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Looking Forward Symposium- Paper Draft

Abstract

This paper aims to address the issue of historical significance in the context of this transitory community by invoking Dr. Ned Kaufman's concept of "storyscape," a strategy developed to pinpoint overlapping and diverse forms of historical information, including original campus buildings, historical texts, physical documentation and oral history. It also serves as a methodological template for ongoing historical research, which captures the evolving persona of the campus. This method responds to a pressing need to capture historical significance as it unfolds and in places that might otherwise be lost as the communities to whom they mean the most are disengaged after graduation and frequently never return.

This paper will use the case study of Smith College, an institution whose physical embodiment has mirrored prevailing ideas about the role of education in the life of the American woman. The primary historical pretext will be that the buildings we see today are the result of both institutional conviction in the appropriate pedagogy for women as well as the actual experiences and use of those spaces by the students, many of whom went on to become leaders in the transformation of the very stereotypes about womanhood that the college trustees were intent on advancing. What the "storyscape" reveals within structures from the college's inception through its history is not only the primary historical record of design and institutional intention but also the important transgressions, modifications, re-packagings, etc. that these spaces were subjected to by a community of young women who, over time, transformed the identity of the college and thus the historical significance of the spaces created to house the institution. I will focus on the history of the Alumnae Gymnasium to illustrate the role of "storyscape" in campus preservation and how this way of analysis can change what aspects of history are presented in the future.

Smith College: Interpretation and Preservation of Gendered Space

Throughout New England colleges and universities have been centers of intellectual and academic pursuits and have heavily informed the way that their host towns and cities have grown and developed. Collegiate buildings have provided the backdrop of important national and international historical events, and all campus sites have been the backdrops to smaller more personal histories that hold special meaning for the thousands of students who lived and worked within their walls. In his book *Race, Place, and Story*, Dr. Ned Kaufman has used the term “storyscape” to define landscapes and buildings or “storysites” that “have the ability to convey history, support community memory, and nurture people’s attachment to place” through their mnemonic nature.¹ This ideology holds particular relevance for campus preservation.

While college campuses hold the memories of thousands of people their physical attributes are constantly in flux, a process that is detrimental to the preservation of community memory. Campus preservation of physical attributes is challenging in itself due to institutional reluctance to encumber or restrain the development and improvement that is seen as central to the ongoing life of the college. New buildings are the showpieces of campus tours and the pride of a college’s trustees and donors. However, when preservation takes place on campus, Kaufman’s storyscape concept provides an important addition to the standard arguments of architectural and historical significance. This paper focuses on the preservation possibilities of the storyscape concept on the historic Smith College campus using the example of the first successful preservation campaign at Smith, saving the Alumnae Gymnasium, as a case study. The Smith campus example offers not only a range of significant architecture, but also the added potential

for enhancing our understanding of the history of women's academic achievements through the ways in which its structures were used as gendered spaces.² Gendered space can be defined as space in which women's unique role in history can be made apparent or brought to light and conveyed to current students to enrich their understanding of college history. In this way, buildings can be a primary source text in the larger narrative of institutional history; reading changes in the building as a story can reveal the specific historical moments in which they were built and how they evolved over time.

The College Campus as a Cultural Storyscape

Smith College's campus buildings can, as a totality, be understood as a "storyscape."³ "Storyscape" can also be seen as a way of defining the totality of the collegiate experience, an intense four years spent amassing personal stories that occur in public and private spaces that ultimately must be abandoned. Each of these stories or memories, when combined with other personal accounts of storyscape and more traditional preservation signifiers such as important architecture, original fabric, and prominent architects can come to be prime sites for preservation. The idea of storyscape therefore, can be an important component of preservation planning ensuring that a more inclusive and comprehensive history is conserved.

