Preservation Profiles

Episode 1: Preserving Intangible History with Susan West Montgomery
Advocate for Natural and Historic Places

Hosted by Jane I. Seiter, Ph.D.

Episode Description

Susan West Montgomery is a passionate advocate for natural and historic places, committed to leveraging these places to connect citizens, promote social justice, and foster health and wellbeing. In this episode, we discuss the changing role of preservation, the need for creativity in preserving intangible heritage, the concept of greenlining, and what steps the preservation field can take to bring more inclusion and equity to the National Register of Historic Places.

Episode Transcript
**Susan West Montgomery:** The built environment as we know it has a huge impact on policy and on the way we move through the world. So preservationists have a huge role to play in this. I always say everything happens in place. We live in places, we work in places, we eat in places, we laugh in places, medical care is dispensed in places, education is dispensed in places, and preservationists own place, that's our thing, that's what we do. We just have to figure out how we do our work in such a way that we're advancing those other objectives like healthcare or social justice or climate adaptation.

**Jane Seiter:** Welcome to *Preservation Profiles*, a podcast by the National Preservation Institute. I'm your host, Jane Seiter. *I'm* an archaeologist and cultural historian, and *this* is a show for people who believe in the relevance and value of historic preservation.

In this season, I'll be sitting down with six inspiring practitioners who are shaping the field of preservation in the United States.

In these episodes, you'll learn what brought each preservationist to this work and hear their preservation philosophies and insights. This season’s episodes will touch on advocacy, laws and regulations, planning, intangible aspects of stewardship, and more.

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My guest today is Susan West Montgomery. Susan's been advocating on behalf of cultural resources for 30 years, most recently as Vice President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. I spoke to her at a time in her career when she's taking a moment to reflect on the role and scope of preservation and figure out where exactly she wants to direct her efforts next. Susan describes herself as a passionate advocate for natural and historic places who's committed to leveraging these places to connect citizens, promote social justice, and foster health and wellbeing.

On the surface, historic preservation has traditionally focused on saving *buildings.* But it can, has, and should encompass so much more than bricks and mortar. In our conversation, Susan paints a picture of the full range of possibilities within preservation and the impactful future it could have...if we just use a little imagination and let new voices take center stage.
Susan West Montgomery: Hello. I'm Susan West Montgomery and I'm thrilled to be part of this conversation. My career in preservation has evolved tremendously over the 30 years from where I started in Buffalo, New York. There, it was sort of all about buildings. I was very much focused on trying to save places for their architectural and landscape integrity. But I really shifted over time and learned a lot about the more intangible aspects of historic preservation and that's been really a wonderful journey and has really changed and shifted the way I think about historic preservation.

Jane Seiter: So how did you first get your start in preservation?

Susan West Montgomery: Well, I was an Art History major but the more I studied art and architecture, the more interested in architecture I became. And I think that was because you might have works of art that are architecture but there are also places where people live and work and play and I really loved that interplay between art and people's experience. They were actually touching and feeling, moving through these places.

So I was very interested in that regard, but I was living in Buffalo and Buffalo had a 1930s huge... one of these sort of massive train stations, one of the last... sort of the last era of big train stations. And it had sat vacant since the 60s and was just so sad to see it sitting there and I was at a party one night with my boyfriend at the time who was a reporter for The Buffalo News. And there'd been an article about this building and the paper that day and we're at this party, we're young and I got talking to someone and I realized that she was the author of the story about this building. And I said, "So were you able to get inside the building?" And she's like, "Well, not legally." And I said, "Can you get me inside the building?" And she said, "Well, we could."

And so she and her boyfriend, who was the police beat reporter, and my boyfriend and I drove down at two o'clock in the morning and we broke into this building and spent the next four hours sort of going everywhere inside that building and watching the sunrise from it. And for me that was a transformative experience because I recognized how this building left to molder...and the most recent of the owners had
come in just to take out the light fixtures and the tiles. They were just stripping the building of anything that it was worth.

And there was something so wasteful and just wrong about letting these places which contained so much history and beauty and life lived...letting them just deteriorate. Just seemed a crime to me. And I sort of right then said, I'm going to try really hard to make sure that we as a society don't do this, don't let places wither and be destroyed through neglect or through wanton destruction.

