PastForward Online 2021 Conference Proceedings: Lead the Change
Leading the Change Together

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In November 2021, the PastForward conference was held online for the second year in a row, engaging more than 2,300 attendees from across the country and across the preservation movement. Its theme, *Leading the Change Together*, reflected the imperative that preservationists bring about changes needed to make our work more inclusive, relevant, and impactful—and that we do so in collaboration with a wide spectrum of people who are working to save, steward, activate, and interpret our country’s historic places.

The incredible keynote speakers at PastForward 2021 included the first Indigenous cabinet member in U.S. history, a bold Congressional champion of historic preservation, the recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, a national best-selling author whose books have been translated into 35 languages, and a director of an internationally renowned museum. Each of them represented different aspects of the practice of preservation, such as using cultural landscapes to tell our full history, weaving creative storytelling into place, advocating with a focus on preservation’s social and economic benefits, and federally protecting historic places. This edition of *Forum Journal* allows us to see them together as a group, highlighting the common themes of equity, justice, agency, and environmental sustainability—all potential outcomes of our work together as preservationists.
Paul Edmondson, president and CEO of the National Trust, (right) began the conference by focusing on the theme of *Leading the Change Together*, reminding us that “as change-makers, this community knows that we can go further, achieve more, and become more relevant by working together.”

Similarly, Secretary Haaland urged us to act quickly and effectively, especially as we seek to meet the challenges of a changing climate. “The time to act is now,” she said. Connecting the value of stewardship across time, Secretary Haaland also reminded us, “By taking bold action, we ensure that the special and sacred places that you all work so hard to raise awareness about and protect are preserved well into the future. It’s a win-win: Not only do we create a more sustainable future full of opportunity for generations to come, but we also preserve the histories and memories of the generations that came before us.”

In addition to delivering powerful calls to action, our speakers also shared their personal connections to heritage and place. Representative Teresa Leger Fernández of New Mexico’s 3rd District spoke about the idea of *herencia*, or inheritance. Speaking of her own upbringing, she said, “Preserving the stories, preserving the culture made us stronger as a community, but also made us more open to celebrating other stories and cultures.”

Landscape architect Walter Hood, in conversation with Brent Leggs, executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund and senior vice president at the National Trust, described being inspired in his work by his earliest memories: “I spent summers in Tobacco Road with my uncles, who were sharecroppers. I spent time with my grandmother literally in agricultural fields. So that kind of memory of landscape [is] in North Carolina. If you’ve never been there, it’s green. Everything is green.”

And author Jamie Ford, in conversation with Cassie Chin, interim executive director of the Wing Luke Museum, spoke of a variety of places with meaning to him: “That building [current home of the China Gate restaurant] has been there forever. It was
originally built as a theater. In the late 1800s, the Knights of Labor [a labor organization] got together and they basically paid to have the Chinese community removed and put on a ship and sent to San Francisco. They held their meeting in that building, in that theater, which became the Chinese restaurant where my grandparents had their 50th wedding anniversary celebratory dinner. But that place is part of the historical record. It’s part of this whole journey of the community there, good and bad.”

Describing Seattle today, Cassie Chin (above) focused on the temples she has noticed more while walking in her neighborhood during the pandemic and how they are inspiring her work, “to build the significance, to build that value in a city like Seattle, where displacement is happening at an incredible rate.” She went on to say, “Before we lose places like that, we could actually use stories and preservation and all the tools that we have to not look back years from now and say, ‘Oh, if only we could have done something to save that place.’ That’s what’s driving my passion right now.”

Taken as a whole, the keynote speakers’ remarks at PastForward 2021 clearly point us forward into a different understanding of ourselves, a more interconnected version of our shared historical narrative, and a more dynamic idea of historic preservation. As Walter Hood expressed, “In a decade, I would like to see us figure out the multiplicity of memory, the multiplicity of history … I just want there to be more cross-cultivation of what’s important in our collective memory.”

If historic preservation is defined going forward by those who spoke at and attended PastForward 2021, then yes, we will become a movement of greater multiplicities and expanded social justice, embodying resilience and bringing true value to our future. I hope that someday people will look back at PastForward 2021—especially in the words of a remarkable array of speakers—and see this virtual gathering as an inflection point where we heeded Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández’s charge to us: “Let’s act boldly, together.” FJ

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