-Highrise	Mitchell/Giurgola Associates	1970	2010, individual de
40	University Lutheran Church	3637 Chestnut Street	Ecclesiastical	Pietro Belluschi	1969	unprotected
41	Walnut Street Parking Garage, Univ of PA	3201 Walnut Street	Transportational	Mitchell/Giurgola Associates	1964	unprotected
42	Free Library of Phila, NE Regional Branch	2228 Cottman Avenue	CivicBuildings/CommunityCenters	Geddes, Brecher, Gualls, Cunningha	1963	unprotected
43	Archbishop Ryan Catholic High School	11201 Academy Road	Edu-Primary/Secondary	Dagit Associates	1968	unprotected
44	Benjamin Rush Junior High School	11081 Knights Road	Edu-Primary/Secondary	Thalheimer and Wetz	1968	unprotected

SIG_LYR_1	SOURCE_1_A	SOURCE_1_B	SIG_LYR_2	SOURCE_2_A	SOURCE_2_B	SIG_LYR_3	SOURCE_3_A
ContempArchHist	2009, Clendenin		UrbanDevelopment		MunicipalProject		
ContempArchHist	2009, Clendenin	1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist	2009, Clendenin	1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist	2009, Clendenin					ContempPublic	2010, PAGPpoll
ContempArchHist	2009, Clendenin		UrbanDevelopment		MunicipalProject		
ContempArchHist		1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist		1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist		1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist		1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist		1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist	2009, Clendenin	1997, Evers					
ContempArchHist	2009, Clendenin	1997, Evers				ContempPublic	2010, PAGPpoll
ContempArchHist		1997, Evers				ContempPublic	2010, PAGPpoll
ContempArchHist		1997, Evers					
			UrbanDevelopment	NortheastPhila	MunicipalProject	ContempPublic	2010, PAGPpoll
			UrbanDevelopment	NortheastPhila			
			UrbanDevelopment	NortheastPhila	MunicipalProject		

FIGURE 8: Sample of the Attributes Table (split to fit the page).

I then began to draw GIS polygons around the footprints of the buildings in the inventory (access to municipal shapefiles of buildings and streets is essential to this step). As I outlined each building, I recorded the information that I had about it in the attributes table (FIGURE 9). I created all of the polygons within a single shapefile, which represents the sum total of buildings in my inventory (FIGURE 10). The use of a single shapefile eliminates the need to redraw building polygons as my knowledge about the buildings grows over time. Each polygon is fixed as the building itself, while the attribute fields within each polygon are editable and potentially endless, capturing the information

about the building's significance over time.

GIS can cut the labor of inventorying and assessing over time as prior work remains in the system and new work builds upon it.

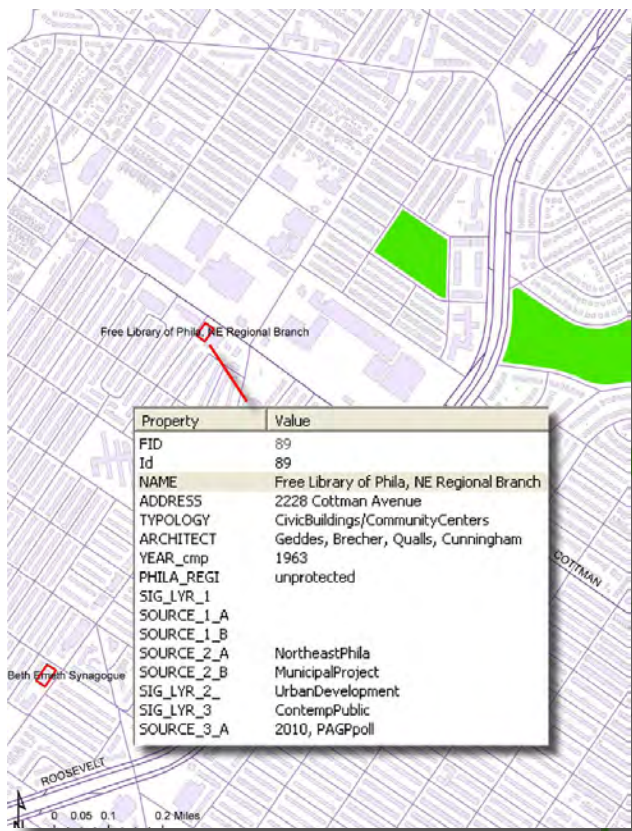


FIGURE 9 (above): Example of a building polygon and its attribute fields.

FIGURE 10 (right): The red specks indicate a selection of the 1960s buildings inventory that I noted for containing various types of significance.

In addition to recording basic information in the attributes table (address, architect, etc.), I recorded information about building significance that I had accumulated through my research. I refer to these as “significance-layers,” as some buildings did not have just one type of significance but multiple layers arising at different points in time or concurrently. Different sources of information provided the basis of the significance-layers in the system. For recent-past buildings, sources might include:

- architectural journals of the historical time;
- contemporary architectural-historical publications;
- historical maps;
- local chapter AIA yearbooks and awards;
- newspaper articles of the historical time;
- opinions from varied segments of the public today;
- records of municipal building projects;
- regional building industry publications of the historical time; and more.