And I remembered a quote from Senator Patrick Moynihan of New York and he had said something to the effect of people will remember us, our generation, by the buildings we build and the places we create and the policies and programs we put in place. And it is so true that we will also be remembered by the places that we steward and care for and preserve.

And that is so resonant now because our inability to have preserved so many places of our history is what I think is contributing to the current unrest. We simply were not telling the full American story and at our peril now as we don't really fully understand our American history.

And so much of the clashes that we're seeing now illustrate that lack of understanding of systematic racism, of a history of exploitation, of winner take all. All those things that have characterized our history, and it's partly, I believe, because we don't preserve the places that tell those other stories. We've only preserved a certain slice of our history and it's coming back to haunt us.

Jane Seiter: Wow. How do you think preservation can inform that discussion?

Susan West Montgomery: I think the two greatest things facing...and this is my opinion, but it certainly is climate change and systematic racism and the economic disparities in these countries. And both of those are thoroughly informed by the built environment. You cannot escape the impact of our built environment on the climate. We have to heat our buildings. We have to pave over our city streets to build the infrastructure. And all of that has contributed to the carbon footprint that we have.

Buildings could be part of the solution if we green them and not build new ones but reuse old buildings, et cetera. We can...the buildings can contribute to answering
that. I don't think we've quite figured that out yet but we certainly, there are certainly lots of folks who are working on that question of how the built environment has impacted climate change and how it can be used in service of managing climate change.

And I think that's absolutely true with systematic racism and injustices and poverty and disparities in economic wealth, and the red lining discussion is absolutely key. You can look in any city, you can look at those federal policies that were put in place many years ago, 50, 70 years ago, and you can still see the legacy of those policies and those institutions and how they have marked the landscape and marked the built environment and in so doing marked people's lives and not for the good as it were.

And so I sometimes think, well, if red lining could have done so much damage, if the built environment could have contributed and the way we dealt stewarded the built environment could have done so much damage, what's the reverse that? Could you have a green lining in which we say, okay, now we're going to actually direct all of our resources and energy and creativity and investments into key areas of our cities. The complete opposite of what we did with red lining. It's an idea. I'm not the first to say it, but again the built environment as we know it has a huge impact on policy and on the way we move through the world.

So preservationists have a huge role to play in this. I always say everything happens in place. We live in places, we work in places, we eat in places, we laugh in places, medical care is dispensed in places, education is dispensed in places, and preservationists own place, that's our thing, that's what we do. We just have to figure out how we do our work in such a way that we're advancing those other objectives like healthcare or social justice or climate adaptation.

**Jane Seiter:** What would that vision look like? If you could install that green lining philosophy into government public policy, what would be the results? What future do you see?

**Susan West Montgomery:** Well, actually, how I would do it first I think is, maybe if you don't mind if I start there. If you look at the National Register of Historic Places, it's something like only 8% of listings represent anything other than white male
history. So women's history, African American history, Native American history, it’s just not represented.

So I would spend the next 20 years or however long it takes to write that wrong, to dedicate... We're not going to list any more sites associated with white history to the National Register until we get parity, until we get equity, until we get to the point and even skew in the other direction because that's what's necessary.

So that all the things that we talk about, all the tour, the walking tours, all the investments, the historic district tax credits, all the tools that we're using would actually be directed towards sites associated with something other than white male history. It's a little radical, but it would organize us in a way that I think could be very transformative.

Similarly with the green lining thing, I just think we could be going into communities and saying what is needed to address the systematic and the institutionalized shortcomings of these neighborhoods? Okay. And you could define them and people have defined them. It's not that we don't know...lack of education or less funding for school programs, less access to enrichment activities. I mean, on and on and on, and I'm not a social scientist by any means. But you could define them and then if preservationists say, well, our mission going forward for the next 20 years is simply to direct all of our energies, all of the creative placemaking activities we do, all of the tax credit rehabilitations we do, all the interpretive things we do in terms of telling the stories at these places, uncovering their histories, all the ways that we do our work could be brought to bear in those places.

And again I think with that amount of energy, we could really uplift these places and be a positive force and a transformation in our communities, because we do those things. We just do them for places that are more comfortable for most of us, more obvious to most of us. It's no disservice to our traditional historic sites, but the amount of time and energy we put into them and they're telling one narrative, so that energy and creativity needs to be applied across many narratives.

