



Ellis Island Institute

Center for Heritage Preservation Concept  
Focus Group Meeting

December 7, 2009

Final Report

Made possible with funding from:



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Background:

The Ellis Island Institute is a program of Save Ellis Island, Inc. (SEI). Save Ellis Island is the National Park Service fundraising and programmatic non-profit partner for the rehabilitation of the twenty-nine remaining buildings on Ellis Island, which once served as the largest U. S. Public Health Service hospital in the country, built to treat ill and infirm immigrants. SEI has the mission and mandate to raise the funds necessary to create and sustain, within these buildings, the Ellis Island Institute and Conference Center. The project is one of the largest historic preservation projects ever undertaken in the country, and one that will return this national icon to the public for a renewed purpose. The Institute now provides educational and public programming on Ellis Island, along with continuing to plan for expanded programming related to immigration, public health and historic preservation.

In recognition of the significance of the preservation project on Ellis Island, in June 2008, SEI convened a Preservation Education Forum to discuss ways in which the work could most effectively serve as an education resource for those in the preservation field, the general public and other audiences. The meeting resulted in many solid approaches to insure that the actual preservation work will also serve as a model of preservation education, broadly speaking.

The idea for a Center for Heritage Preservation arose from the June 2008 meeting. The New Jersey Historic Trust brought the concept to SEI as a possible partnership within the Ellis Island Institute. The idea supported the mission of the Institute and furthered SEI's and the NPS's intent to employ best practices and sustainability measures in the actual restoration work. The concept document for the Center for Heritage Preservation, distributed to the participants in advance of the meeting, was developed as a result of discussions between SEI and the Trust. Before proceeding any further, both SEI and the Trust agreed that it was necessary to invite others in preservation, planning, law, academia and advocacy to join the conversation.

Summary:

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, the Ellis Island Institute in partnership with the New Jersey Historic Trust convened a focus group for the purposes of discussing the possible establishment of a Center for Heritage Preservation within the Institute. The mission and goals for the Center had been laid out in a concept document, which was distributed to participants in advance of the meeting. Briefly stated, the mission and goals are:

The Center for Heritage Preservation will give voice in the public arena on the benefits of heritage preservation for the economy, for environmental sustainability, and for our culture and our social fabric by:

1. Sponsoring and commissioning research to quantify and support the economic, cultural, social and environmental benefits of heritage preservation.
2. Disseminating the results of research studies to civic leaders, government agencies, educational institutions, business leaders, preservation organizations, the media and the public.
3. Actively participating in the formation of public policy such that the importance of historic and cultural preservation informs decisions that affect urban planning, affordable housing, the environment, conservation of historic landscapes and rural settings, education, economic development, heritage tourism and transformation of the workforce, along with integrating heritage preservation into mainstream disciplines like architecture and urban planning, public policy and housing.
4. Promoting and convening conferences, policy forums and awareness sessions for diverse audiences both within and outside the preservation field to insure that the benefits of sound historic and cultural preservation practices are understood, acknowledged and incorporated into decision-making.
5. Supporting and encouraging specialized building trades programs, secondary school, college and graduate programs in preservation studies to guarantee a next generation of professional preservationists.
6. Demonstrating the interdisciplinary value of historic preservation by using the adaptive re-use of Ellis Island's south side buildings as an ongoing laboratory that showcases – through media, education programs, heritage destination tours, public events and exhibits – the synergistic benefits of preserving our nation's past.

Participants were asked to respond to the concept document's statement of need, and to expand upon the needs as they understood them. Three distinct needs emerged: the need for consolidated, focused research to underscore preservation's benefits in a vibrant, sustainable, livable environment to influence and inform public policy, the need for broad-based education and the need for training in preservation crafts. A number of participants commented upon past efforts to establish a center, such as the one being envisioned, none of which, to date, have come to fruition, though the need was clearly identified.

Following the initial discussion, participants responded to the question of addressing the identified needs. Because of the many organizations already working in the field and undertaking portions of the work identified in the needs discussion, the overall theme arising from this discussion was that the Center should help those in the field do what they already do, only better; it should complement and provide synergy in the field, not duplicate or draw energy, attention and resources from it, and that it can be an important voice for small players in the field who generally do not get the attention they seek. There was general consensus that further investigation and discussion with the many preservation groups to further enlighten the concept and forestall duplication of effort was in order.