In my experience, the source of information determined the values that I discerned—different sources suggested entirely different priorities—underscoring the importance of consulting a wide range.

I carried out a test of the “multiplicity” approach using sources of information that I categorized into three distinct significance-layers in the attributes table. Significance from the perspective of architectural history was noted in buildings cited in two Philadelphia architecture publications. Significance from the perspective of urban history, particularly the dramatic, heavily subsidized development of Philadelphia in the 1960s, was tracked in buildings that were special municipal projects, as well as in buildings cited in the Philadelphia Chapter AIA Yearbooks from the burgeoning Lower and Far Northeast neighborhoods. Significance from the perspective of broader public appeal was recorded in buildings that received the first-, second-, and third-most votes in the aforementioned Preservation Alliance poll.

I want to emphasize that additional sources and categories of significance should be added to enable thorough assessments; I do not present the following results as conclusive in any way.

However, the test was useful in suggesting how this methodology could work. It suggests that the following five 1960s buildings are highly laden with significance:

- District Health Center No. 1 (Montgomery and Bishop, 1960)
- Free Library of Philadelphia's Northeast Regional Branch (Geddes, Brecher, Qualls and Cunningham, 1963)
- Municipal Services Building (Vincent Kling and Associates, 1965)
- Police Administration Building (Geddes, Brecher, Qualls and Cunningham, 1963)
- Rohm and Haas Building (Pietro Belluschi, 1965)

Among the significance-layers that I included in the attributes table, these buildings were cited most frequently, in three out of four categories. This is to say, the Northeast Library, for example, was part of the historically significant explosion of development in the Far Northeast in the 1960s, *and it was* a special municipal project, *and it remains* valued by Philadelphians today (FIGURES 11, 12, 13).



FIGURE 11: Free Library of Philadelphia, Northeast Regional Branch (Geddes, Brecher, Qualls and Cunningham, 1963), Northeast Philadelphia, PA, in 2011 Source: Deborah Merriam



FIGURE 12 (top):
Northeast Regional Library, front, in 2010

FIGURE 13 (bottom):
Northeast Regional Library, lobby, in 2010

Source: Deborah Merriam

The presence of multiple significance-layers does not mean that such buildings necessarily warrant designation at the present time, but it does indicate that they warrant documentation, monitoring (of both condition and usage), and further historical and ethnographical research. Further research revealed that the Northeast Library in fact has history of strong appreciation and landmark status among the Northeast Philadelphia community. Unlike the other buildings highlighted above, both this library and the District Health Center No. 1 (FIGURE 14) are not considered canonical Philadelphia buildings, and they may be overlooked as priorities using traditional methods of assessing significance.



FIGURE 14: District Health Center No. 1 (Montgomery and Bishop, 1960), Center City, Philadelphia, PA, in 2009
Source: Lindsey E. Allen

CONCLUSION

Today, preservation professionals tend to accept that significance is a connotative quality—socially constructed, based on intangible values as well as tangible attributes, dependent for its meaning on a particular cultural perspective, and subject to change over time. However, the field still must reconcile this broadened significance concept with the methodological need to retain evaluative standards, identify priorities based on a consistent measure of value, and make compelling, defensible claims of significance.

Burgeoning interest in recent-past preservation has only compounded the challenge. Recent-past properties, to a greater extent than distant-past properties, have not accrued strong historical value, and responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of the preservation planning professional to ensure that some of these most vulnerable buildings are retained for the future. It is a challenge that professionals cannot dismiss. As architecture critic Paul Goldberger notes, “the battles, increasingly, are going to be fought on the grounds of modern landmarks—those buildings that were constructed in the years after the preservation movement rose to become a major force, those buildings that many

of us, myself included, grew up disliking.”⁴⁶

The professional would benefit from a method to help navigate the process of identifying recent-past priorities among many possibilities—where no priority is self-evident and all possibilities are arguably valid. The professional should be able to do this without overemphasizing high-art masterpieces or falling prone to contemporary taste. The criterion of multiplicity and the tool of GIS may be useful toward this goal. The criterion of multiplicity, in contrast to the traditional criterion of exceptionality, directs the professional to assess a building from a variety of perspectives and to actively hunt for diversity in meanings, while GIS provides a tool for recording all of that information, processing and analyzing it in different ways, tracking changes over time, and revealing, graphically, the conclusions that the professional draws.

The field cannot do without the concept of significance, but it can seek a pragmatic solution, an admittedly imperfect method that helps professionals address the pluralism in heritage and the polysemy of cultural objects while nonetheless uncovering priorities of highest significance. This paper, I hope, provides a step toward that objective.

⁴⁶ P. Goldberger, “On Historic Preservation,” a lecture delivered to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, May 29, 2003, www.paulgoldberger.com/lectures/13 (accessed Aug 31, 2011).