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Leading the Change Together

KATHERINE MALONE-FRANCE

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 grand-
parents 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 our-
selves, 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

KATHERINE MALONE-FRANCE is Chief Preservation Officer of the National Trust for Historic Preservation
Making an Impact Through a National Agenda

PAUL EDMONDSON

I’m Paul Edmondson, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and I want to welcome you to PastForward 2021, our second all-virtual national preservation conference and annual meeting!

Please join me in welcoming the 200 Diversity Scholars attending this year’s conference. From around the country and across the movement, these scholars reflect the richness of our shared heritage, and I am truly grateful for their participation, as well as that of their conference mentors.

Before going any further, even though this is a virtual conference, I would like to acknowledge that the National Trust occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of many Indigenous peoples and tribes, including lands ceded in treaties. Our headquarters office in Washington, D.C., where I am today, sits on the ancestral lands and overlooks the waterways of the Anacostan or Nacotchtank peoples, and the neighboring Piscataway and Pamunkey peoples. I affirm our organization’s respect for Indigenous sovereignty, history, cultural traditions, and experiences.

This past February, the 18-member PastForward National Steering Committee provided clear and powerful guidance that this year’s conference should be organized around the idea that each of us has a leadership role to play in bringing about change in what we preserve and how we preserve, for the benefit of our communities, our country, and our world. Although the times we live in are filled with challenges, across the preservation world we all have made changes in response to the global pandemic: finding new ways to safely engage the public at historic sites, using digital tools to convene publicly, and responding to the need to help sustain local legacy businesses. Many of these changes, as noted in research conducted by the National Main Street Center, will last beyond the pandemic.
While we’ve weathered an unprecedented number of natural disasters caused by climate change, the preservation movement is being newly inspired to use the inherent resilience of historic places, to adapt our historic buildings and landscapes, and to demonstrate that building reuse is a powerful form of climate action.

Inspired by a long overdue reckoning on race and justice, the movement is also finding ways to make our programs more accessible, our policies more equitable, our practices more inclusive, and our interpretations more truthful. For example, a $20 million gift to the National Trust for the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund by MacKenzie Scott and Dan Jewett will be used to help further protect the places and share the stories of African American activism, achievement, and resilience.

As change-makers, this community knows that we can go farther, achieve more, and become more relevant by working together. That’s why the National Trust began at PastForward 2020 and continued throughout the past year convening conversations and collecting ideas with partners and allies to craft a National Impact Agenda for the preservation movement, which we are calling “Leading the Change Together.” In listening to people across the preservation movement, we learned that the field is guided by a diverse yet interconnected set of principles. Some people are motivated by all of these, some by a smaller set—but all preservationists believe deeply in the power of preservation to
create a better future. I hope you see the ideas that guide and inspire your work here.

Staff members at the National Trust sorted through the hundreds of ideas that we’ve heard so far in listening sessions and synthesized the results into seven over-arching goals for our mutual consideration. These goals are reflective of our time, and they envision a more sustainable, accessible, relevant, and inclusive future for our field. For each of these goals, we’ll be sharing examples of specific crowd-sourced actions that can help make them a reality. We hope all of the crowd-sourced actions for each of the draft goals will help you envision your own role in leading the change. We also know that work is already being done around the country to advance these goals, and we look forward to highlighting case studies for each of them.

For example, a Denver neighborhood expanded its preservation tools by using community engagement and the city’s new “cultural criteria” to create the La Alma Lincoln Park Historic Cultural District, just recently approved by the Denver City Council. The new cultural district expands the period of significance of the district to cover a full century; it evaluates integrity where 20th-century modifications are as relevant as the original vernacular design; and it uses customized design guidelines that reflect the layers of history that are visible.

In Rochester, New York, the Landmark Society of Western New York is helping to tell a truer history through its LGBTQ Landmarks Initiative, which has identified landmarks of Emanuel Martinez’s “La Alma/The Soul” (1978) was painted with the help of the La Alma Lincoln Park community and highlights the connection between past and present.

PHOTO BY BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN
significance in the history of the city’s LGBTQ community—and which recognizes their importance both historically and culturally. In Georgia, a new program of the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation called Georgia Trust GREEN is supporting climate resilience by using a three-step process to educate, guide, and certify energy conservation improvements for historic homes.

As we seek to advance the goal of building collaborative networks, I am especially proud of our partnership with the National Preservation Partners Network to create new, practical resources for education and advocacy in four distinct and vitally important areas. The Preservation Priorities Task Force is focused on four specific areas:

- Affordable Housing and Density
- Diversity, Inclusion, and Racial Justice
- Preservation Trades and Workforce Development
- Sustainability and Climate Action

Our work together on this impact agenda for change isn’t finished. I’m counting on all of you to participate in sessions during and after the conference to continue shaping this dynamic roadmap for change. The National Trust will also be making commitments of our own resources to support the goals of “Leading the Change Together.”