**Jane Seiter:** It's a very sweeping plan, and you would have to reorient the preservation community and have everybody sort of be on the same page and you would have to rewrite the National Register criteria, I think, I know and there's some talk about that in preservation circles.
I know some people who were working on LGBTQ history are struggling with trying to fit these very important sites into the National Register criteria, which have very strict regulations for what is preserved. Some people are saying that the sites don't... They don't fit because there's been a lot of destruction. These sites weren't seen as important places or sites...they weren't preserved over time and so how do you tell that story if you don't have as much original fabric, let's say as a giant plantation house, what do you say about that?

**Susan West Montgomery:** Oh my God, this is a conversation that's been going on for 10, 15 years and it is the same conversation that we're having about policing and structural racism. We assume that our laws are such that they don't accommodate these other things. Then we either have to reinterpret the laws or change them.

And I think it's a failure of imagination to believe that preserving the intangible heritage, which is... I think is what you're talking about, we know how to take a building and repair the windows and fix the mortar, all of that and then have a house museum or whatever.

But the stories that we tell are much richer than the bricks and mortar of those buildings. And there is the Chicano Moratorium March Corridor in, I believe, Los Angeles. It was a time when during the Vietnam war, more Chicano men were dying at much higher rates for lots of reasons. They were being drafted at higher rates than they proportionally should have been because they couldn't defer out because of education and other reasons. And then once they were in the combat zone, they were given the most dangerous jobs, et cetera.

So this Chicano population is just reeling from all of these deaths and they're protesting and saying, "You know what, until everybody else catches up, all the other demographics catch up, no more recruiting or no more drafting Chicano men." Right. This is sort of the argument.

There was a march and a Chicano newspaper reporter..the police came and he ran into a restaurant and was shot. I don't...this is a much fuller story than that. But there's been a long, long time trying to figure out how we preserve that march route. That is such an important piece of our American history that most of us don't know anything about and that preserving that corridor would really help tell that story,
would uplift that history, would educate us all, would commemorate the death of this man and all those people that were involved.

But what do you do? The buildings on either side are now not even the same businesses that they were at the time of the march. We know one was a restaurant now it's a dry cleaner. One was a beauty store now it's a hardware store, whatever. So what exactly are you preserving? And it's a challenge. Oh my God, it's really difficult to think about what do we do.

But do we just say, well then preserving that history is not worth it? No, we figure out a way and actually the State Historic Preservation Officer in California figured out a way to get that route nominated. There's the question of nominating and uplifting and quantifying and designating that place.

The second question becomes, then what do you do with it afterwards? Right. So once you've designated then how do you... What is the treatment? And that's where it starts to get into the rub. Do you tell these property owners they can't change their facades, which don't even look like they looked during the march, probably not.

But do you say that forever we're going to have this be named that place? We're going to have interpretive signage. We're going to have festivals that honor this. We're going to do certain things in this space that continue to commemorate this event. Sure, like that's okay.

Just because you're not applying the bricks and mortar window treatment, repointing, that you applied to a different kind of a resource that's listed on the National Register doesn't mean that you can't engage in preserving, commemorating, uplifting, protecting, stewarding, interpreting this place.

I mean, I think we are smart enough human beings that we can figure this out if we want to figure it out. And I think there's an interest in not figuring it out, just like there's an interest in not really creating equity in our communities. Because if we did that, then maybe some people would have less than others. It's not that we can't do it, it's that it's a failure of commitment and an ethic and a desire to do it. And that's true of the preservation community, too. We can do this, we can figure it out if we want to.
**Jane Seiter**: For the first time I'm sort of hopeful that we might figure this out because for a long time we've had these discussions and these ideas have been percolating, but it's been really difficult to see a space that we could do that. And for some reason right now, it seems like lots of things are changing and suddenly people are seeing opportunities that they didn't see. So that's the how... What would that look like if we could get that started?

**Susan West Montgomery**: Can I just say one of the other reasons why it's happening now and why there's hope is because as we diversify the movement, as more and more voices come into the conversations that we're having, I have deep respect for the preservationists that came before me but I have even more respect for the people coming after me. They are the ones that are pressing at the edges and pressing not even just at the edges in the very middle and it is up to us to... Those of us more established in this to sort of allow that in and that's what transformation will happen.