## THE NEEDS:

The concept document for the Center expressed the need as:

The Center for Heritage Preservation has the potential to build upon current knowledge and techniques by expanding the role historic preservation plays in addressing the larger issues of a strong and vibrant economy, urban planning, sustainability, cultural identity and honoring our past. Opportunities exist to look at preservation through a different lens, one that has its basis in the belief that preserving and re-adapting the physical structures that define our culture is good economic policy, sound environmental strategy and prudent stewardship. Though data has been collected on the economic, social and environmental benefits of preserving historic buildings, neighborhoods and landscapes, little has been done to synthesize, update, analyze and disseminate this research to illustrate the positive benefits of preservation to the public and the private sectors. Consequently, preserving and re-using historic buildings as a major thrust of urban revitalization, thoughtful land use planning and environmentally sustainable practice has not found a permanent voice within policy discussions. Participants were asked to comment and expand upon this statement from their professional experience and viewpoint. Three distinct needs arose from the various threads of the discussion:

- Research to inform public policy: ranging from data collection, coordination of efforts, and improved dissemination mechanisms; removing obstacles to easy access to existing data. Much of the extant data is ad hoc, uncoordinated, unsystematic. Accordingly, a need for collecting, analyzing, synthesizing and “translating” (scholarly and academic research into practical and useful forms for advocacy purposes, among others) was articulated in several different ways, for various purposes, ranging from the critical need for ideas in practice (e.g. how to make a building ADA compliant while preserving the essential historic structure) and to influence policy (e.g. economic value of providing state tax credits). The need for research and data collection was affirmed several times over, with a variety of reasons to prompt it, from the need to demonstrate the value that preservation adds to the economy in terms of jobs, tourism, taxes- and to document it- to a need to coordinate, synthesize and disseminate information in a common language and convince the various audiences who are essential to advancing preservation’s objectives.

There was virtual unanimity on the need for data to aid advocacy, and for the need to explore options such as an online Center, which would host searchable data bases on preservation and heritage, among other services. A major goal of the proposed Center is to provide the quantity and quality of data necessary to support the inclusion of heritage preservation within public policy with regard to economic development, tourism and community planning and sustainability. Participants suggested a number of approaches, including data that would support removing the impediments to achieving preservation goals (e.g. laws, government policies, building codes, rules and requirements) to the actions which would improve preservation’s prospects. Over the past forty years, much of the advances in preservation have been in preservation technology, not in research that quantifies the benefits of preservation. What data has been collected is often only available to those in the field. Efforts need to be directed towards translating this data, and new research, for local constituencies. With this type of product, a Center, along the lines proposed, could have a voice in the formation of public policy, to inform decisions narrowly constructed as well as those

broadly affecting the urban landscape, the environment, and, specifically, policy relating to heritage tourism and workforce training related policy issues. The need for data that supports and justifies “investment” in heritage preservation and history, including data that demonstrates the benefits of heritage tourism and the “return on investment” of grant funds was another topic added to the discussion.

There was sentiment for a research agenda developed at the Center that could leverage funds from multiple sources and broaden the reach of the field. And, further, several participants expressed a desire for the Center to serve as a link between university-based research and practitioner-based work. Universities are now switching to databases, but individually designed, making coordination and information sharing difficult. A central location or nexus would benefit the field as a whole.

Several participants cautioned that care should be taken to insure that a new entity to address the articulated needs not dilute but rather concentrate efforts. Some 4,000 local preservation groups with various missions already exist. Both the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the New Jersey Historic Trust have identified the need for a center to inform public policy in their respective strategic plans, but the process by which such a center would come to fruition has yet to be developed. Both agencies are very interested in the topic, and the need. The proposed Center for Historic Preservation may meet that need, even though obstacles with regard to focus and funding will need further investigation.