Analyzing the gendered elements of the Smith College campus is important to an overall understanding of the campus as a unit for preservation planning purposes. In combination with a multiplicity of elements, including landscape design, circulation patterns, etc., the buildings and their stories make up the overall cultural landscape of Smith College. "Cultural Landscapes" have been defined by Charles A. Birnbaum of the Cultural Landscape Foundation as places that, "provide a sense of place and identity; map

our relationship with the land over time; and that are part of our national heritage and each of our lives.”⁴ Cultural landscapes are recognized as sites worthy of protection, but are still capable of change and adaptation through time as necessary by use, such as with historic garden or agricultural site. Combining the cultural landscape definition with Kaufman’s idea of *storyscape* creates an interpretive framework for the Smith College campus collectively as a *cultural storyscape* (author’s emphasis), or a landscape that provides a sense of place and history through the preservation of specific designed features, building configurations, and architectural elements (both interior and exterior) with the uses of those features and the accumulated events, and memories of its users and inhabitants over time. Interpreting the Smith campus using a methodology that looks at why buildings were first designed first, how design decisions were made, how students were meant to inhabit these buildings, and then how they were actually inhabited, the larger significance and meaning of what can seem like a disparate group of buildings can be better understood and protected.

Memory Infrastructure and the Preservation of the Alumnae Gymnasium

The collection of buildings and spaces that make up the Smith Campus creates a shared "memory infrastructure" for its residents not unlike that of a historic city that retains its monuments to the past for those of the present to interact with today.⁵ The preservation of this “memory infrastructure” works to make those who use the campus today at least tangentially aware of those who came before them and left their mark on the campus. Given the transience of the student population, and the importance of alumnae to the long-term life of the institution, enhancing the campus’s “memory infrastructure” can be seen as means of creating a timeless space. At Smith, the memory

infrastructure connects present students to some of the most influential thinkers of our time, graduates such as Betty Freidan, Sylvia Plath, Gloria Steinem, and Julia Child, who have contributed to this memory infrastructure both in tangible and intangible ways. Thus, seemingly ordinary spaces can convey significance for current students and future alumnae. This paper analyzes the story of a single building as a storysite within the overall campus storyscape and uses that building to reveal an element of the college's memory infrastructure.

The focus of this paper is the Alumnae Gymnasium, an 1892 structure whose preservation history beginning in the 1970s uncovers the relevance of storyscape within the preservation process to not only preserve bricks and mortar but also the meaning behind them.

History and Use, Alumnae Gymnasium as *cultural storyscape*

In 1888 the Smith College Department for Physical Culture produced a report on the state of physical education on campus and the need for a new building to house such activities. Miss Gertrude Walker, head of gymnastics at the college outlined why a new building was needed, and what the new structure should accommodate. She asked:

What would a new gymnasium be to the college? What are some of the qualification it should possess in order that it may best serve our special needs...We have not room enough to accommodate all who would like to avail themselves of regular practice...The building in which the work now goes on is inadequate not only in space, but also in facilities for making the practice truly healthful and complete.⁶

Plans for a new gymnasium began first with a large fundraising campaign led entirely by the then fledgling Alumnae Association of Smith College in June of 1887.⁷ An Alumnae Association committee was formed to spearhead the fundraising efforts for the roughly three hundred Smith alumnae who had dispersed across the nation. The committee was

unrelenting in its efforts to raise "no less than 20,000 dollars" for the new gymnasium.⁸ They were also moved to action by the report that Vassar College's Alumnae Association had recently raised funds for its own new gymnasium. The Smith alumnae vowed that they "were not to be outdone" by their fellow seven-sister school.⁹

Hartford architect William C. Brocklesby was chosen for the job as part of a larger building campaign that included four student cottage residences. Miss Walker's 1888 report listed the programmatic requirements for the new Alumnae Gymnasium: along with a place for fancy marching, chest weights, and exercise machines (then part of the normal routine of the current gymnasium) the ideal gym would have space for gymnastics and larger group calisthenics as well as a running track.¹⁰ This program established the basis for Brocklesby's 1890 design of the Alumnae Gymnasium.

Brocklesby's final interior design included a split-level staircase at the main entrance on the west façade of the building allowing students and faculty either to proceed upstairs to the central gymnasium, and suspended running track or downstairs to the classroom spaces, changing rooms, offices, bowling alley, swimming tank, or squash courts. On the upper floor were full-height windows, a large brick fireplace at the south and an open roof structure that revealed the rafters and building trusses from which climbing ropes were hung. The building also contained storage space for costumes and props for the many plays held on an elevated stage at the north end of the structure.