I think the time is right because finally it's not just a bunch of people talking to each other, the chorus just... We always say speaking of the chorus, we all sit in a room, we all look alike, we all have the same education, whatever and so of course, things persisted for a long time past even when we had the ideas that we could change something, we didn't have the right personnel, I think. And I think we do, more and more we're doing that and more and more we're dedicated to doing that.

I'm not that old but I'm old enough to think a little bit that I need to kind of get out of the way. So that's something, but then what would that look like? Oh my gosh, it would be amazing. It would be that buildings were not seen as obstacles they would be seen... And we already see this in communities where you have a community center that was built out of a former Sears store.

There's a Crosstown Concourse in Memphis, Tennessee, that was this old Sears warehouse and it's been turned into a community center and there's a school and there's healthcare facilities and there's retail and there's art space. And the community comes together in this historic place where they would remember sort of what happened here before. And they're part of this continuity of their community. It's not just this ugly old building sitting there on the edge of town, it's a beating part of their lives, and they are so proud of that and they have a space now in this beautiful old building to come together.
So there's pockets of that everywhere, amazing historic buildings that have been converted into affordable housing, into community health centers, into schools, into people-serving facilities. The restoration and reopening of the Pauli Murray House in Durham as a place of social justice.

Oh my, I mean, this is what it's all about. It's a question of scale, I think. That those little pockets are what I want to see writ large in every city, old places and historic buildings, and whatever from the earliest to the most recent are seen as these community assets, and they're vibrant and alive and contributing to people.

So I don't know if that's a little too pie in the sky and sort of rose-colored glasses, but I think there is an opportunity for buildings to play this really wonderful role in community building and civic engagement.

And I'll say one other thing when...during 9/11 and now during some of this even COVID, but also the protesting that we're seeing now, it's really interesting to see how people need community spaces to come together, to grieve, to fight, to protest, to get reacquainted with each other, to see each other. If you've taken part in any of the protests like we're seeing the full range of who we are as a nation on those streets and we need these places.

And it's even more powerful when you are at a place like Lafayette Square in Washington, that is so layered. There's quarters where enslaved people were held, the slave trade occurred on that street, years of protest for civil rights and the anti-Vietnam protest and the women's march, and all this has happened in this one space over and over again. And there's a power to that and people want to go there and be part of history and we need those historic places to do that.

Jane Seiter: Who should we be talking to? What organizations, people, related fields, people in related fields should we be reaching out to at this point?

Susan West Montgomery: Sure. The one thing that I was very proud to be part of at the National Trust was the creation of Our Trust Lives which I'm not sure are going to continue now. But the idea with presenting these conversations at the National Preservation Conference was to bring in people who were not preservationists, who … that wasn't what they do.
Bryan Stevenson, a civil rights lawyer who was the founder of the museum and Birmingham author of *Just Mercy* which is now getting a lot of really good play. He wouldn't say he was a preservationist but he had a lot to tell us about what historic places can and can't do to help the social justice goals and objectives that he had. It was really important for him to be on that stage.

We had a documentary filmmaker, John Valadez, who really talked about the misunderstanding of our Latin and Hispanic culture in the Southwest United States. We somehow think that they came but it was we who came. Those places already existed. And he tells us really important stories about what it's like to have your history obliterated. Nobody's saying that his family had been living in these places for generations and generations. Everyone looks at him and paints him in the brush of an immigrant, right.

So filmmakers and social justice attorneys and climate change folks and we had a futurist, for God's sake. So I guess when you say, who should we be talking to? I think we should be talking to people who are not us. People who are engaged in activities...artists and filmmakers and scholars and researchers in human health and wellbeing and what makes a place healthy for human beings and what... How do you address systemic trauma and how does place enter into that?

We sort of know well walkable communities are good for you physically, but there's research that's showing that it's possible that old places are good for you neurologically because humans have an affinity for old places. We like the idea that time passes and that a building ages.

A brand spanking new building is a little disconcerting. Every human being recognizes the passage of time and we are human beings who age ourselves, right. So there's some neurological research that's happening about the value of old places and so I would want to be talking to those kinds of folks, too.

And I also would want to start the conversation in every time we reach out is do not start with the building, do not start with the object or the resource. Start with the need. What is it that we need in this community and then figure out what the built resource or object or landscape or cultural resource....It seems so simple. We did a report called "Preservation for the People: A Vision for the Future."
It's sort of culminated a lot of what people have been talking about for a long time and it's... If you shift the narrative and start with the people and have everything else come after, I think it really does change the way we do our work. It can change the way we do our work and it can bring in lots of other people who really care about communities and who really want...they want to reuse these historic buildings. They don't want to tear them down.