For example, through new Climate Action Grants for the National Trust Historic Sites we own, we are helping visitors understand the inherent resilience of historic places and how innovative preservation practices can meet the challenges of climate change. At three of our sites—Lyndhurst, Wilson House, and Oatlands—historic climate control systems have been closed, removed, or no longer function. Through these grants, environmental engineers will help us reactivate these original features to work with smart technology, and then share this work with the public.

Another way the National Trust demonstrates this new agenda for change is by ensuring that the stories we tell at our own historic sites reflect the full true history of those places. To give just one small example, as part of our Where Women Made History campaign, later this month the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois—long
celebrated as the modernist masterpiece of architect Mies van der Rohe—will be rededicated and renamed the Edith Farnsworth House. This change is being made to acknowledge and celebrate the key role that Edith played in the creation and design of the iconic structure. Edith was an engaged and visionary partner in the creation of this structure, and for decades her story has not been given the prominence it deserves.

The National Trust is also committed to helping others tell the true history of historic places through a new grant program. To aid in their pandemic recovery, we are assisting a broad range of nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and state and local agencies doing humanities-based work to interpret and preserve historic places that tell our full, true history. Grants of $25,000 to $50,000 are made possible by the National Endowment for the Humanities under an initiative titled “Sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan.” Funding will be awarded in these four categories: encompassing research for interpretation; landmark designations; architectural design and planning; and training workshops to preserve and interpret historic places of importance to all Americans.
The National Trust’s federal advocacy efforts also recognize the places that tell our full history. This work includes support for establishing the World War II Amache National Historic Site in Colorado as a unit of the National Park System in order to interpret and preserve resources associated with the incarceration of American citizens of Japanese ancestry during the Second World War. Our federal advocacy work also includes support for expanded recognition of sites that reflect the full story of the courageous activism that led to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision through direct affiliation with the National Park Service.

Additionally, we support critical funding resources for preservation at the federal level. Funding for historic preservation is at an all-time high, and in his first budget proposal, President Biden recommended the highest level of funding for the Historic Preservation Fund ever. We are very encouraged that the House and Senate are equally supportive of historic preservation and are poised to enact significantly more funding for the Historic Preservation Fund than at any point in its history.

Of course, another critical funding source for preservation is the federal historic tax credit, and Congress has the opportunity to enact the most substantive improvements to the incentive in more than a generation. Provisions to strengthen the credit were included in legislation developed by the House Ways and Means Committee,
and they are currently under consideration on the Hill as part of the budget reconciliation package. The proposed changes would be transformative for preservation projects in big cities and small towns. They would also help to advance President Biden’s Build Back Better agenda, by increasing the adaptive reuse of historic structures and providing solutions to some of our greatest challenges—for example, by creating new units of affordable housing and lowering carbon emissions.

Our success is far from guaranteed, however, and we need everyone to reach out to their members of Congress, and to urge their support for these improvements to the federal historic tax credit. Let’s send a clear message to Congress that strengthening the historic tax credit is a critical piece of infrastructure reform with far-reaching benefits for all communities. Let’s remind our elected officials that building reuse is a powerful form of climate action.

This conference provides an ongoing opportunity to reflect on the goals identified in “Leading the Change Together,” as well as our shared progress towards meeting those goals. I see PastForward 2022 and 2023 as opportunities to revisit these goals and to hold ourselves accountable to meeting them.

I would like to end my brief remarks here today with a request. This common agenda for change is a work in progress. Please take time to read this first iteration of “Leading the Change Together,” and then please share your own thoughts about these crowd-sourced ideas. We hope the lessons you learn over the next three days will have long-lasting impacts on our movement and in your own communities! FJ

PAUL EDMONDSON is president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
The Time to Act is Now: Protecting Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis

DEB HAALAND, SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Guw’aadzi haupa. Hello everyone, I’m Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Department of the Interior and proud member of the Pueblo of Laguna. I’m grateful to deliver remarks at the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s PastForward plenary session.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that I’m joining you from the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Anacostan and Piscataway people here in Washington, D.C. Many may think that land acknowledgements are a new custom, but the practice actually dates back centuries in many Native nations and communities. Land acknowledgments recognize Indigenous people who are the original stewards of the lands where we live and work. As the globe faces the existential threat that climate change poses, the recognition of the Indigenous stewards of our land, air, and water helps us to center those voices and honors the millennia of traditional knowledge that can and should guide us as we tackle our toughest challenges.

Your motto, “Save the past. Enrich the future.” aligns strongly with our mission at the Department of the Interior and with President Biden’s goals for the United States in this pivotal moment. It’s a moment in which we face the overlapping crises of a global pandemic, a climate crisis, economic uncertainty, and racial injustice.

