



## The Café

On Tuesday October 19, 2010 the Neighborhood Preservation Center hosted its second [Preservation Vision Café](#). Twenty colleagues gathered for seasonal sangria, snacks, and sparkling conversation about inciting a young preservationist movement in New York City.

## The Conversation

by Ashley Hahn

As preservationists met and mingled at the Neighborhood Preservation Center, colleagues of every age started discussing the café's topic: Where does the "next generation" fit into today's preservation movement? What can preservationists do to broaden encourage young people to join the ranks?



Before the program.

Photo credit: Alexis Stephens/SMHLF

To help New Yorkers answer this question locally, the Neighborhood Preservation Center invited speakers from two different cities to discuss what New York's preservation community can learn from their experiences. Dan Holland\* founded a nonprofit in Pittsburgh that trains young people to be preservationists of the future through explorations of their region's history. While working for Historic Denver, Mike Webber\*\* helped to create *One Past Five*, special events that managed to loosen up preservation's stuffy reputation by rebranding it locally as fun, fashionable, and relevant.

As people settled in for the discussion, the evening's facilitator, Seri Worden\*\*\*, wasted no time in addressing the question on everyone's mind: What's a "young" preservationist anyway? To

her, if you *feel* like a young professional or part of the next generation, then you are. And while "young" may be a relative term, Worden wondered why there aren't more young people involved with preservation and why New York doesn't have the same sort of robust alliance of young preservationists that can be found in other cities? She questioned whether preservation has an image problem, maybe even rooted in the word *preservation* itself. Whatever the case may be, Worden sees ample opportunity for preservationists in New York to cast a wider net to involve interested individuals.

For Dan Holland, the CEO of the [Young Preservationist Association of Pittsburgh](#), it's a question of legacy. Preservation work is as much about understanding and honoring heritage as it is about shaping the world the next generation will inherit. Holland sees preservation as a potent tool to help rebuild local economies and neighborhoods.

Holland explained that Pittsburgh has lost 50% of its population since 1950, which has dramatically affected the region's economy and its built environment. Even as the city has shrunk and people moved away, many people from Pittsburgh have a deep attachment to their city. Holland's group works to channel this attachment, and turn it into a constituency for the region's history and culture. The Young Preservationist Association provides opportunities for high school and college age residents to participate in preservation and in so doing helps to train them as future stewards of their region's heritage. Their activities have included cleanups of local landmarks, tours,

and even the publishing of a book researched and written by high school students about their neighborhood in Homestead. By giving young people these opportunities to roll up their sleeves and really engage in preservation, Holland hopes that they will stay involved as citizens as they grow up.

By contrast when Mike Webber worked at Historic Denver, he approached the issue of young people in preservation in a different way. Historic Denver was about to lose its most significant funding source and desperately needed a new revenue stream. The core membership of Historic Denver was an older crowd, so Webber sought to attract Denver's younger residents (20-40 year olds) to preservation by hosting events. Webber recognized the opportunity to change the perception of preservation from historical re-enactors and protesters to a hip, design-oriented field. His mantra: "Make it sexy."

Webber helped to create [One Past Five](#), a series of events that aimed to create a fun environment for preservation professionals and the public to meet up in some of Denver's most iconic, historic settings. With no budget, he relied on promoting the events using social media platforms, designed polished marketing materials himself, and cultivated partnerships among other groups and businesses. They set reasonable prices for the events (\$20-\$40) and they sold out quickly. By offering access to some of Denver's historic buildings the events drew new audiences and eventually attracted 300 new members to Historic Denver. In order to keep these new members interested, Historic Denver created programming that appealed to younger homeowners.



Dan Holland, Mike Webber, and Seri Worden.  
*Photo credit: Alexis Stephens/SMHLF*



Discussing strategies for New York.  
*Photo credit: Alexis Stephens/SMHLF*

Even though Holland and Webber expressed completely different approaches to the problem of involving the "next generation" in preservation, their approaches stressed responses tailored to local conditions.

