Paper / Proposal Title:

Neighborhood preservation against aesthetic governmentality and affluence

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Presentation Method. I would like to:

i. present in person (with/without a written paper)

Abstract (300 words):

Preservation policy has long served conservation efforts by establishing evaluation criteria for the identification of significant historic structures and neighborhoods. Historical significance is not only attributed to outstanding architecture, a person, event or cultural pattern, but also to the location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Properties, in other words, must convey a sense of authenticity, honesty or purity, if not straightforward historic legibility. The appearance of authenticity thus binds contemporary preservation policy and practices to visual evidence, which can exclude significant neighborhoods that do not adhere to culturally constructed histories of the past.

Embedded in neighborhood preservation, where larger cultural landscapes are implicated, aesthetic governmentality is at work. Governmentality refers to the way a state exercises control over a population (Foucault). For preservation, the control focuses
on interdependent ways visible characteristics are identified and governed. State agencies have a role but the process includes collective action by preservationists, archeologists, or historians and lay community members. Specifically, communities use history to verify the significance and the salient characteristics of a neighborhood. Yet the integrity of construction materials, workmanship, feeling, and association depend on historic and aesthetic interpretation. It means that favorable integrity assessments are more easily met in affluent neighborhoods with continual or recent economic investment because evidence of the past and narratives about it are synchronous. Aesthetic governmentality underpinning preservation pairs practice (controlled by federal and state agencies) with aesthetics and privilege, and makes the “image” of the landscape (no matter how it is contrived) an instrument of conservation.

The few scholars who have examined the processes of preservation alongside ethnic, racial, and the socio-economic realities of residents problematize common preservation practices. The work lends concepts to the analysis of historic non-affluent districts that have undergone noticeable change. Building on this work, this paper studies additional innovative practices in preservation whereby conserved districts challenge preservation’s inadequate attention to poor and diverse communities. With examples from North and South American cities, including “failed” mid-century modern architect-designed projects, this paper is a researched position on the limitations and potentials of preservation policy, particularly for non-affluent urban and suburban neighborhoods, and a call to action.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Clare Robinson, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Arizona, where she teaches courses in modern architectural history and theory. Robinson earned a Doctorate in Architecture from UC-Berkeley, an M.Arch from the GSD, and a B.A. from Smith College. Since 2001, she has taught at several universities and has received grants and awards for her research. Her current research examines architecture and planning in the mid-twentieth century, focusing on social environments of college campuses for their educational, social, and economic import, and as well as suburban middle-class aesthetics. In this work, she addresses socio-economic conditions and the ways architecture has served and continues to be an instrument of social education and class realization.