I’ll start by giving a brief overview of how we at the U.S. Department of the Interior work to preserve cultural sites. Our department’s roles in culture and nature are deeply interconnected. In fact, part of our mission is to protect the nation’s natural resources and cultural heritage. Through efforts such as the World Heritage Program, the department works in partnership with other countries to preserve and share our nation’s and the world’s cultural and natural heritage. We’re proud to host workshops that bring World Heritage Site Managers together to share ideas and best practices, and plan for the future. Heritage is an essential resource for living cultures and human identity.
As the first Native American Cabinet Secretary for the United States, I come to the table with a deep respect and profound connection to cultural sites across our country. I applaud the National Trust for Historic Preservation for your long history of advocacy and incredible progress in recognizing the important historic sites that are part of our collective memory.

Identification, preservation, management, and sharing of our cultural heritage on public lands helps tell our stories. And telling those stories helps us to be better public servants and build a more inclusive future. It is my goal to make sure we’re telling the whole story of the United States by preserving cultural sites that reflect all perspectives, including communities that have been underrepresented in the past, and making sure that we build on, learn from, and react to what came before. We help give those communities a voice. We re-tell and elevate their stories, and in many cases, we help people to understand the hardships of those people and the origins of inequity. These special places can make people feel, laugh, and cry. These special places can make people care.

President Biden demonstrated his commitment to preserving sites that are culturally significant when he took profound action to permanently protect the Bears Ears, Grand Staircase-Escalante, and Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine national monuments.
As I stood on the White House lawn for the announcement, I felt the weight of that moment and remembered the many times I felt the presence of my ancestors in those canyons.

Historic places hold the memories, feelings, and lessons of the past.

In my culture and in many Indigenous cultures around the world, we are taught at a very young age that our actions impact not just ourselves, but our entire community and thus the generations that follow. That deep understanding grounds much of the work we do at the Department of the Interior, but none can be more pressing than the climate crisis. Right now, we’re in a pivotal moment in which communities across the globe face harsher storms, longer droughts, more intense fires, and extreme heat and cold caused by climate change. This is a moment that calls on us to recognize that climate change impacts every person on this planet, but not every person on this planet has the same access to life-saving resources or the ability to relocate when disaster strikes. Entire communities and cultures are at risk of being lost to the perils of climate change. The natural resources that have sustained Indigenous peoples for centuries in forests, grasslands, rivers, coral reefs, and other natural habitats are being destroyed by extreme weather events and climatic shifts. Cultural traditions are being irrevocably altered in the face of climate change. Communities that have been marginalized throughout history face some of the most devastating impacts.

The time to act is now. Earlier this month, the Biden-Harris administration released our climate action plans. The Department of the Interior’s plan centers on environmental justice, builds resilient communities, and invests in a clean energy future that can create millions of good-paying union jobs while protecting the natural and cultural resources on which we all rely. 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.
Together, our work will promote climate resilient lands, waters, and cultural resources; advance climate equity; transition to a resilient clean energy economy; support tribal and insular community resilience; empower the next generation of conservation and resilience workers; enhance climate literacy; and bolster climate resilience in the management of sites, facilities, and supply of products and services. We have a president who not only recognizes the inequities that exist but is showing through action that we are ready to lead the world toward a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive future.

One of the tools we use to preserve and maintain these important sites is through the Great American Outdoors Act. When I was a member of the House Natural Resources Committee, I worked with my colleagues to pass this bill. Now, as Secretary of the Interior, I can put this law into action. For example, the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund provides $8.2 million to stabilize the cliff that is part of the foundation of the San Fernando Bastion. The National Park Service also recently completed a $6 million multi-year construction project that

**Historic Fort Yellowstone is the recipient of $22.3 million from the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund. The army fort was established in 1891 to assist in effectively managing the park prior to the establishment of the National Park Service.**

PHOTO BY NEAL HERBERT
repaired about half a mile of historic masonry walls including an original city gate on the west side of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

When I visited Yellowstone National Park earlier this year, I saw the largest Legacy Restoration Fund project focused on historic preservation. We’re investing $22.3 million to address the deterioration of historic Fort Yellowstone. These investments are also funding the National Park Service’s Historic Preservation Training Center and Historic Architecture Conservation and Engineering Center so that we can develop Preservation Maintenance Action Teams. These teams will develop, coordinate, and deploy experienced personnel to address high-priority deferred maintenance projects at small and medium parks, while introducing youth in underrepresented communities and veterans to the skills, knowledge, and opportunities in historic preservation.

This is one of the many tools in our toolbox that we’re using to serve as a partner to you, and to be good stewards of our lands by preserving the past. We can learn from it and build an equitable and sustainable future we can all be proud of. Thank you for all you do. Please know that as we take bold action to address the climate crisis, we also think about how we work with partners like you to tell America’s story for generations to come. Thank you all. FJ

DEB HAALAND is Secretary of the Department of Interior.
Hello everyone, I’m Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernandez, representing the beautiful and beautifully diverse 3rd Congressional District of Nuevo Mexico. It’s an honor to be with you all for this year’s PastForward Conference. This conference is a beautiful celebration of the love we all share toward preserving our diverse stories and our diverse communities. Our nation has infinite stories of struggle, of conflict, of historical trauma, and, yes, cultural celebration.

