

# Preserving public health: A literature review

**The philosophical premise of preservation and heritage is based on the idea that historic environments are important for humanity's well-being. Unfortunately the literature has not yet explored how knowledge and understanding of the past relates to the broad goals of public health.**

Almost fifteen years ago, Dannenberg et al. (2003) challenged researchers to explore the diverse and interconnected ways that design of the built environment affected human health.

The design choices we make in our homes, schools, workplaces, communities, and transportation systems can be major effects on health, which is defined by the World Health Organization as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." A healthy community protects and improves the quality of life for its citizens, promotes healthy behaviors and minimizes hazards for its residents, and preserves the natural environment (Dannenberg et al., 2003, 1500).

Research towards this goal has been completed, but the work is largely disciplinary (Dannenberg et al., 2003). Interdisciplinary opportunities to improve public health should not be ignored. This presentation reviews literature for evidence of ways historic preservation and heritage (hereafter preservation) and public health may relate. While preservation has been recognized as one of many approaches that may interrelate with public health (Orthel & Anderson, 2016; Budd, Lovich, Pierce, & Chamberlain, 2008), there is no direct literature evidence that this relationship has been explored specifically. Indirect evidence suggests tangible and intangible aspects of preservation may influence public health.

## Preservation and design

Historic preservation involves the repair, re-creation, stabilization, or protection of physical (tangible) historic artifacts at scales from objects to buildings to landscapes. Justifications for preservation of buildings, history, and heritage are often based in pragmatic concerns of economics and business (Koziol, 2008). United States federal regulation outlines mandatory and recommended preservation practices that define the preservation profession in this country. Individuals and groups may nominate historic resources for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. In most cases, the resources are documented or recognized, but physical preservation choices are left to owners and local authorities. Preservation, then, serves to record, gather, and disseminate knowledge about the past.

Design is linked to preservation and heritage. While there are obvious and long-standing connections between traditional design disciplines (e.g., architecture) and the protection of buildings and other design products, the strongest connection exists through design thinking practices. Allison and Allison (2008), Orthel (2014), and Orthel and Anderson (in press) discuss preservation and heritage as design problems. Design, preservation, and heritage problems are often social and inherently complex in ways that fit Rittel and Webber's (1973) wicked problem theory (see also, Coyne, 2005). These problems are ill-defined, cannot be solved without changing the character of the problem, and are no longer focused on simple meanings or physical objects. Similarly, Buchanan's (1992, 1999) four orders of design (signs, things, actions, and thoughts) organize the problems that design and preservation address. Contemporary preservation practice is evolving from problems based on the first and second order of design to the more complex third and fourth orders. Design's relationship with preservation and heritage is now about how to support people in their understanding and choices (Orthel & Anderson, in press). As a result, preservation must be addressed through the frame of design-based problem solving.

## Preservation and public health

The philosophical premise of preservation is based on the idea that historic environments are important for humanity's well-being. Much preservation literature simply asserts the importance of people knowing their past. Recent developments have translated heritage into a basic human right (Bennoune, 2016; Blake, 2011; Hodder, 2010). More directly, Grenville (2007) argues the psychological well-being of individuals requires an awareness of how the individual fits into a past. As a result, she states that preservation and heritage engender:

A sense of confidence and ontological security which allows an individual to escape the debilitating consequences of existential fears

about life in an unfamiliar, "transient and untrustworthy" modern world (Grenville, 2007, 449, 251). Individuals' understanding of their relationship in the historical world is historical consciousness (e.g., Lowenthal, 2008; Nietzsche, 1874/1980). History is no longer a deductive exercise; history is an abductive consideration of cause, effect, importance, and relevance



## Which parts of this scene promote public health?

<b>Police powers and government interests</b> (e.g., constitutional interpretations of police powers or public welfare clauses)	25 entries
<b>Planning and health</b> (e.g., obesity in relationship to school locations or urban form)	24 entries
<b>Social justice issues</b> (e.g., ethics)	5 entries
<b>Co-incident use of search terms</b> (e.g., identified in bibliography titles or used in unrelated ways in the article)	74 entries
Duplicate, non-academic, or otherwise removed	87 entries

