PastForward Online 2022 Conference Proceedings: From Vision to Action
Latinos in Heritage Conservation: Re-imagining the Historic Preservation Movement

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Many thanks to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for this invitation. It is a pleasure and huge honor to be with you on this day. My interest in life has always been around history, places, storytelling, and whose story is being told. I’m going to share with you a piece of my own history and research that has deeply influenced my preservation approach. I’m also going to share the incredible work ahead for our new nonprofit, Latinos in Heritage Conservation (LHC), and the work that we are doing to elevate community voices and offset systemic inequities as we push for equity and inclusion and a practice that values Latinx heritage.

In 2013, I was attending Savannah College of Art and Design, studying to get my Master of Fine Arts in Historic Preservation.

Texas Historical Commission’s Christianson-Leberman Building, also known as the “pink building.”
PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
I was so excited to have been awarded the coveted Texas Historical Commission’s Diversity Internship that summer. Not only would I be working with the National Trust and the State Historic Preservation Office, but I would also be in Austin and working on the very first Hispanic tourism guidebook. On my first day, I walked up to the historic pink building, and I was greeted by my boss, April Garner. Along with my colleague Joel Zapata, we reviewed the project and our work ahead of us. We’d be doing site identification and travel writing, so I reached out to the 18 Latinx content experts who were advising us on the handbook.

After hearing that I was extremely fascinated by the Borderlands and women, one of them pointed me to Laredo, a small town in south Texas. Early on, I became obsessed with the social movements coming out of Laredo. I learned about an extraordinary individual named Leonor Villegas de Magnon, also known as “La Rebelde.” She was born in 1876 and became a Spanish newspaper journalist and a feminist. She was a political activist who also worked as a teacher. Her work and fearlessness took over my research. I told my husband about how in March 1913, she heard gunfire and battle. The Mexican Revolution had made its way on the other side of the border in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Knowing that there’d be much bloodshed, she took to action and organized to help the revolutionary cause and Carranza’s army.

She and a handful of other women crossed the Rio Grande and ran straight into gunfire to sneak wounded men back to safety in Laredo, Texas. Leonor’s home had always been a social sanctuary for Mexican expats and political organizing, and now she converted it to a makeshift wartime hospital to nurse and heal the wounded. This all-volunteer brigade was called La Cruz Blanca, or the White Cross. After the war, Leonor received five medals from the Mexican government for her valor and role in supporting the revolutionary effort. I was going to pursue this site so that I could add it to the guidebook, but then I learned that her home, La Cruz Blanca, which was located on Flores Avenue, no longer existed. How is it possible that this house owned by this significant figure would not be considered important enough to save?
This dead-end of not finding extant buildings kept coming up for me. As a kid growing up in Grapevine, Texas, I was fascinated with the history of my hometown and its people. As many of you know, Grapevine is a thriving Main Street community, and Main Street was the backyard and the playground of my childhood. Our historic buildings, their mystery, stories, always piqued my interest. My parents had moved here in 1971 from Sabinas, Coahuila, Mexico, to make North Texas their new home. My father is a huge sports fanatic and started the first Latinx soccer league soon after moving here. As a kid, I attended Sunday soccer games and loved riding my bike up and down Main Street. I was a budding historian and never missed the opportunity to duck into the public library and to learn more about historical figures and my Mexican and Indigenous roots.

I was in the third grade when I first set foot in the Grapevine Historical Museum. Beyond excited, we walk to Heritage Park to the yellow wooden building. The docent welcomes us, and I enter the dimly lit room. I see exhibits. I see the first doctor, our first mayor, and agricultural exhibits on cotton, which built my hometown. I see confederate veterans and train conductors. What I notice is that it’s mostly white men and white people, and it’s the telling of the pioneer and settler story of Grapevine. I didn’t see Tejas, I didn’t see Mexican history. I didn’t see Indigenous history, and I didn’t see myself. I was frustrated and confused, and I felt like an outsider within my own hometown.