As a young girl, we had poetas, músicos, and writers stream through my home as my parents worked to preserve our language and herencia. They understood that preserving the stories, preserving the culture made us stronger as a community, but also made us more open to celebrating other stories and cultures. Understanding the historical trauma and historical beauty of our herencia was as key for my family as it is for our beautifully diverse country. Your work is at the forefront of saving those stories, especially the difficult ones, which in the end can be even more important than those that celebrate the joyous occasions in our history.

Having a strong historical identity is a gift. A gift that allows us to celebrate each other, our similarities, and, most importantly, our differences. My experience in cultural preservation informs so much of what I’m doing in Congress. As a Nueva Mexicana and a former Advisory Council on Historic Preservation vice chairwoman, I understand the importance behind preserving and protecting our most precious natural resources: our lands, our waterways, and our historic monuments.

That’s why I’m working to ensure you all have the resources you need to move forward. I’m proud to have secured an amendment in the INVEST in America Act to permanently authorize the Historic Preservation Fund and double its reauthorization of appropriations level to $300 million for each fiscal year. The authorization level of
the HPF has not increased since its establishment in 1976. That’s over 40 years. And since then, it has never been fully appropriated. I’m committed to changing this. I’ve been working on a bill now, too, for the support of the Historic Preservation Fund, as well.

I was also able to secure key wins in the House Natural Resources Committee markup of the president’s Build Back Better Act. One of those prevents funds from being used to lease or nominate land within the 10-mile buffer area around Chaco Canyon. And it provides an additional $600,000 to ongoing tribal cultural resource studies in the Chaco Canyon area. Sadly, if we destroy a cultural resource, if we erased 23,000-year-old footprints, we lose that resource. We lose that discovery forever.

Our Build Back Better draft also included additional funding for historic preservation. Preservation priorities are national priorities, because now we have a president in the White House who cares and sees the value in this work.

I’m sure you all celebrated as I did President Biden’s reversal of the devastating Trump executive order dramatically downsizing Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante. The restored boundaries of these monuments and the added protections for the Northeast

*Fajada Butte is one of Chaco Culture National Historical Park’s most famous sites.*

COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument signal to us the start of a new chapter.

We couldn’t have gotten here without your activism, without your advocacy, without your commitment to our history. Let’s keep those stories coming. Let’s act boldly, together.

_Muchisimas gracias._ FJ

CONGRESSWOMAN TERESA LEGER FERNANDEZ represents the 3rd Congressional District of New Mexico.
A Conversation About Landscapes and Preservation as Justice

WALTER HOOD AND BRENTH LEGGS

Brent Leggs: I’m Brent Leggs, the executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. I want to welcome you to the 2021 PastForward Conference. The Action Fund is this year’s sponsor of the Promoting Equity and Justice in Historic Preservation conference track, and we’re thrilled to launch the conference program with the renowned artist, landscape architect, and author Walter Hood.

Before I interview Walter, I want to share opening remarks to center this conversation in our conference theme. In solidarity with African Americans, a multi-racial coalition is marching in the footsteps of earlier generations whose vision for equality and human rights continues to inspire. Nevertheless, the preservation movement is flawed. In the not-too-distant past, historic sites were preserved to reinforce the white majority’s narrative and to communicate idealized, but unevenly realized, American values. We must face the fact that history and the character of our nation is carved out of chasms of racial brutality and economic exploitation, and out of a self-determination, character, and resilience that moves our nation to its best self. By preserving these places and telling their stories, preservationists inspire commitment to equity and justice. By preserving the beauty, uniqueness, complexity, and significance of historic African American sites, we can craft a more accurate American narrative and identity.

We stimulate revitalization and foster interest in places that today seem to exist without history or meaning, spanning space, time, and geography. African American and diverse cultural sites can anchor us and expand our sense of pride and agency. I feel it’s critically important to acknowledge that the nation may be rich in diverse history, but it has often been poor in representation of that history and in funding its protection, conservation, and recognition. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) sites, whether cultural
landscapes or historic buildings, deserve the same stewardship and admiration as Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and George Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate. Regrettably, grassroots efforts to preserve places of diverse history are some of the most underfunded.