With the completion of Alumnae Gymnasium in 1892 Smith College had a physical monument representing not only its regard for the cultivation of the female body but also the fund-raising power of its alumnae. The striking building joined other women-only college gyms across the country as places where women were encouraged to

increase their physical strengths and engage in athletic competition. Among the activities that took place within the Alumnae Gym were some of the most important events in women's sports, as well as Smith College, history and these have helped to shape the collective memory of the campus.

The building became the permanent home to the Department of Physical Culture under the direction of Miss Senda Berenson. Berenson came to Smith one month after Canadian physical education guru James Naismith developed the game of basketball in the neighboring city of Springfield, Massachusetts.¹¹ After several meetings with Mr. Naismith, Berenson introduced the game to her students at Smith. Under her instruction the first game of collegiate women's basketball was played on March 21, 1893 between the freshmen and sophomore class teams.¹² Reflecting on that day, Berenson mused:

We thought that just a few students would come to watch, but the whole college with class colors and banners turned out. They filled the broad balcony, the early ones sitting on the edge dangling their legs. They stood along the walls...the cheering and screaming of the spectators grew deafening...a high pitched sound I do not believe [any] one had ever heard before.¹³

The game was fiercely popular on campus and quickly spread to other women's colleges, YWCAs, and athletic clubs. Berenson went on to write and edit *Spalding's Official Basket Ball Guide for Women*, adjusting the rules of the game to make it more "suitable" for women of the time. This rulebook established the standards in women's basketball and was used to govern the game until its official rules were amended to mirror those of men's basketball in 1971.

The building was also home to a flurry of non-athletic events throughout the academic year. The most important social event to take place within the Alumnae Gymnasium for incoming students was the Freshman Frolic. During this time new

freshman were asked to the dance by sophomore students who took up the role of gentleman caller, in both her actions and dress. The gymnasium was decorated as a ballroom where the two classes celebrated new students and new friendships.¹⁴

During the Freshman Frolic, in the all-female space of Alumnae Gymnasium, students were actually acting as men, and in doing so subverted the entire collegiate program defined by Smith's first president, L. Clark Seelye: "it is to preserve her womanliness that this college has been founded."¹⁵ The building itself played an important part of this event: the running track was transformed into a viewing area, where older students could witness the gender role reversals of the sophomore class:

The gymnasium however does not confine its festivities to occasional dramatic representation. An impromptu dance, known as the "Freshman Frolic" opens the year...this has become one of the most cherished institutions. Looking down from the running-track upon the seven or eight hundred girls dancing together, one is struck by the almost theatrical effect of the swaying forms and bright colors...Men are not missed so well are their places filled by the assiduous sophomores.¹⁶

The specific design of Alumnae Gym created a space that simultaneously created an arena for incoming students to witness women acting out a socially unacceptable behavior, allowed for sophomores to take on a male persona, and through the running track provided a platform for upper-class students to witness and relive their own experiences as freshmen attendees as well sophomore role players. Even though the building had a specific program, the students were able to use it in varied ways that added a set of collective memories, or storyscapes, to the space and added both to its historical significance as the site of the first women's college basketball game and to its place as a storysite.

SACSAG and the Campaign to Preserve the Alumnae Gymnasium

By the nineteen sixties, use of the gymnasium had declined. With a new gymnasium housing all indoor athletics and other campus buildings providing social and community spaces, the old gym was no longer the setting for the all school events and gatherings that had solidified its importance in the minds of earlier students. In May 1975, a proposal to expand Nielson Library, Smith's main library, called for the demolition of Alumnae Gymnasium.¹⁷ The proposed addition, designed by Cambridge Seven Inc., a Boston architecture firm, would add 67,000 square feet of space to the growing library. In response, a committee, the Smith Alumnae Committee to Save Alumnae Gymnasium (SACSAG), was formed to advocate for the preservation of the gymnasium, prevent its demolition, and identify a design solution that would give the old building a new purpose.¹⁸

The committee, made up of burgeoning preservationists, was put together during an integral moment in the larger history of the historic preservation movement in this country.¹⁹ Columbia University, under the direction of James M. Fitch, had been graduating professional preservationists for ten years, some of whom made up the SACSAG, such as Yona Donner Hermann (Smith College class of 1957), and the SACSAG's chairperson Mimi Evans Findlay (Smith College class of 1956).²⁰ These women were uniquely qualified, as concerned Smith alumnae and Columbia- educated preservationists, to coordinate opposition to the demolition of Alumnae Gym. Even though no longer resident at the College or in the Northampton area, they were still important stakeholders who would be negatively affected by the removal of the gym.

