INSEPARABLE BY DESIGN: ARCHITECTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

VERSION 1.0 · 2026-06-11 · ALEX PEMBERTON
COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", *NASHVILLE SCENE*

> FINDING
>
> The MHZC calls itself an architectural review board and places social history outside its work, but the National Register's Criterion A makes historical association an independent basis for significance — and the commission's own case for Green Hills East rests on a social movement, not a style.

SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *historic preservation does not separate architectural significance from social history*
- *the National Register's own criteria count association with the broad patterns of history as significance, apart from architecture*
- *the commission's 'architectural review board' framing is at odds with the field's standards and with its own significance claim*

> "Some overlays are based on their architectural designs; some on how they developed. … It's not significant because of who lived there."
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> — Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission, interview, June 1, 2026

ABSTRACT

The Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission says its official histories of protected white neighborhoods elide their segregationist instruments because the commission is, at its core, an architectural review board — that social history belongs to a neighboring discipline, outside the duties of design control. The field of historic preservation has held the opposite for half a century. Preservation scholarship has treated the social life of a building as constitutive of its meaning since at least the 1980s; the National Register's criteria make association with the broad patterns of history an independent basis for significance; the international Burra Charter sets social value level with aesthetic value; and Nashville's own ordinance turns on historical merit, not architecture alone. The commission's own significance rationale for Green Hills East rests on a social movement, not a style, while its staff characterized a neighborhood as "not significant because of who lived there." To place social history outside the work of preservation is to describe the field as it stood seventy years ago.

SOURCES

Scholarship.

- Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (MIT Press, 1995) — the built city read as a record of the social histories, especially of women and minorities,

embedded in ordinary buildings and streets.

- Ned Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (Routledge, 2009) — the argument that preservation's privileging of physical form over social meaning is a choice the field can and should reverse.
- Max Page and Randall Mason, eds., *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (Routledge, 2004) — the field historicizing its own architecture-first inheritance; see Robin Datel's review, *The Professional Geographer* 56, no. 4 (2004): 590–592.
- Daniel Bluestone, *Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation* (W. W. Norton, 2011); Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1998), and Dell Upton & John Michael Vlach, eds., *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (University of Georgia Press, 1986); Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Pantheon, 1981); Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Temple University Press, 2010).
- Sarah Schindler, "Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment," *Yale Law Journal* 124, no. 6 (2015): 1934–2024 — the built environment as a regulator of movement and belonging.
- Steven W. Semes, *The Future of the Past: A Conservation Ethic for Architecture, Urbanism, and Historic Preservation* (W. W. Norton, 2009) — the design-centered, traditionalist strand, cited here as the field's counter-voice.

Standards and criteria.

- National Park Service, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, National Register Bulletin 15; the criteria are codified at 36 C.F.R. § 60.4.
- National Park Service, *Best Practices Review: Nominating Properties for Cultural Significance under Criterion A* (January 2024); "What Is Historic Preservation?" and "Telling All Americans' Stories," nps.gov.
- Australia ICOMOS, *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance* (2013), art. 1.2.
- Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, *Code of Ordinances* § 17.36.120 (criteria for historic-overlay designation).
- Rick S. Kurtz, "Historic Preservation: A Statutory Vehicle for Disparate Agendas," *The Social Science Journal* 43, no. 1 (2006): 67–83.

Companion briefs.

- Whitewashing the History: The Short History Critique — Research Brief I2, the empirical record of what the commission's histories omit.

- Counting the Silence: Race-Language Asymmetry in the Short Histories — Research Brief M3.
- The Better Homes in America Movement — the social movement the commission cites as Green Hills East's claim to significance.

Interview.

- Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission staff (Robin Zeigler and colleagues), interview by the author, June 1, 2026. On the record. Speaker attribution for the "architectural review board" line is best-effort pending the recording (see the closing qualification).