- Education: broad public education, and, specifically, in such venues as real estate evaluation and sales, community groups, coordination with undergraduate and graduate programs in historic preservation and expanded outreach to other disciplines ( law, economics, public policy, for example).

The topic of broad-based education and outreach was interwoven in the overall discussion, but came through as a necessary component of the Center. Currently, there is no way to determine how many people work in the field and how the field contributes to employment. The preservation field has so far failed to document or publicize its serious commitment and ongoing work. By speaking primarily to each other, preservationists have not capitalized on the economic and social benefits of their work. The Center can help coordinate and disseminate these accomplishments as a means of supporting public policy that favors preservation and engaging new audiences.

- Hands-on skills training for people who restore and preserve: professionalized training, that ranges from the training of new construction workers through training institutes, to finding ways to effectively influence developers, contractors, trade unions (electricians, plumbers, etc.) in how to use “preservation-conscious” methods in construction; using experience, research data (e.g. economic impact of adaptive re-use; desirability of preserving historic features in enhanced pricing), the proposed Center might, for example, not do training per se but rather facilitate the training of trainers to set or secure standards for training and expand the pool of trained professionals. Participants pointed out existing programs, such as the preservation trades high school in Brooklyn and the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, and again suggested the avoidance of duplication, while identifying the potential of the work on Ellis Island to serve as a “field school” over the course of many years.

The potential for using the rehabilitation of the remaining buildings on Ellis Island as a laboratory of best practices was not lost on the meeting's participants. This topic was previously discussed in the Preservation Education Forum in June 2008, and continues to be of interest to SEI as planning for the work continues. The idea of a series of "field schools" in conjunction with trades programs, university preservation programs, trades unions and other building crafts is currently a goal of the project. Participants also pointed out that the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (NCPTT) is already established, and given the plan for the Ellis Island Institute as an overnight conference facility dedicated to migration and public health once the buildings have been rehabilitated, a long-term training center on Ellis Island may not be a feasible approach for the Center. However, the educational potential during the work will be addressed, and as pointed out during the discussion, funding for sustainable preservation work is readily available and may provide a first stream of income for the Center. Once the work is completed, it is possible to consider the Center as a convener of targeted audiences in "train the trainer" workshops or conferences.

#### WAYS TO ADDRESS NEEDS:

The concept paper proposed the following role for the Center:

The Center for Heritage Preservation will fill this void by securing a place for historic preservation within the spheres of public policy and public awareness. The Center will accomplish this goal by commissioning studies, publicizing this work, convening conferences and workshops, providing informed testimony and giving voice to preservation's role in a sustainable and economically strong future where our treasured resources are valued.

The actual preservation and re-use of the remaining buildings on Ellis Island logically leads to a larger discussion of the important role of preserving and adaptively re-using historic buildings as good economic and social policy. The important story of historic preservation is one focus of the Ellis Island Institute's mission. The Center for Heritage Preservation, located under the umbrella of the Institute, will fulfill that mission by insuring that the preservation project on Ellis Island serves a larger purpose – that of supporting and advancing the economic and cultural value of heritage preservation.

The location of a Center at Ellis Island was recognized as a unique, even powerful idea not only because of what this location evokes and symbolizes- the power of place to shape ideas- but because of the need for preserving the remaining buildings and the opportunity that the restoration of these buildings provides to model and document the potential of 'green' technology, for example, adaptive re-use, and other areas, such as sustainability, that have contemporary funding potential.

The place, Ellis Island, an attractive setting for convening meetings already, could expand further to serve specific purposes associated with the Center for Heritage Preservation, such as conferences for policy discussions, to develop a research agenda, to disseminate research, to continue essential communications in and among critical actors in the preservation field. The Center could also broaden the range of outreach to historians and others who might help make the case for a Center for Heritage Preservation more persuasive and, in the future, provide a solid network for joint work that raises public awareness for the value of preservation, to the economy and environment, to culture and to society.

Accordingly, a Center for Heritage Preservation, located there, and as a part of the Ellis Island Institute, in whatever configuration eventually is decided upon, seemed to resonate.