Other members of SACSAG worked in the preservation field as community advocates, architectural historians, and architects.²¹ At the time, the country was

preparing for bicentennial celebrations that cast a new light on the importance of cultural heritage. There had also been a number of recent historic building demolitions on the Smith campus, which had been poorly received, by both current students and alumnae alike. The members of SACSAG took it upon themselves to re-introduce Smith students, alumnae, and administration to the importance of the gymnasium. By reminding the Smith community of the events and memories that had taken place within the Alumnae Gymnasium, the SACSAG revealed the gym as a storysite and formed their advocacy campaign around it. Within the literature they the SACSAG noted:

Alumnae Gym, 1976. To many it was the place you first descended a fire rope, to others it was a squash court, to some it was the scene for Sophia's circus or an International Bazaar. Everyone remembers Alumnae Gym, however Alumnae Gym is in danger of becoming just that...a MEMORY!²²

These remarks highlighted the importance of Alumnae Gymnasium as a backdrop for student lives at Smith, a place where every student had her own anecdotal associations. Architectural significance in this case was not as important as the significance of events and memories formed in and around the gymnasium. In rallying support, the committee did not cite the architect or even describe the building. But by calling up the memory of personally significant events, the SACSAG were able to make not just an architectural or aesthetic argument for the importance of the gym but also to emphasize the function of the space as a place of remembrance for thousands of students and alumnae.

Through the work of the SACSAG the once utilitarian and sentimental space of the gym became the site of a political battle opposing the plans of the current administration. The SACSAG successfully organized a disparate group of alumnae, who unlike local stakeholders, were not on the ground in the area to make their voices heard.

With combined support from on-campus protests and alumnae letter-writing campaigns, the committee attracted backing from the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to preserve and reuse the gym.²³ Through the research efforts and work of the SACSAG, the Alumnae Gymnasium became the first building in Northampton listed on the National Register of Historic Places.²⁴ With National Register listing, the building became eligible for National Trust funds to complete a feasibility study of preservation options. The SACSAG secured the National Trust grant, and with additional donations the committee began to research possible new uses for the gym.

Under the leadership of Mimi Findlay, the SACSAG hired the Chicago architectural firm of Harry Weese and Associates to carry out a study for alternatives to demolition. Weese and SACSAG developed a proposal for the gym in which it would be repurposed as the permanent home of the Smith College Archives, housing the Sophia Smith Collection and newly developed non-print resource center. Weese proposed that Alumnae Gym be connected to the library via a second story bridge. This would allow increased access to both library spaces without diminishing either building's architectural integrity. The SACSAG continued to write alumnae, to host information sessions, and to educate the Smith community on the importance of historic preservation and adaptive reuse, and the role of historic architecture as a teaching tool on campus.²⁵

On November 7, 1976 Smith College trustees accepted a plan that integrated the gymnasium into the Neilson Library expansion rather than removing it.²⁶ The original architects for the expansion, Cambridge Seven Associates, were directed to fit the programmatic needs of the enlarged library within the shell of the Alumnae Gymnasium.

Cambridge Seven followed Harry Weese's recommendation to insert an additional floor within the gym to increase stack and archival storage space and create a reading room within the main gymnasium floor space. The new design called for the removal of the original gym floor, and installing poured concrete floors in the new space.²⁷ The exterior elevations of the gym were restored. On the interior, the massive roof trusses remained visible, but much of the original interior was lost.²⁸

Looking Forward: Integrating Storyscape into Campus Preservation Planning

Through architectural preservation, Alumnae Gymnasium, a building built as a temple to the strengthening of the physical body has become a shrine to the mind. Since it was safeguarded through adaptive reuse, Alumnae Gymnasium has become the home of the Smith College Archives (which contains the institutional history of the campus), and the Sophia Smith Collection, a "repository of manuscripts, archives, photographs, periodicals and other primary sources in women's history" that was founded at the college in 1942.²⁹ This collection consists of 10,000 linear feet of documents that record the history of first and second wave feminism, the work of Margret Sanger, Gertrude Stein, and hundreds of other individuals of paramount importance within the women's history narrative.³⁰

