

Introduction

by Antoinette J. Lee, Editor

With this issue of *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*, we address the post-World War II era with a major article, "Evaluating the Significance of San Lorenzo Village, A Mid-20th Century Suburban Community" by Andrew Hope. The period starting in the late 1940s and stretching through the 1950s is when many of us in the historic preservation profession were born and grew up. As we age, the 1950s is no longer the "recent past." Where once the material culture of this decade was considered commonplace and ubiquitous, it is now fading quickly under the pressures of development, modernization, and mansionization. Before 1950s heritage is subsumed under newer layers of subsequent development, preservationists may want to take stock of how resources of their own era will fare in the 21st century.

For many years, historic preservation looked at the 1950s through its architecture, ranging from Mies van der Rohe's Modern style buildings in Chicago to the development of the major house types of the period, most particularly the ranch house and rambler.¹ Today, our approach is broader. We now understand the period as one of great social change as seen in the Civil Rights Movement; advances in science, medicine, and technology that changed the way in which people lived; the flowering of the arts, literature, and music; urban redevelopment plans that promised to bring people and investment to the central city; and the rise of defensive measures to protect the nation during the Cold War. Few areas of the nation were unaffected by such national and international trends and thus historic resources representing these themes can be found across the country.

The emphasis on social history in the United States system of heritage management will serve the preservation field well as communities examine their 1950s heritage. National social trends played out in everyday life in downtowns, neighborhoods, schools, houses of worship, and shopping centers. Individuals important in leading social change in communities can be commemorated in their residences and places of work. Some of this history may be found in archeological sites.²

The tools for documentation will evolve as the preservation field addresses 1950s heritage. The documents of earlier eras—newspapers, archival records, and photographs—will continue to be important. During the 1950s, television,

home movies, and tape recorders left records that should be added to the documentation sources for heritage research. In future periods, it is clear that digital and computer records will be important sources.

How will this heritage measure up against the established criteria for evaluation and integrity standards? Preservationists will want to examine how historic places of the 1950s are already being designated at the local level, particularly in Western states such as Arizona, Nevada, and California. Other states, especially in the South, are undertaking major surveys of places associated with the Civil Rights Movement. The legacies of 1950s music can be found in New York City, Memphis, and Philadelphia. These examples demonstrate that the existing criteria and standards continue to work as they have for resources of earlier periods.

Preservationists who grew up during the 1950s will want to help shape how the heritage field incorporates resources of the period because many will remember what these places meant when they were new. The memories associated with these resources will give preservationists an opportunity to shape their own heritage and its interpretation before passing it on to rising generations of preservationists for whom the 1950s is increasingly the "distant past." In this way, the 1950s can be interpreted by those who lived through the decade as well as by those who study the period using a variety of resources not available in the documentation of earlier periods.

As the 1950s evolves from "retro" to "real heritage," it will accumulate the weight of credibility that will make it as serious a subject for preservationists of the future just as 1920s suburban subdivisions and New Deal school buildings are for us today. At that point, the "recent past" will be redefined to address the heritage of the last four decades of the 20th century.

Notes

1. Recent books on the ranch house include Alan Hess, *The Ranch House* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005) and Katherine Samon, *Ranch House Style* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2003).
2. Susan L. Henry, "The National Register and the 20th Century: Is there Room for Archeology?" *CRM* 18, no. 6, supplement (1995): 9-12.

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