For instance, the Action Fund has received a remarkable 2,300 grant proposals since 2018, totaling nearly $253 million. A response on this scale speaks to the need for significant investment in preserving this impressive collection of places and stories. It also represents that African American landmarks are in critical need of financial support. With urgency and intention, the public must invest in and restore more assets that hold exceptional cultural value. The National Trust launched the Action Fund in 2017 to reconstruct a true national identity that reflects America's diversity. I’m proud to lead this effort for the National Trust. Through historic preservation practice, we aim to expose the world and our nation to the culture, ideals, politics, art, and the hope of America. We tell overlooked stories embodied in these places, ones of African American resilience, activism, and achievement that are fundamental to the nation itself. Preserving this tapestry of our shared culture, pride, and heritage is an act of racial justice and should be viewed as a civil right.

Today, we’ve supported more than 200 preservation projects nationwide and raised more than $50 million, thanks to our partnerships and esteemed National Advisory Council. We can also expand the conversation to answer both questions: How should America preserve BIPOC monuments and landscapes so that we never forget their meaning and history? What’s the role of the BIPOC community, civic leaders, preservationists, artists, and funders to envision landscapes of understanding and reconciliation? The purpose of preservation practice is not to stop change, but to offer tools that help society manage change in ways that do not disconnect it from the legacies of its past. Done right, historic places can foster real healing, true equity, and a validation of all Americans and their history.

Join us in honoring and telling the full American story and in leading the change we all seek. Walter, it’s so good to see you and to be with you today.
Walter Hood: How are you doing, Brent? I’m glad to be here.

Brent Leggs: In your book, *Black Landscapes Matter*, you write in the introduction, “Black landscapes matter because they are prophetic. They tell the truth of the struggles and victories of African Americans in North America. Black landscapes matter because they can be born again.” Your writing is both poetic and intellectual. It challenges our nation and profession to build an ethic for the conservation of BIPOC landscapes imbued with important stories and sacred memories. In historic preservation, we’ve often prioritized protecting old buildings versus the natural landscape. Why should more Americans and preservationists elevate landscape preservation and create reverence for these historic spaces?

Walter Hood: That’s a wonderful question, Brent, and very complex, just like the quote that you just mentioned. For me, at the end of the day, when buildings disappear, the landscape is still there. I have been privy to wonderful experiences around the world, to go to places where there had been either civilization or people inhabiting a place, and the most wonderful memories and strategies that I’ve collected from that is: There’s always something there, if you choose to see it. I’m taken by how in history, we can go to the Roman Forum and find all kinds of things, but then if I go to Charleston, South Carolina, I find nothing. To me, it’s all there; it’s just that we have to be vigilant to exhume it and want it. It takes courage, because in doing so, we say something about ourselves. I think in our national memory, we only like to remember those things that make us heroic, that make us powerful. We don’t want to remember those things that make us vulnerable, that make us have this empathy, that make us want to reconcile, that make us want to forgive all of those things that human nature really wants us to, and collectively have this relationship to one another. I think in the landscape, there are so many different stories that create a collective, if we choose to do so.

Brent Leggs: I love that you just mentioned the word empathy, and it made me think about, what does an empathetic landscape look like? How would you describe empathy?

Walter Hood: Empathy for me in a landscape means that there is care in wanting to remember, but also wanting to re-present, and
really getting out of your way. I think a lot of us in design, and even in preservation, we’re in the way, because we have this narrow view. If we get out of the way and let those other things lead us, they will take us to these different places where we’re then able to have that joy and that pain, collectively together. It’s not an either/or thing. I think we like our joy over here, and we like our pain over here. To me, that empathetic landscape mixes those two things together, and it allows you to have that reverence in space.

Brent Leggs: I love that, balancing public memory. I’m curious about how you got inspired to contribute to this work, and I wonder if you have a first memory, whether as a child or an adult, that’s connected you to cultural landscape, heritage, and conservation that’s inspired your passion, career, and ideas.

Walter Hood: From a very early memory, my childhood growing up in rural America, in North Carolina in the ‘70s, and also later, my first job at the National Park Service. And I never really connected those two things together. 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 in North Carolina. If you’ve never been there, it’s green. Everything is green. As a kid, we were in the landscape all the time. Then if I zoom ahead 15 years, when I was at an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), North Carolina A&T, one of my faculty members said, “You should take this job in the Blue Ridge Parkway.” I went and got a job with the National Park Service, and there were three things that they coveted as part of the job. It was preservation, reservation, and conservation of landscapes. I had a chance then to witness how the national memory is constructed through design. I then moved to Washington, D.C., and I worked for National Capital Planning for one year, and then I got really bored with it, and I wanted to really do work that impacted the everyday.

Years later, as I’m doing urban work, slowly, a lot of those memories start to come back. One of them, in particular: returning back to Charleston, South Carolina, or to the South, a decade or so ago. It reminded me of my Southern roots, and it also
gave me clarity to go deeper and remember that I was around storytellers when I was growing up, that people had ways of imbuing the landscape through a collective memory. Then I started thinking about the National Park Service work, and all of these things started to come together through art as I freed myself from the more professional aspects. I started digging deeper and saying, “Well, there’s got to be something here, a way of critique.” Why was I bored with these national landscapes? The reason I was bored was because they were only telling one story, and if you went back in there and started filtering out those other stories, it then gave me a better way to put all of these things together, and actually use that as a way to force creativity within my studio work, within my academic work, and then within my public life.