FINDINGS

THE FIELD ABANDONED THE ARCHITECTURE-ONLY MODEL DECADES AGO

Historic preservation began as an architectural and patriotic enterprise — the saving of great houses and the homes of great men — and for most of the twentieth century its scholarship was a literature of buildings. That is no longer the field. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s its leading scholars rebuilt preservation around the social history that buildings hold. Hayden's *The Power of Place* took the ordinary working landscape of Los Angeles — a boarding house, a flower market, the route of a Black midwife — and showed that the history worth preserving in such places is the history of the people who labored in them, a history legible in the fabric but not reducible to its design.[1] Page and Mason assembled *Giving Preservation a History* to replace the founding "catechism" of heroic architectural rescue with an account of preservation as a contested social and political practice.[3] By the time the National Trust and the National Park Service turned in the 2010s to "telling all Americans' stories," the move was institutional, not academic alone.[6] A commission describing social history as a neighboring discipline is describing the field as it stood seventy years ago.

IN THE SCHOLARSHIP, A BUILDING'S SOCIAL LIFE IS THE BUILDING'S MEANING

The modern literature holds that the social life of a building is the building's meaning, present in the fabric and inseparable from the design, not a second subject set beside it. Kaufman's *Place, Race, and Story* argues that the race and class relations of a place are constitutive of its significance, the thing a preservation that bracketed them would fail to preserve.[2] Bluestone's case studies show the significance of a building emerging from the social conflicts over how it was used and remembered, never from its elevation alone; the vernacular-architecture scholarship of Upton and his colleagues reads even the plainest house as a social fact, a record of the labor, gender, and racial order that produced and occupied it; and Wright titled her standard architectural history of American housing *a social history* because the two cannot be written apart.[8][9][10] Hurley carries the point into practice, arguing that a preserved building becomes an

asset to its community only when its social history is interpreted, not when its façade alone is controlled.[11] The consensus is old and broad: to evaluate a building's significance is to evaluate the life it organized.

THE ARCHITECTURE IS ITSELF A SOCIAL INSTRUMENT

The commission's separation fails at its own chosen end of the line, because architecture is never socially inert. Schindler's "Architectural Exclusion" documents how the physical design of the built environment — a wall, a one-way street, a bridge too low for a bus — regulates who may move through a place and who may not, enforcing exclusions the law would forbid in writing.[12] Green Hills East illustrates the problem directly. The model home's plan put the Black servant in a basement room the deed's "except in the capacity of servants" clause expressly allowed; the subdivision's covenants paired a minimum construction cost with a bar on Black ownership; the cream paint over the brick veneer sold a manufactured permanence. Each of these is at once an architectural fact and a social one. To read the design and stop is to miss what the design was for.

THE GOVERNING CRITERIA MAKE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE A CATEGORY OF ITS OWN

Were the scholarship contested, the standards would still settle it: the criteria a commission works under define significance to include the social and the historical outright. The National Register's criteria, the framework every American preservation office is trained on, list a property as significant under Criterion A for its "association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history" and, separately, under Criterion C for embodying "the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction"; the two are independent paths, and the Park Service now publishes guidance coaching nominators to document social, ethnic, and community history under the first.[47] Every nomination, architectural or not, must be argued within a "historic context" — the social and historical frame that makes a building legible. The international standard goes further, the Burra Charter defining a place's "cultural significance" as "aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value," with no rank among them.[5] Preservation's own working definition, as one survey of the field's statutory standards puts it, is the protection of properties possessing "historic significance, integrity, and context" — significance that is historical first.[13] Nashville's ordinance is no different: an overlay turns on the neighborhood's historical merit, not on architecture alone.[15] A body that reviews only design is administering a fraction of the test that binds it.

A DESIGN-CENTERED WING, AND A COMMISSION THAT UNDERMINED ITS OWN POSITION

Preservation is not without a design-centered wing; the traditionalist conservation ethic associated with Steven Semes still places architectural form and continuity at the center of the work.[14] But that wing argues for architecture *within* the social and urban context that gives it

meaning, and it does not hold that the social record falls outside the field. A staff member characterized the commission as "at its core an architectural review board," and its lead historian described significance as a choice between tracks — "some overlays are based on their architectural designs; some on how they developed" — and told the author that a neighborhood "is not significant because of who lived there."[16] Yet the commission's own case for Green Hills East is a social-history case: it rests the neighborhood's significance on "the national initiative to promote homeownership," the Better Homes in America movement, a social and economic campaign with no architectural content of its own.[17] The body that calls who-lived-there immaterial designated this neighborhood for what a movement tried to make of the people who would live there. The commission has conceded the question is open, allowing that "what kind of history we're preserving — architectural significance, social significance — is up for rigorous debate" in the citywide preservation plan to come.[16] Its field settled that debate decades ago.