But their mission and their goal and their objective is different than ours. It's not about saving the building. It's about serving the community and when we marry those two, it can be really powerful. We can bring that to the table. That's what we have to bring to the table.

**Jane Seiter:** What's inspiring you right now?

**Susan West Montgomery:** Well, I spent 30 years working with the built environment and historic landscapes and cultural resources and intangible heritage as well. But I have found myself very recently, in the last four years let's say, because of some of the sort of things that we're seeing in our nation, I've been really needing personally to be outside in the woods and nature and so that was great. Of course, if you need to be in nature you should really go out and be in nature. Everybody needs something. Some people need to read a book. Some people need to get a massage, whatever. One should take care of themselves.

But as I was doing that, I actually have come to learn that I think it's more than that for me. Just as historic places have the power, I believe, to help and to heal and to promote social justice and to connect people and all of those things that I have always felt about historic places and why I was in this business to begin with, I believe that even more deeply about nature and about forests and about public places, parks and those kinds of things.

And so what is inspiring me now is really a study of that aspect of the environment. What does nature have to contribute? And there's a lot of writing and there's a lot of research about it, but the most exciting part of that I think is the intersection I'm hoping to find between historic place and landscapes and woods and nature and there's a lot of richness there and so that's what I'm kind of dedicating my life to now. And it's very exciting to me because it's the same place-based work that says places
contribute and we need to figure out how to steward them and heal them and share them and build them, and I hope to do that with nature as well as culture.

Jane Seiter: I know you have a course coming up on NPI, an eLearning course. Could you talk about that?

Susan West Montgomery: Sure, happy to. So it's called “Fundraising in Challenging Times” and what it seeks to do and it's all of a piece of what we've been talking about is that you can go to the traditional funding sources again and again and they're just limited. Funders who fund the built environment are a limited group of people, but funders who fund education and health and wellbeing and social justice and whatever, that's a whole different category of folks.

And so if you can position your cultural resource project to be more than just about the built environment or more about the building, you open up avenues to additional funding. And so I'm going to talk about how you think about your projects differently so they are part of a larger conversation in the community and then also where those funding sources are and how to begin to prospect for them.

Jane Seiter: Well, thank you very much. This has been a very interesting conversation.

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Hey everyone, thanks for listening so far! We’ve got more of my conversation with Susan coming up, but first I want to take just a moment to thank our sponsors. This podcast is made possible by the generous support of Fred McCoy, Darwina L. Neal, and Gail C. Rothrock.

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I’m inspired by Susan’s nuanced and inclusive vision of preservation. Going forward, I’m going to be thinking more about the ways natural and cultural resources are intertwined and how they work together as a united process rather than as separate efforts.
Here’s my takeaway from my fascinating conversation with Susan: If there’s something that you think is worth preserving... then find out more, network, advocate, fight, and think creatively about its future worth. There are so many examples of revitalized areas that were once destitute and now serve as amazing places to live, work, and connect. And if places worth saving because of their connections to the history of African Americans, Latinx communities, women, workers, or queer communities don’t fit neatly into the existing National Register nomination criteria, then maybe it’s time to adjust the criteria. As Susan argues, historic preservation can and should play a greater role in building better, more inclusive, more equitable, and more sustainable communities.

If you’d like to learn more from Susan, she’s created a free, 30-minute, on-demand course for NPI that will be available in late Summer 2020. It’s called “Finding New Sources of Funding in Challenging Times: An Introduction.” Here’s the course description:

“An investigation of any grants database using the search terms ‘historic preservation’ or ‘cultural resources’ will yield minimal results. During times of economic hardship, and the resulting narrowing of priorities for funders, results may be downright nonexistent. Learn how to evaluate a cultural resource project for its value in serving broader community needs. Review traditional funding types vs. alternative sources that can be redirected to meet project goals. Consider new partnerships that can expand the universe of support.”

And that’s our episode. Thank you for tuning in to Preservation Profiles. For a transcript and more information on this episode and this podcast, please visit our show website, preservationprofiles.org.

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This podcast was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio. Additional editing by Julia Letts. Research and guidance were provided by NPI Executive Director Jere Gibber and myself, Jane Seiter.