The function of the Alumnae Gym as an archive is particularly interesting given its history as the backdrop for important events such as the first women's collegiate basketball game. However in achieving that transformation, the architectural interiors, so integral to the building's original purpose, were lost. In preservation practice particular importance is given to the retention of original fabric for establishing authenticity. Therefore, the question must be asked, what has been lost in the preservation of Alumnae

Gym? The historical records describing the original building provide a sense of that loss but there is no way to duplicate the fresh scuffs on a basketball court that has been hosting games for over 100 years, or the sway of the running track as it lurches under the weight of hundreds of spectators. Those elements could have been preserved through the continued use of the gym as a sports or recreation space for the college or even in the re-used space, if the architects and planners had found them important enough to save. One structural element repeatedly highlighted in historical photographs and memoirs was the elevated running track. Young women used that space not only to train, but also to watch plays, cheer for their house basketball team, and celebrate as first-years were introduced during the Freshman Frolic. The retention of such an element would have preserved a physical artifact to embody these personal accounts and memories, and represent the past even to those who were not actively seeking it.

While the Alumnae Gym is a good example of the success stories that flood the preservation discourse, a thirty-year old success should not overshadow a larger issue that remains problematic today: the absence of active preservation planning within Smith's larger campus master planning efforts. The college drafted a landscape master plan in 1996, however it focused almost entirely on the preservation and unification of the campus's grounds and infrastructure. While preservation has been considered in individual building-by-building renovations, a holistic approach has yet to be developed.

In recent years the discourse surrounding the built environment at Smith has been dominated by environmental sustainability. LEED standards have been followed for all new building construction, however preservation has yet to be identified as a component of sustainable development and design. The integration of preservation into campus

sustainability policies must be considered if the college is truly committed to furthering its educational mission within the context of its richly historic campus setting.

Institutions such as Brown University and Wheaton College have successfully integrated preservation planning as part of their commitment to sustainable development and within their comprehensive campus master plans.

Beyond the basic imperatives of recognizing preservation within sustainability and master planning lies the more subtle potential for storyscape to inform planning efforts. For preservationists, the Alumnae Gym example shows that studying a building with its storyscape in mind can expand the standard models of architectural history and historic preservation to include elements of a building's memory infrastructure, thereby enriching our appreciation of the building's history with a clearer understanding of its meaning for who used and inhabited it as well. With a broader adoption of this approach, the Smith College campus could provide a cultural storyscape that integrates architectural history into the larger institutional history of the college, tying its physical spaces to the overarching experiences of women's education throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As each specific college building continues to be used, ongoing maintenance and preservation provide the opportunity for future Smith students to begin to experience the line of history that has come before them. Along with the physical preservation of space, attempts should also be made to capture the intangible aspects of the Smith cultural storyscape.

Some vehicles for achieving this integration of architectural preservation and cultural meaning could be an increased focus on the form and uses of historic campus architecture within student coursework and social activities (drawing on the archival

collections now housed in Alumnae Gym, for example), developing robust mechanisms for ongoing inclusion of student and alumnae input during renovations, and finally making a comprehensive commitment to integrating historic preservation planning in campus master planning, taking storyscape into consideration.

Conclusion

The college has done an admirable job conserving and restoring the natural and designed landscape of the campus. If such efforts were also applied to the built environment then both the architectural and landscape aspects of the historic campus could be integrated into its cultural storyscape. Each tree within the campus is labeled with genus and species, for example, but no similar information concerning historic architectural elements, original woodwork, or the homes of notable alumnae appears on its buildings. Efforts to identify the layers of history inherent in the campus would establish its memory infrastructure for current and former students alike. The alumnae link has historically been strong, but to move that link beyond the realm of pure nostalgia and into a dynamic tie that includes a continued conversation about campus preservation would provide a powerful means of incorporating alumnae into the current life of the college.