**Brent Leggs:** I love that you mentioned the role of preservationists to construct national memory. In the program that I run, the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, our mission is to reconstruct a national identity that reflects America’s true diversity. That work is so important—that all citizens can see themselves in the landscape, in historic buildings, and have their stories reflected in spaces around them.

I’m curious about your work on the Tidal Basin. As you know, this was sponsored by the National Trust and presented by American Express. I’m curious about your proposal. This iconic memorial

This design proposal of the Tidal Basin landscape in Washington D.C. reflects the participation of many voices, both heard and unheard focusing on design anthems of Tell the Truth, Let the Waters Be Free, and Invention: Making New Things.

*PHOTO COURTESY HOOD DESIGN STUDIO RENDERING*
landscape in the heart of D.C. is provocative and innovative in its format, really a graphic novella in four parts. One shows an African American family on a tour of Washington, D.C. At the Tidal Basin, they wander through restored wetlands and elevated walkways, discovering the lost Black history of Washington, D.C., in its landscapes, namely, a hush harbor. Can you tell us more about your vision for such monumental public spaces like the Tidal Basin?

Walter Hood: Working on the Tidal Basin was just really fantastic, so I have to thank you guys for supporting designers to think about these landscapes in a context where we’re able to be very liberal in how our thoughts can come to place.

I was taken by a couple things. One, I’ve always had this relationship with Washington, D.C., knowing that it’s a fiction, it’s basically a swampy landscape that has been given a fictitious origin story. That’s always intrigued me. But it’s also, as I become more learned about the American story, in particular the story of enslaved people and the aboriginal story here, the wetlands in America play a big, big role in constructing those cultures, whether you’re in the South, whether the Dismal Swamp, these landscapes actually gave people places of refuge, but they gave people also a place of diversity, biodiversity.

Water has always been this big, big theme for me, and particularly as it relates to spirituality. I remember my mother telling me very early as a kid that she was actually baptized in the Cape Fear River. But that image of my mother walking down to the river, I have this fictitious memory. The swamp and water is this very powerful thing to me. As we were doing the Tidal Basin, I was struck by the narrative that the Tidal Basin was a swimming area at one point in time, until it was conceived to be integrated. Once people wanted to integrate, it ceased becoming a swimming place, this idea of this shared resource. I started thinking, maybe if I could conjure up these other ideas about water, it becomes less precious. It becomes less of a fiction, and maybe it can actually return. And in a way, for me, seeing how histories are constructed and people are making decisions, this is where you can kind of push back through design. You don’t have to be direct to say, “Oh, the reason why I want to bring up hush harbors here is because of the racial
tension that existed 70 years ago.” It’s actually doing the oppo-
site. It’s telling a different story, so that maybe people, in time,
might begin to see the Tidal Basin differently and then want to
advocate for making it something completely different, versus
keeping it at this kind of rigid fiction. We didn’t want to repair
it. We didn’t want to say, “Yeah, let’s go back to the origins.”
We’re suggesting it’s a hybrid; it can keep evolving. But it should
evolve maybe through cultural identities.

**Brent Leggs:** Where else might we conceive of similar work
like that at the Tidal Basin? Do you think there are other opportuni-
ties for reimagining the ecology?

**Walter Hood:** Well, New Orleans. I think in places where com-
munities have been most vulnerable in this country, particularly
marginal communities, brown and Black communities, are in these
environmentally degraded areas. I think history can teach us how
to live with water, if we choose to do it. There are great stories of
Natives and Africans in Louisiana living in the swamps, to not be
part of plantation life. They figured out ways to live with the
water. I think if we’re interested in the truth about these places, it
might help us see the landscape and how we can live with it in a
very different way. One of my favorite books is *Ark of Bones* by
Henry Dumas. Toni Morrison found his work and reprinted it, I think
in the late ’80s. In the book, he talked about the ark of bones, that
there is this mythical ship going up and down the Mississippi,
collecting bones of our Black ancestors. That’s a very powerful
idea, because it links you back in time to what that river really
means. So those ideas, for me, can help us actually see places
anew, and maybe give us different ways to begin to design the
world around us.