Flashback to my summer in Austin, which began with me chasing the story of Leonor, and it continued with me chasing after several
other important figures whose lives were not deemed worthy enough of preserving. This roadblock and realization ended up shaping my Master of Fine Arts thesis work. I wanted to examine why and how is it that this practice shapes and affects the local community and our U.S. history—and more importantly, how do we change this?

I assessed the national landscape of Latinx preservation and examined how our field has traditionally disregarded the Latinx narrative and experience. My thesis work concluded with proposals for a new and inclusive methodology with a framework that values and actively preserves Latinx heritage. The following summer, in 2014, I received the Mildred Colodny Diversity Scholarship and interned with the National Trust to help find threatened and endangered Latinx heritage sites throughout the country. I was connected with other like-minded individuals who were also asking these questions. This included Latinos in Heritage Conservation (LHC) co-founders and early co-chairs like Desiree Aranda, Laura Dominguez, Dr. Sarah Zenaida Gould. Along with a dozen other practitioners, we began deliberating how we, as a collective, could take action.

We’re a group of professionals and advocates working in historic preservation and allied fields such as academia, conservation, museums, the arts, and planning. We started to create this synergy, and we met for the first time at the National Trust PastForward Conference in Savannah, Georgia, in 2014. For this first gathering, we had 30 other individuals for a lively one-hour session. It was exhilarating to discuss the need to support the Latinx preservation movement within our own field. We held mini breakouts and brainstormed, and by the end of 60 minutes, we knew that we needed a national network. That evening, a dozen of us had a very well-deserved celebration. Eddie Torrez, architect and National Trust Advisor from Chicago, proposed this ambitious idea that we host our own national conference in just six months in Tucson, Arizona.

So, we got to work. In May 2015, our emerging group, Latinos in Heritage Conservation, held our very first convening in partnership with Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation. The support was more than we anticipated, and we ended up having to change venues a few times. Over a period of two days, we met and walked Tucson to learn more about Latinx preservation strategies. We had
a shared interest in preserving historic Latinx sites and sustaining the living cultural heritage of Latinx communities. We also wanted to promote Latinx leadership and participation within the profession. Overall, our goals were to define a governance structure for LHC and consider roles, responsibilities, programs, and advocacy. We also solidified our mission and vision, which would affirm our work moving forward. With nearly 100 Latinx elders, practitioners, advisers, leaders, and scholars, the room resonated with a feeling of community, and for all of us, we felt like we finally found our gente.

In 2018, we had our third national convening in Providence, Rhode Island, marking our first conference in New England. We partnered with Rhode Island Latino Arts and the State Historic Preservation Office and held a gathering of over 200 individuals. There, we elevated the histories and preservation work of individuals from Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Puerto Rico. As we reflected on the 50-year anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act, we examined how national trends and urgent issues in heritage conservation within Latinx communities and underrepresented work was affecting our own worlds and our communities locally. We asked who is this Act serving, and who is it not? We celebrated how new and recent arrivals were preserving their own heritage.

During the Corazon de Providence tour, we explored La Broa’ Street, or Broad Street, and we heard about Josefina Rosario, known Doña Fefa, a Dominican who migrated to Providence and opened her first Fefa’s Market in 1959. This was Rhode Island’s first Latinx bodega in the state. Doña Fefa and her husband’s store served Latinx foods and sold Spanish language newspapers from Doña Fefa’s motherland. The bodega and Doña Fefa acted as a
community hub. This was where they welcomed and advised new immigrants by helping with housing, registering them to vote, and sharing the ins and outs of getting settled in Rhode Island.

This past April, we held LHC’s fourth national conference, which we’re now calling Congreso, in Denver, Colorado. With over 230 people, we met in the beautiful History Colorado museum with our partner Historic Denver. We highlighted Latinx heritage work in the Intermountain region, and its diverse geography, cultures, ecological zones, histories, and traditions. It was also a milestone moment as we celebrated our new chapter. For the past eight years, we’ve been a passionate, all-volunteer group, and we recently became a nonprofit. In Denver, LHC announced that, with support from the Mellon Foundation, we’d be hiring our organization’s inaugural staff with me as the new executive director. Collectively, we reflected on democratizing historic preservation and shared innovative strategies to preserve Latinx heritage in rural and urban communities and in our public lands. We ended the conference with walking tours of Denver’s historic Westside, and there we learned about the history and evolution of the land from Indigenous to the Chicano/Chicana movement, and viewed La Alma Lincoln Park Historic Cultural District and Chicano/Chicana murals, which still tell the story today.