Throughout the United States academic institutions walk the line between cutting edge new development and devotion to campus history. Each is integral to drawing qualified applicants to the school, to establishing the ties of loyalty that will sustain graduates once they transition away from the college, and to maintaining a committed alumnae body that will support and continue the educational mission of the school. Within the two extremes of innovation and nostalgia, there must be room for preservation

planning in all aspects of the campus, including its physical infrastructure and operations, its cultural landscape, architectural and social history, and its storyscape. The proper management of an institution's cultural heritage can bring the multifaceted histories inherent in all campuses to the surface while also placing innovative historic preservation at the forefront of campus planning and the public eye.

Endnotes:

¹ N. Kaufman, Race, Place, Story: Essays On The Past and Future of Historic Preservation (New York, Routledge, 2009) p. 38

² Theorist Daphne Spain has also used this term, but with a different meaning. In her 1992 book Gendered Spaces, Spain defines gendered spaces as spaces that "separate women from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege". In my work I use this term to describe spaces in which women's unique role in history is apparent or brought to light, and therefore able to be understood, experienced and added to by the current population.

³ N. Kaufman, Race, Place, Story: Essays On The Past and Future of Historic Preservation (New York, Routledge, 2009)

⁴ <http://tclf.org/landscapes/what-are-cultural-landscapes>, as referenced on March 27, 2011

⁵ Dr. R. Mason, The Once and Future New York : Historic Preservation and the Modern City (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ ⁷ Smith College, Celebration of the Quarter-Centenary of Smith College, Cambridge MA, Riverside Press (1900) pp. 62-65

⁸ Ibid, p.62

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid, Within the 1888 report Miss Walker reports specifically that, "I have attempted to lead the girls in running, but we have no good opportunities for this exercise, and I am not, therefore, able to make out of it what would otherwise be possible."

¹¹ Senda Berenson Papers, Five College Digital Archive Project
<http://clio.fivecolleges.edu/smith/berenson/>, as referenced on March 5, 2011

¹² Ibid

¹³ R. Melnick, Senda Berenson, The Unlikely Founder of Women's Basketball (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 2007) p.1

¹⁴ Ibid p. 162.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 75

¹⁶ H.C. Seelye, "Festivals in American Colleges For Women", *The Century Magazine*, Vol XLIX, No. 1, November 1894, p. 433

¹⁷ Smith Alumnae Committee to Save Alumnae Gym, *Feasibility Study*, Smith College Archives, Buildings and Grounds Collection, Alumnae Gymnasium Box #34, Folder #5

¹⁸ Within the SACSAG's complaints was the fact that the proposed addition "if built as planned would result in a huge complex of buildings...virtually cutting the campus in two," Smith Alumnae Committee to Save Alumnae Gym, letter to Smith College Community, Smith College Archives, Buildings and Grounds Collection, Alumnae Gymnasium Box # 34, Folder #5

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Smith Alumnae Committee to Save Alumnae Gym, Mailing flier, Smith College Archives, Buildings and Grounds Collection, Alumnae Gymnasium Box # 34, Folder #5

²¹ Ibid, Other SACSAG members included: Darlene Denise Melis, Carol Hitchcock Southerland, Nellie Leber Longworth, Hortense Feldblum, Charlotte Blum, and Cheryl Krieger

²² Ibid. Mimi Findlay is still active in the preservation field today and has been an integral part of numerous preservation projects in the Connecticut area.

²³ insert poster image

²⁴ Letter from Lawson B. Knott Jr., Executive Vice President of the National Trust of Historic Preservation, to Mrs. Charles C. Glover, Chairperson of the Smith College Board of Trustees, February 25, 1976, Smith College Archives, Buildings and Grounds Collection, Alumnae Gymnasium Box # 34, Folder #5

²⁵ *The Sophian*, "Buildings Can Be Teachers" Thursday, February 26, 1976, Smith College Archives, Buildings and Grounds Collection. Alumnae Gymnasium Box #34, Folder #5

²⁶ M. Oravec, *The Daily Hampshire Gazette*, "Smith trustees vote to try to keep gym" November 8, 1976 (Northampton MA), p.3

²⁷ Smith College, "A New Life For Alumnae Gymnasium" p.9

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ <http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/about.html>, as referenced on March 5, 2011

³⁰ Ibid