

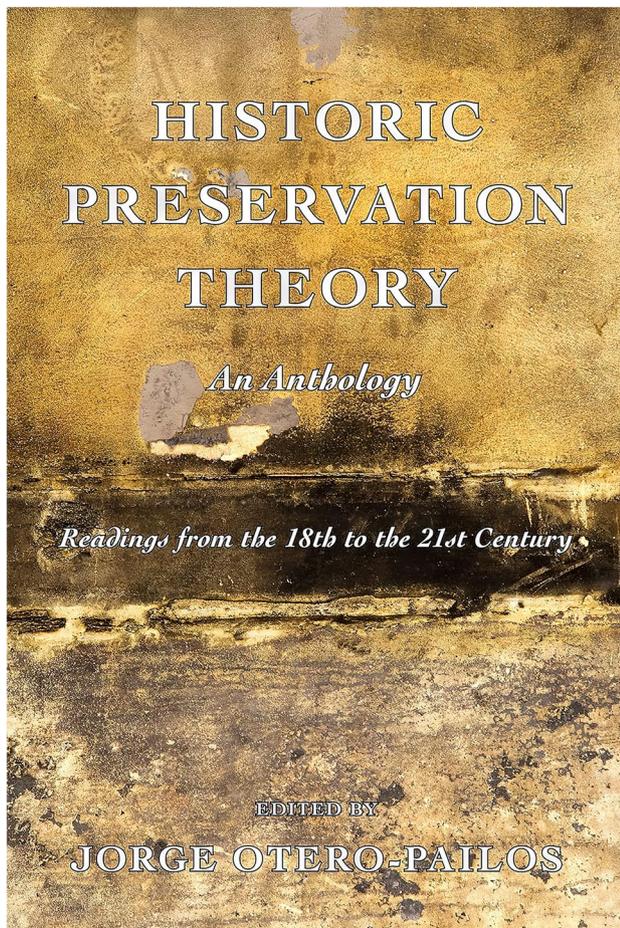
BOOK, CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

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Historic preservation theory: an anthology— readings from the 18th to the 21st Century, edited by Jorge Otero-Pailos. Design books, 2022. 608pp. ISBN9780578547145

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As the world confronts a confluence of existential crises at the start of the new millennium, an anthology of theories concerned with historic preservation makes an important and timely contribution in and beyond the field. With the early 21st century increasingly feeling like an age of reckoning, the hangover after centuries of profligacy, this collection of writings helps us to not only reassess our collective built pasts, but also to ponder historic preservation's vital role in built futures. Containing 96 texts spanning four centuries, this anthology is an outstanding teaching resource that will be an essential entry on the reading list of any course concerned with historic built environments, indeed any built environment. The editor, Professor Jorge Otero-Pailos of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP), says the aim was 'to give students access to that wider international and historical perspective so they could gain a solid footing in the rich intellectual traditions that nourish historic preservation theory'. It achieves these aims admirably.

The content of this weighty 584-page volume comprises a variety of primary sources spanning various geographies, disciplines, and epochs. The earliest writings date from the mid-18th century and some are translated into English for the first time (e.g. Henri Grégoire's '*Rapport sur les destructions opérées par le vandalisme, et sur les moyens de le réprimer*'). Although billed as theories, which Otero-Pailos defines as 'an intellectual method for developing knowledge', the strength of this collection is in its diversity and includes core texts, key ideas, seminal writings, various treatises, and radical manifestoes. These are prefaced by Otero-Pailos's excellent Introduction, which succinctly explains the rationale for the book, its context and content, and, perhaps most revealingly, its

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absences. He also acknowledges the discipline's ambiguity emanating from its contested history, carefully disentangling some of its knottier roots, while making the case that this ambiguity is precisely what makes the field so rich, resilient, and intellectually nourishing.