**Brent Leggs:** I want to talk about some of your projects.
Your work has transformed some of America’s most historic and
significant landscapes, like the campus of the University of Virginia,
Charleston’s Gadsden’s Wharf, and Pittsburgh’s Hill District. As you
began working on projects like these that have and will transform
space, history, and memory at different scales, share with us your
design thinking and process to creating equitable yet thought-
provoking public spaces and memorials.
Walter Hood: I would just start out saying, it is very difficult work to do. I’ll start with the Hill District. We’ve been working there probably over the last decade, and very little has come to fruition. It’s about a thousand acres. It has a historic legacy, but it’s very valuable land. And that value can either exist in its potential, as new development, or that value can exist as a cultural landscape. We’ve tried to get people to see it as a cultural landscape, and we just haven’t been successful. As an urban designer, an artist, I’m not a developer. I’m not a politician. I’m not involved in all the local politics of an area. You really need a team of people to come in and actually think in the same way. We try to get people to see the Hill District, which is an urban area, that its history is coal. Basically, immigrants came to the hill to mine the coal. Everyone else had access to other areas. We were left there, which is our cultural landscape story. We then lived in that landscape for 50 or so years as it’s being disinvested, and I think what we’ve been trying to do is get inhabitants who have lived in these places, we have to give them other means to imagine themselves. If you’re in a place for so long and you’ve been devalued, or your landscape has been devalued, it’s really hard for you to even accept another way, because you’re only familiar with one way. We try to really think about, how through disinvestment, you got a landscape back, and that people were living in this wild landscape. It’s a different aesthetic.

We talked about the woods a lot when we were in Pittsburgh, and I could see the Black community getting it. It’s like, “Woods,
yeah, we get it.” But the institutions that make parks, that make landscapes, they don’t get it. It’s really hard for a city to let land go. In a way, that’s what has happened in a lot of places, which I try to get people to see. If you go out to the suburbs, to a 19th-century suburb, it looks just like these wild areas in urban areas. Why do we allow one to look this way, and we can’t imagine people like me to be in that area, because all of a sudden, you want to make it different. That’s the ongoing work in the Hill. It’s taught me a lot, and we continue to work there.

The work in Charleston and the work at UVA is a little different, in that those works commemorate. They’re attempting to commemorate individuals or actions in a period of time. We use commemoration not as a memorial, but as a way to remember. At UVA, I struggled with trying to find the means through the medium that I had learned. I had to turn back to the mythologies that I was taught through storytelling as a kid. One of the things that I remembered was the Flash of the Spirit, which, shadow and reflection, is something that my grandmother would always talk about. Like, if you go to a cemetery, you will see the poinsettias, and you will see the foil turned back, or you’ll see someone leaving a little airplane. It’s always about flight. It’s always about ascending and moving away from this place. So we built the shadow-catcher for Miss Foster, which is a mythical structure that talked about a more spiritual aspect of our life. For me, that was a way that I could talk about the Spirit, and people would get it. I have to
tell you, I’ve lectured around the world, and people get it. We don’t have spaces where people are talking about spirituality in a non-denominational way. I’m just talking about it as an experience of looking at the ground and looking back up at the sky.

That project, in a way, gave us the juice—I’m going to use that term—to try other projects, whether it’s a statue that reads “freed,” F-R-E-E-D, that will be in Arlington, Virginia, and will probably go up in January. That project talks about the Freedman’s Village that was in Arlington Cemetery, and how that diaspora of Blacks moved into Arlington, and no one really talks about that. Or in Charleston, where upwards of 40 percent of the slave diaspora landed at Gadsden’s Wharf. How do you tell that story? There’s no other landscape that I can go to and say that. I can maybe go to Toni Morrison’s [B]enchanting Road and talk about what happened in these places, what happened in these forts, but there’s no historic landscape that I could go to, other than a plantation, other than a building. This is a moment for us to really do something audacious in the landscape. We’re inspired by the Brookes map, which was that first lithograph that depicted slaves in the hulls of ships. Now we have a big fountain at Gadsden’s Wharf that will actually go wet and dry, wet and dry, as a reminder that bodies, bodies, were basically left here, and the body becomes an important image then at the museum when you experience it.

The landscape design concept for the International African American Museum in Charleston, SC takes cues from the tradition of ‘hush harbors’—landscapes where enslaved Africans would gather often in secret, outside the view of slave owners, to freely assemble, share stories and keep traditions from their homeland alive.

PHOTO COURTESY HOOD DESIGN STUDIO RENDERING
Brent Leggs: When you were speaking, I kept hearing your words from Black Landscapes Matter about resuscitating the landscape, and also I was thinking about the resurrection, literally connected to the spirituality that you talked about, and the power of historic preservation to reduce that gap between space and time, and it becomes spiritual in essence. What are some opportunities that our profession has to resuscitate and resurrect land and memory in the U.S.?

Walter Hood: I think we have the ability to layer stories that are already out there. And I guess I’m more a palimpsest of layers. I don’t like these binaries because nothing really exists that way. It’s much more complex. But I would rather, instead of marking a special site to say something happened here, go to the place where it happened. If Black folks built the White House, when I’m out in front of the White House looking at it, I should be reminded that Black folks built the White House. I don’t know how we do that, but that should be part of that reminder. When I go to an important building, there’s a stone that says when it was built, something that forces us to layer things. I can look at a building and say, “It’s a classical building,” or I can look at a site and say, “It’s a historic site,” but once I say who inhabited that site and how they inhabited it, it changes how I actually see it.