Latinos in Heritage Conservation is the leading national nonprofit organization that works for the preservation of Latinx places, stories, and cultural heritage in the United States. We are preserving historic Latinx sites, sustaining the living cultural heritage of Latinx communities, and promoting Latinx leadership and participation within communities and the profession. We envision a just world that values Latinx heritage, people, and places. Rooted in social justice, LHC strives to transform the preservation movement at a national scale through creative projects and intergenerational collaboration that will amplify Latinx voices and perspectives, and here’s how we’re going about it.
The Abuelas Project is a digital humanities, multi-year project that will identify, collect, and share stories about places that matter most to Latinx communities in the United States and Puerto Rico. It will be something accessible at all levels to the community and something that even my mother can use. Recognizing that our own sites have historically been excluded from historic designations and that we have abuelas, or grandmothers or strong matriarchs, in our families, this project pays homage to those leaders who have shared our family histories across dinner tables and at family gatherings to help keep our history alive. Our final product will be a story-driven, map-based online platform that functions as a grassroots historical registry for significant Latinx places.

Our Latinx Preservation Toolkit will be the first of its kind. It will be a free community resource revolving around a print and digital handbook and short bilingual videos that will weigh the advantages of historic preservation and help to demystify the formal processes and languages that we use. It will highlight Latinx heritage conservation success stories, and it’ll share best practices for place-based advocacy. For example, this toolkit could be an aid for community leaders in El Paso and help guide them in protecting their sacred cultural barrios from arena footprints, overeager developers, eminent domain, or from the wrecking ball. Our goal is to produce an accessible educational resource in both English and Spanish that will help Latinx communities and organizations in urban and rural areas to help advocate for the protection of Latinx historic sites and other tangible and intangible resources.

We’re so excited to share that in 2024, Congreso will be in Miami, though it’s not lost on us that the state of Florida and Puerto Rico have sustained devastating losses from multiple hurricanes over the past few months. This, of course, includes tragic loss of life, infrastructure, housing, but also irreplaceable heritage. It makes our mission even more profound as we focus and study regional methodologies and share impressive work that’s rooted in community. We’ll discuss strategies against commercial gentrification, environmental health, resilience, and disaster relief, such as sea level rise for historic communities and zonas, like in Little Havana, Calle Ocho, Miami-Dade, and the broader Southeast,
as well as Puerto Rico. This biennial conference of Latinx community leaders, advocates, allies, and historic preservation professionals is the only national event dedicated to the Latinx preservation movement.

Now I want you to imagine the heritage and pioneer museum in a Midwest American town, but today it’s just called a museum. There’s a Dominican girl with her lunchbox and perfect chongos, ready to go to her school trip. She walks into the museum. Instead of seeing the town’s first white doctor, mayor, war heroes, or settlers, she sees her own heritage being represented. She sees Doña Fefa’s bodega, the Guatemalan restaurant located on Calle Ocho, Chicanx murals, and my father’s soccer league. She sees her own heritage, and she knows that she belongs.

Latinx stories have been excluded from the narrative and mainstream preservation practices. That’s why we invite you to support Latinos in Heritage Conservation. Join our movement and help push for transformative change. Start with your local community. Ask them to lead you by sharing the places that matter most to them - some may be known, and some may be unknown. Let those stories and sites be the ones that you help to preserve. Everyone in this room knows that the histories we uplift help us understand ourselves as human beings and influence who we are within our spaces. I’m asking you to integrate Latinx heritage into your daily practice and commit to decolonizing this work. Tell the stories of Latinx individuals, and celebrate our contributions to this country by preserving our history. Thank you for listening today. FJ

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