## Public health + preservation themes in literature

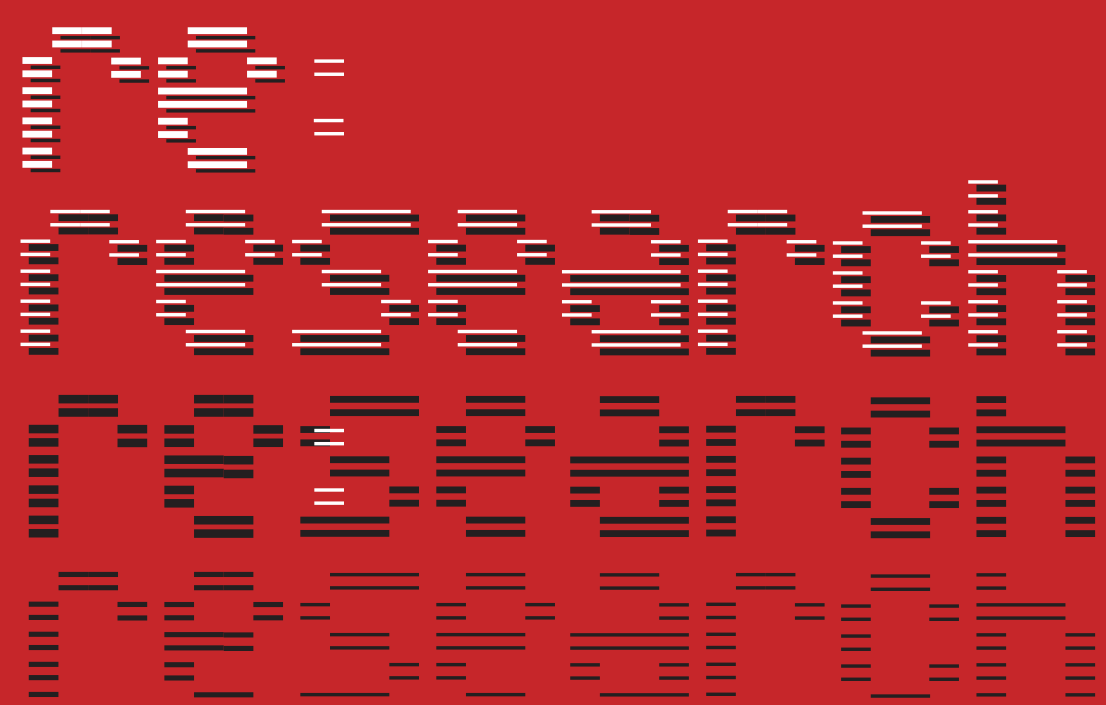
through the viewpoint of individuals. History must be "understood as a mental structure or competence that underlies our dealing with collectively important aspects of past, present, and future" articulated through individuals' narratives (Kölbl & Konrad, 2015, 20).

### Unconnected literature

Three notable articles highlight the potential for further connection between the two fields. Kearney and Bradley (2015) explain that alterations to heritage knowledge affect a community's foodways, physical activities, and social interactions. Unfortunately, the authors do not connect these observations with public health. Appler (2015) highlights potential benefits associated with locating housing in urban historic districts as opposed to non-historic areas (e.g., location to public services, improved quality of life). His analysis of the physical distances directly ties characteristics of historic areas (e.g., density, walkability, established public entities) to the public health concerns associated with connections to transit, schools, and parks. Grüning, Strünck, and Gilmore (2008) discuss heritage as a factor in the limited effectiveness of German anti-tobacco campaigns. Ultimately, while these articles connect preservation and public health ideas, they do not discuss the connection between the fields.

### Discussion

The literature search identified three themes of potential scholarship that were expected: police powers (and legal issues), planning and health, and social justice issues. The lack of academic work directly connecting preservation and public health was unexpected. While some literature demonstrates a potential connection between the two fields, this connection remains unexplored. There is a clear opportunity for targeted, interdisciplinary, and methodologically sound research exploring how preservation and public health can support symbiotic objectives.



Bryan D. Orthel, PhD Kansas State University

iasdr 2017

University of  
CINCINNATI

D | A | A | P