The agreement did not come without caveats. Several suggestions were offered, in general terms, and some with specific and clearly defined objectives, but it was clear during the conversation and interviews that further discussion and groundwork was essential before the proposed Center for Heritage Preservation can be fully developed. Several participants raised concerns about potential competition for research dollars particularly and the value of policy institute unless it coordinated its work with other major actors in the preservation field. Some expressed the need for a broader base for policy generation, a think tank as it were, to get distance from the perception that policy in preservation can be seen as self-serving advocacy.

A persistent theme was the following: the Center should think “outside the box,” broadly, to engage related disciplines and seek to gather the kinds of data that will inform, in layman’s terms, the value of heritage stewardship. The Center should help those in the field do what they already do, only better; it should complement and provide synergy in the field, not duplicate or draw energy, attention and resources from it.

In this environment, under the leadership of the Center, a well-developed and coordinated research agenda is more likely to be developed. Dissemination of the information from research generated and commissioned here and elsewhere, through meetings and conferences and through electronic means could meet critical needs. The Center might be best positioned to gather, analyze & interpret data, and by diversifying the participants in the accomplishments of these tasks. University collaborations across departments (academic research, economists and planners in addition to historians and preservationists) will strengthen the Center’s impact.

Some participants saw the creation of the Center as separate from the restoration of the buildings, which was the original intent of the concept paper, though most recognized that there could very well be a useful connection on the one hand that has to do with “place” and a very practical and direct connection that has to do with using the restoration as a laboratory to document, even showcase, best preservation and innovative, contemporary practices.

Participants were asked to respond to the question, “Are there other institutions already providing the kinds of services proposed for the Center?” Responses indicated that there were certain organizations, agencies or academic institutions doing some pieces of the research but those efforts were not coordinated and frequently were either unknown or not accessible and so a new entity to perform the functions identified made sense. Although the idea for a center that addresses the research needs to inform public policy on heritage stewardship has been considered by state and national organizations (the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the New Jersey Historic Trust, to name the two represented at the meeting), very little progress has been made on the formation of such a center at this time. None of the representatives attending this session identified its own organization or any other existing one as better suited to the comprehensive mission that the concept document lays out. While existing preservation organizations will continue to do what they currently do, there seemed to be no evidence that any would compete for the role the concept document proposes for the Center for Heritage Preservation.

Discussion of the Institute at Northwest Louisiana University, and its concentrated focus on training, suggested to some that the Center for Heritage Preservation ought to direct its attention

primarily to research and policy while supporting the efforts of the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (NCPTT) and the critical need for its work. While the possible use of a field school program during the restoration work itself was discussed as a viable option, overall, participants indicated that the Center for Heritage Preservation should seek not to supplant, but to complement NCPTT's work, and, perhaps have a direct link between its plans for restoration and the training provided through the NCPTT. The idea of broadening the scope of the mission of the Center to focus, for example, on older buildings not just historic buildings in order to tap into federal monies or to attract funds for sustainability projects was raised as a means of securing some initial funding for the Center and its potential projects. Investigation of this idea certainly has merit, though the focus may well fall under the field school idea and "best practices" concept rather than a center directed at policy research.

#### FUNDING:

Throughout the day, participants noted the funding challenges presented by establishing a center as proposed. A number of participants noted that the Center will need to be unique and meet a need within the community, along with having a qualified and respected board of trustees to garner the kinds of funding needed to operate and commission the economic studies that will inform public policy. Others noted that funding for training programs and sustainability studies and implementation are currently easier to procure, and may be one approach to initially launching the Center. Since the concept for the Center is in its early stages, the topic of governance and funding will continue to be a crucial topic as the next steps are undertaken.

#### NEXT STEPS:

Participants suggested that discussion should be expanded to additional possible constituencies, including but not limited to other preservation groups, trade unions, planning associations, redevelopment authorities, the conservation community, NCPTT, and other academic disciplines (cultural anthropologists, economists, cultural geographers, historians, planners, among others).

A number of participants agreed to serve on an advisory committee as plans for the Center proceed in 2010.

The Ellis Island Institute and the New Jersey Historic Trust will devise a plan for engaging additional constituencies in the discussion, and look to convene the advisory committee in the spring of 2010.