So, what about New York?

Many of the colleagues present appreciated that Holland and Webber didn't purport to have all of the answers, but that they encouraged New York's preservation community to rethink its activities and outreach. As in other cities, the audience agreed that in New York preservation has an image problem. It is not seen as particularly hip or sexy. Yet, as one colleague noted, New Yorkers also suffer from a sort of "gala fatigue." So, perhaps hosting swanky preservation parties for young up-and-comers might not work as successfully as it had in Denver. Still,

preservationists get to see the city's exceptional places every day. This rare access to unique New York is one of the field's great strengths and the concept of opening up these places to the public is a compelling idea to capitalize upon.

For some present, there remain lingering questions about how New Yorkers can effectively organize the next generation (and interested individuals in general) around preservation issues? Some in the audience expressed a desire for more opportunities for hands-on preservation projects. Others were concerned about the ability to organize younger people whose lifestyles can be very mobile. How do you connect to a transient population? Does this make meaningful involvement by young people in preservation issues more difficult if they're just going to move away? Or perhaps the same concerns about "place" and quality of life apply anywhere?

Perhaps more presciently, one young professional said that the concerns about communication and message resonated with her. She noted, "If we're not communicating within ourselves how can we expect to get the message out as a united front?"

As the official conversation drew to a close, colleagues lingered, poured more sangria, and chewed over the evening's ideas with one another. The evening may have opened more questions than it offered answers, but everyone present took away something from the experiences of Holland in Pittsburgh and Webber in Denver. There was so much more to discuss that half of the crowd retired around the corner for dinner and drinks to continue the conversation. Perhaps the Young Preservationists of New York just had their first meeting.

**\*Dan Holland** is the founder and CEO of the [Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh](#) and recruits young people to preserve history. He is an experienced preservation author and public speaker. Dan has a B.A. in applied history from Carnegie Mellon University and an MPM from CMU's Heinz College.

**\*\*Mike Webber** helped found Historic Denver's young preservationist's program, "One Past 5". The city-wide initiative sought to create a hip environment to engage future preservationists and went on to be nominated as one of Denver's top events put on by a non-profit. Mike just recently relocated to NYC after completing his Master in Urban Planning with an emphasis in historic preservation from the University of Colorado - Denver.

**\*\*\*Seri Worden** is a consultant with over ten years of experience in historic preservation and not-for-profit organizations, at the executive level and as a writer and researcher. Her work ranges from documenting the modern architectural heritage of Buenos Aires to leading the successful expansion of the Upper East Side Historic District in New York City.

**Postscript:** Members of Preservation Vision Café 2 have organized a spinoff group to continue discussing "The Next Generation." For more information, contact Isabel Miesner at [Isabel.miesner\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:Isabel.miesner[at]gmail.com).

### The Drinks

Both recipes were modified from The New York Times

#### White Sangria

2 apples, diced  
2 pears, diced  
2 peaches, diced  
2 oranges, seeded and diced  
1 cup gin  
1/2 cup triple sec  
2 bottles dry white wine  
1/2 bottle cava (1 1/2 cups), chilled.

#### Red Sangria

1 bottle red wine  
Juice of 1 1/2 oranges  
Juice of 1 lemon  
Juice of 1 lime  
1/2 cup Spanish brandy  
1/4 cup triple sec  
1 apple, cored and sliced  
1 pear, cored and sliced  
1 cinnamon stick

Place all fruit in a bowl with gin and triple sec. Cover and refrigerate at least 4 hours, or overnight.

[Neighborhood Preservation Center](#) is a unique project that acts as a catalyst for the work of others, serving as a meeting place, office space and resource center that shares information and facilitates exchange among those working to improve and protect neighborhoods. The Preservation Vision Cafés continue the discussions initiated during Preservation Vision NYC and aim to strengthen the future of preservation in New York City by fostering more conversation within and outside the field. If you would like receive more information, contact Felicia Mayro at [fmayro@neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org](mailto:fmayro@neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org) or 212-228-2781.

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