

Teaching Preservation at the Graduate Level

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The National Register of Historic Places has come to structure the way we think about historic resources. With its criteria and guidelines, it represents a fundamental tool for preservation in the United States. This essay explains one way in which the National Register is used in teaching historic preservation at the graduate level at the University of Delaware.

Learning about and using the National Register plays an integral part of the graduate course, "Seminar in Historic Preservation." The course meets once a week for three hours over a 13-week period and averages 15 to 22 students. Their varied academic backgrounds include the historic preservation specialization in the master's program in Urban Affairs, the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, and master's and Ph.D. studies in American Civilization, History, and Art History.

The course is organized in three parts: Part I: "Defining the Field of Historic Preservation," Part II: "Architectural and Cultural Landscapes as the Subject of Historic Preservation," and Part III: "Historic Preservation as Public Policy." The overall organization of the course reflects the broad scope of the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation*. Part I develops the "context" for historic preservation as a field; Part II deals with "identification" and "evaluation" of historic resources, and Part III looks at "evaluation" and "treatment."

At the outset of the course, I place historic preservation in a planning context, stating that historic preservation is concerned with intervening in the built environment to protect historic resources. To do this, the preservationist must understand how the built environment evolved, how it functions as a system culturally and economically, and what will happen to that environment if current trends continue. Since historic resources are real property, the tools for taking action to preserve those resources reside in land use and zoning law. Therefore, preservationists must find a legally defensible determination of significance for historic resources.

The National Register process is the best procedure for reaching this goal. This is because the National Register provides the only national-level evaluation that has the weight of a congressional act. It also represents the consensus of preservationists in the country about historic significance. The National Register has promulgated clear standards for identification, evaluation, and registration of historic resources, a process that should be part of local preservation ordinances.

Spending time in the field gets students to look at, evaluate, and form judgments about historic properties. One of these experiences, a study of a two block area of Main Street in Newark, DE, provides the opportunity for students to evaluate a group of buildings in the area, rank

them in terms of significance, and select three contiguous buildings to be cleared for a hypothetical development project. This exercise focuses attention on the issue of evaluation, using the National Register criteria; teaches the students to develop consensus where everybody's views are respected; and encourages students to work in teams and to use each other as resources.

By the end of Part I, students are conversant with the National Register criteria, which provide a mooring for the students as they grapple with issues of how to define a historic property and what to preserve. The criteria reflect the evolution of the preservation field, from an emphasis on associative criteria (Criteria A and B) to those which justify the preservation of properties because they are of a type or style (Criterion C). Criterion C is examined from both an art historical perspective and from the more empirical approach of vernacular architecture.

For Part II, "Architectural and Cultural Landscapes as the Subject of Historic Preservation," the students progress through a sequence of class sessions in which they move from lecture to field and back, learning to see in the field what was taught in the classroom. Lectures focus on understanding and evaluating the evolution of architecture and landscape as a historic context at the national scale, emphasizing themes, chronological periods, and geographical areas. At the Old College area on the campus and in New Castle, DE, students study architectural trends, the evolution of cultural landscapes, the relationship of interiors to larger architectural trends, and the placement of historic properties into a historic context.

Part III, "Historic Preservation as Public Policy," provides an opportunity for major class/individual projects on National Register documentation. Projects include updating 1970s documentation for a National Register historic district in Wilmington, which does not meet current documentation standards. This gives the class the opportunity to evaluate the work of others and the preservation environment in which they were done, and then to rewrite the nomination using the guidelines of the Delaware State Historic Preservation Plan and current National Register requirements.

The Delaware Plan is a device that allows the development of an initial general historic context for any resource in the state. The framework is a matrix with 18 major historic themes on the vertical axis and five major chronological periods in the state's history on the horizontal axis. The purpose of the matrix is three fold: 1) to ensure that any resource in the state could be placed in a general historic context before a specialized context was developed; 2) to ensure that all contexts would be related; and 3) to provide a means for grassroots organizations or individuals untrained in the National Register to make an initial assessment. Based on their reading of the original historic district nomination, the class blocks out the cells in the historic context matrix in the combination of themes and chronological periods most relevant to the district. Then the class develops a historic context and related property types for their particular theme.

The district nomination updating project allows students to learn how to do original research and to understand that research for National Register nominations is a

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⁷ For more information on the Teaching with Historic Places program, write to Teaching with Historic Places, National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

⁸ For information on the educational philosophies embodied in this format, refer to Fay Metcalf, "Creating Lesson Plans for Teaching with Historic Places," *CRM: Teaching with Historic Places* 16 (1993): 12-13. For information on purchasing lesson plans, write to The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036, or call toll-free (800) 766-6847.

⁹ For information on writing a lesson plan for consideration as part of the series, write to Teaching with Historic Places, National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

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discovery process. They experience the excitement of researching and synthesizing material to create a historic context and reach an understanding of a resource that never existed before. Part of this is accomplished by having them work with primary sources such as street directories and Sanborn maps. They also experience the discipline of applying National Register criteria, making a decision of eligibility, and preparing the nomination forms.

The overarching goal of the reevaluation of the National Register historic district nomination is to simulate a professional experience in preservation—if one thing ties us together in the preservation field, it is working with the National Register of Historic Places. At the end of the semester, students are told: "You are ready." "Ready for what?" they ask. I tell them, "Ready to practice preservation."

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