Every entry is helpfully accompanied by a prefatory summary. These individual introductions are one of the book's many laudable features, offering vital perspectives and astute observations that, for a younger generation accustomed to textural brevity, will do much to aid student engagement in the works. As for the actual texts, accompanying the usual suspects – Jacobs, Morris, Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, etc. – are a cast of characters who, although distinguished in their respective fields, will not likely have taken centre stage alongside so many other more referenced thinkers and doers in the context of historic preservation. The work of the 19th century Cherokee novelist, John Rollin Ridge, for example, appears in his 1854 poem, *Mount Shasta*, an elegy to the spiritual and 'unpolluted grandeur' of this majestic volcanic peak in northern California. Another rare appearance is that of Liang Sicheng, the celebrated Chinese architectural historian who's impassioned 1944 essay, '*Why we must research Chinese traditional architecture*', is an ode to the ancient craft of building and its precarity in the face of modernity.

As with so many examples in this volume, the lessons do not apply only to the contexts in which they are written, whether culturally, geographically, or temporally, but also have resonance and meaning across time and place. Indeed, some are as pertinent, if not more so, now as they were when they were written. As the righteous cries for restitution of plundered or purchased cultural assets around the world grow louder in the 21st century, Victor Hugo's despair in *War on the Demolishers!* (1825, 1832) while watching the English procure the debris of Jumièges Abbey assumes a special resonance two centuries later. The mutually assured destruction of a nation's cultural heritage caused by French profiteering from Lord Elgin's desecrations, elicited Hugo's terse response: 'The Turks sold only Greek monuments; we do even better, we sell our own.'

Such snippets are but a tiny fraction of the immense wealth of material in this anthology. There is so much to savour, learn, and enjoy from the collection, which starts in 1755 with Johann Joachim Winckelmann's '*Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*'. It is perhaps instructive that Winckelmann is first up. Whether in deference to or aligned with the founding father of the linear chronological method (that still dominates the periodisation of western art and architectural history), this anthology is also categorised chronologically. The entries are distributed

relatively evenly between 1755 and 2009, where it concludes with Giorgio Agamben's '*Philosophical Archaeology*'. The decision to organise this collection chronologically is a curious one. Otero-Pailos's claim that it is 'the standard today' feels misaligned with the historiographical and pedagogical concerns and priorities of the 21st century, which has borne witness to growing interest in temporal realignment and a rapid intensification of decentering (what some call decolonising), which owe so much to the psychosis of progress and its straight-jacket of linear time. An alternative approach, such as thematic categorisations, might have helped to unshackle these works from their historical moorings fixed during the height of European imperial expansion. It is within this framing that the spectre of coloniality looms large.

There is no doubt the book's adherence to Western temporality and temporal traditions is a fair reflection of its content, intellectually, historically, and structurally. As the book states, the selection mirrors the historical reality of how the discipline of historic preservation developed out of the European Enlightenment to become enshrined in international organisations, laws, and practices associated with sustaining the built past. However, what feels more telling are the reasons for beginning at the European Enlightenment. In arguing that this is where 'some of the ideas and core principles emerged that still define how we understand historic preservation today', it is unclear who 'we' are? For Winckelmann it is obvious. 'We' refers to 'all the politer world' that can claim descentance from ancient Greece. For the impolite others represented by what the anti-racist scholar and educator Rosemary Campbell-Stephens has more recently coined the 'global majority', the definition, meaning, and purpose of historic preservation three centuries later remains conspicuously elusive (Campbell-Stephens 2021).

It is important to emphasise here that this book, despite interpretations in some of the prefatory endorsements, does not pretend to be global in scope. Otero-Pailos is crystal clear in explaining his selection. He is also explicit in defining his intended readership as American students. 'We', therefore, likely reflects this target audience. As this book claims, the theory and practice of historic preservation as it is known today throughout much of the world, like so many modern academic traditions and, for some, modernity itself, owes a significant debt – and perhaps even its existence – to the European Enlightenment. However, this begs the question whether accepting this provenance does more to constrain or expand the discipline in the present and for the future?

This is too big a question to place on the shoulders of this anthology, but it is one that needs to be answered

by historians and teachers of art and architecture in the 21st century and beyond. It is one Otero-Pailos is clearly aware of and willing to confront: ‘Beginning this anthology with the Enlightenment does not mean an uncritical endorsement of the intellectual tradition that ensued from it’. In an age of widespread historiographical reckoning, how do we disentangle the knotted roots of our collective and often deeply troubled pasts so that we might enable more hopeful futures? Is it sufficient to assemble a body of works that reflects ‘the very European-American cultural points of view that have historically structured the discipline in the United States’ so as to appeal to a target audience made up of its members or is it possible to challenge that audience while simultaneously appealing to new audiences by reframing the discipline, offering new perspectives on its pasts, present, and possible futures? These are inescapable and existential questions for all of us trying to teach in a planetary age and Otero-Pailos’ inspiring work is among those leading the way in offering meaningful responses.