Two qualifications bound the reading. The "architectural review board" line is attributed to a commission staff member on a best-effort basis and should be confirmed against the recording before it is fixed to a name; the *position*, however, is not in doubt — it is stated across the interview and enacted in the histories the commission writes (see Whitewashing the History). And the field's consensus is a consensus, not unanimity: the design-centered strand is real. Neither qualification disturbs the conclusion, which rests on the criteria, not on the scholarly balance — and the criteria are not in dispute.

NOTES

1. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). Hayden's project recovered the labor and domestic histories — disproportionately of women and people of color — embedded in unremarkable buildings, treating the social record as the substance of what such places preserve. ↩
2. Ned Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2009). Kaufman argues that preservation has long favored physical remains while marginalizing the social and racial histories inscribed in them, and that the priority can be reversed. ↩
3. Max Page and Randall Mason, eds., *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004). The editors set the volume against the foundational movement histories that had become, in their phrase, "part of the preservation catechism," recovering instead the field's "differentiations, cleavages, conflicts and tensions." See Robin Datel's review, *The Professional Geographer* 56, no. 4 (2004): 590–592. ↩
4. National Park Service, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, National Register Bulletin 15; the criteria are codified at 36 C.F.R. § 60.4. Criterion A covers properties "associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history"; Criterion C covers properties 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." The bulletin requires every property to be evaluated within a "historic context." ↩
5. Australia ICOMOS, *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance* (2013), art. 1.2: "Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations." The Charter is the governing heritage framework in Australia and is cited internationally. ↩
6. National Park Service, "What Is Historic Preservation?" (nps.gov): "Historic preservation is a conversation with our past about our future. It provides us with opportunities to ask, 'What is important in our history?'" The agency's "Telling All Americans' Stories" initiative, undertaken with State Historic Preservation Officers, treats the histories of underrepresented communities as integral preservation subjects. ↩
7. National Park Service, *Best Practices Review: Nominating Properties for Cultural Significance under Criterion A* (January 2024), guidance for documenting social, cultural, ethnic, and community history under Criterion A. ↩
8. Daniel Bluestone, *Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011). ↩

9. Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), which frames American architecture as an instrument of social order; and Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, eds., *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), the foundational reader of the vernacular-architecture school, for which ordinary buildings are intelligible only through the social relations that produced and used them. ↩
10. Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). ↩
11. Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), which holds that inner-city communities turn preserved landscapes into assets by subjecting them to grassroots public interpretation, not to architectural control alone. ↩
12. Sarah Schindler, "Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment," *Yale Law Journal* 124, no. 6 (2015): 1934–2024. ↩
13. Rick S. Kurtz, "Historic Preservation: A Statutory Vehicle for Disparate Agendas," *The Social Science Journal* 43, no. 1 (2006): 67–83, summarizing the Secretary of the Interior's standard that historic preservation concerns properties possessing "historic significance, integrity, and context." ↩
14. Steven W. Semes, *The Future of the Past: A Conservation Ethic for Architecture, Urbanism, and Historic Preservation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009). Semes represents the design- and continuity-centered strand of preservation thought, which centers architectural form while still situating it within urban and historical context. ↩
15. Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, *Code of Ordinances*, § 17.36.120, which conditions historic-overlay designation on the neighborhood's historical merit and significance, not on architectural character alone. ↩
16. Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission staff, interview by the author, June 1, 2026 (on the record). The "architectural review board" characterization is attributed on a best-effort basis pending review of the recording; the framing of significance as a choice between "architectural designs" and "how they developed," the line that a neighborhood "is not significant because of who lived there," and the acknowledgment that architectural versus social significance is "up for rigorous debate" in the coming preservation plan are drawn from the same interview. ↩ ↩
17. The commission's significance rationale — that Green Hills East is "significant for its representation of the national initiative to promote homeownership" — is set out in its *Short History of Green Hills East* and presented at the December 17, 2025 MHZC meeting; the movement it names is treated in The Better Homes in America Movement. ↩

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