Making no claim to comprehensiveness or expertise ‘in Asia, Africa, the Arab world, or among First Nations,’ the book confers this task on future scholars. Racism and genocide, as Otero-Pailos points out, have been obstinate, debilitating, and erasing factors that have constrained and obscured our understanding of the past globally. But the question remains – how do we redress this in the present and for the future? What does redressing historiographical inequity look like? Of the nearly one hundred entries in this anthology, those representing the experiences or perspectives of those outside Europe or North America can be counted on one hand. Even with rare examples by non-white authors like Ridge and Liang, their inclusion is largely owed to their ability to speak to white men rather than a demonstration of white man’s desire to speak to or learn from them. As is common with histories of disciplines with inherently white European roots, historiographical inequity casts a long shadow racially, geographically, and in other ways too. Gender is a notable example. By this measure, the paucity of entries by women – 7.5 of 96 – feels telling.

In an age of planetary pedagogies (and crisis), the demands on educators and educational institutions to include more voices, to be accessible to more diverse audiences, and to challenge the institutional and disciplinary structures we have inherited are growing exponentially. This requires deeper and more critical international collaborations in the 21st century and beyond, wherein the challenges are fundamentally different and greater than those in the 20th century and before. Time is running out. Disciplinary foundations and functions need to be urgently recast rather than reinforced.

An example from the heritage field is the global collaborative, MoHoA (*Modern Heritage of Africa / Modern Heritage in the Anthropocene*), established in 2020 with the aim of contributing to reframing and decentring the theory and practice of modern heritage in a planetary age.¹ Acknowledging that modern heritage – inextricably bound as it is to Western notions of progress, modernisation, and modernity – uniquely and disproportionately privileges western, invariably white, experiences and values, MoHoA joins the wider global effort to decolonise institutional practices that engage with the research, collection, valorisation, or transformation of material culture associated with our collective recent past. An important outcome of this collective and restitutive endeavour is *The Cape Town Document on Modern Heritage*, an equitable and decentring policy proposal presented in 2023 to UNESCO and its advisory bodies (MoHoA 2024) – vestiges of what Otero-Pailos refers to as the ‘post war consensus of a Eurocentric world view of historic preservation.’

Recasting our disciplinary foundations and functions is especially pertinent to historic preservation, which should be positioning itself not as it has done historically as peripheral to the built environment professions, but radically and assertively at the centre. With the construction industry accounting for 40% of global CO2 emissions (not to mention the myriad other metrics associated with extraction, transportation, and construction), our survival will literally depend on preserving, conserving, and adapting what we have already built rather than building anew. This aligns with what Otero-Pailos calls an ethic of care. Our schools of architecture and the discipline they serve, and indeed our species, will depend on us centring the principles and practices of a fundamentally reconstituted form of restoration. Unlike at any other time in human history, the greatest challenge for architects and architecture will be working with what already exists; a practice antithetical to the tabula rasa dependence of starchitecture and late-capitalist individualism of recent yore yet demanding far greater intelligence, creativity, and ingenuity. Writings that speak to this future imperative would have made a welcome contribution but feel conspicuous by their absence.

On the penultimate page of this volume, perhaps too easily overlooked, is a brilliant feature that goes some way to addressing and redressing any imbalances in the printed version. A QR code takes readers to a world map peppered with hyperlinked pins directing them to further readings and other related media. Simple, but effective, this function joins similar digital platforms using

¹ www.mohoa.org.

technology to radically decentre global knowledges associated with built environment histories, theories, pedagogies, and practices. Otero-Pailos and his collaborators have produced an exceptional gift to students, teachers, and practitioners with this anthology. By inviting future generations of scholars to develop this work is a call to arms for those, to paraphrase Otero-Pailos, embarking on their own exciting journey within historic preservation. They could not have a better point of departure.

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