Right now, the way we do these things are, we put them over to the side. You have to actually remember to read the side note somewhere when you get to the thing to experience it fully. Places like Monticello, they’re struggling with this right now. They re-did Mulberry Row, where the slave houses are, and it’s kind of nice, so that people are like, “Oh, this is not that bad.” In a way, you’ve got to be very careful not to misrepresent. On the other hand, sites are thinking, “Well, we need to create a space so people can decompress.” I’m wondering why would you create a space? You’ve never thought of decompressing? I mean, when I went there and there was no mention of the slaves, no one thought, “Hey, Black folks need a place to decompress because we’re not talking about them.” That’s the other way, is flipping the script.
I think the more you layer it, the more the story becomes complex, and people then can find themselves in the story. Right now, I think people are left out of the story. For a lot of us, we’re trying to find ourselves in this world, and we don’t have that many touchstones. I think if we can give people more touchstones, the conversations will become even more complex, which I think is more sustainable.

**Brent Leggs:** I want to get your perspectives on the terms “equity” and “justice.” As you know, this plenary session is part of the PastForward Conference’s Equity and Justice track, and I’m curious how you define equity in historic preservation and justice in historic preservation. Do you see them as being individual strategies or one and the same?

**Walter Hood:** I think equity and justice need each other. On one hand, I can talk about equity as it relates to how two communities have the same thing, or that they’re given the same thing, but I would also like to think that people are viewed in the same way, and we know that’s not the case. That’s where justice comes in. To me, justice is really about finding that truth. In finding that truth, you’ve got to deal with it. You’ve got to deal with what happened yesterday. You’ve got to deal with all of these things. By the time you bring them together, you arrive at a different place.

We worked on a building here [in San Francisco] in Bayview Hunters Point. The building is 130 years old. It’s an old opera house. It was built in the suburbs, before the Blacks were
pushed south of San Francisco. By the mid-60s, Bayview had become a Black neighborhood through redevelopment, and this historic building sat there. Over time, it became this unique element. It became a theater that taught drama and music and things like that. But slowly, it became paternalistic, because the bureaucracy looking at it didn't see it as a historic building, per se, but they saw that it was a place where a group of people needed to be taken care of. So instead of thinking that maybe culture will take care of them, things like community gardens, and all of that paternal, those tropes that come into our neighborhood. And in a way, the building was almost diminished in its reverie of being old. When we came in, the first place someone took us was under the building, and they talked about this rock that the building sat on, which related it back to the Ohlones, the natives. They were very proud of that. That inspired us to really talk about all these histories and return it back to a theater.

The reason why I’m telling you this is we used all these stories. When we had to go through the historic preservation process, we were then able to do something pretty radical to an old building, because I think we had a great layered story to talk about. We put in these modern, floating ramps around the building to make one elevation, so that you can move around the entire building. It's new against old Victorian. To see these little beautiful Black kids come there every day, man, to dance, it’s just wonderful, because that’s where you have empathy and justice happening simultaneously.

They’re very proud of the building. I was just talking to one of my students who went over and was doing the evaluation the other day. The caretaker there is from Oakland. The whole time we were doing the project, and this goes back to my earlier statement, he kept saying, “Walter, why are you putting all this energy into this, man? They’re just not gonna take care of it.” That mentality of being in a place and seeing it that way. He’s like, “Oh, man, this is nice wood. You’re doing this nice wood? Oh, man, they’re not gonna take care of it. Oh, man, you’re putting in beautiful metal? Oh, man.” The thing opened up, he came over and shook my hand, and then when my student went over, she mentioned my
name, and he let her in. So again, they’re very proud. That’s my point, is that through that process, to see that kind of proudness of that history and taking care of something that’s really different, that’s valued, it just blows your mind.

**Brent Leggs:** Let’s talk about the future. What’s your vision, let’s say 10 years from now? What’s your vision for the U.S. historic preservation movement and profession?

**Walter Hood:** Well, one, I don’t know what’s going on right now. I think there’s a lot of reactionary planning happening right now, and I don’t know where we’re going to land. And what I mean by that, from last year, a record number of memories were taken down in the landscape, and I’m going to be vague about that. Every narrative that people could chip at in the last year has been chipped. I think for me, in a decade, I would like to see us figure out the multiplicity of memory, the multiplicity of history. I know it’s very generational, because I know younger millennials, they want everything out of the way. But for me, I want to live in a world where there’s palimpsest, there are old things around me that tell multiple stories, that talk about multiple lives, so that if I go to a building that’s 200 years old, I’m able to understand the traumas of Black life, but also the progress of Black life. I’m also understanding the trauma of white life and the progress of white life. All of these things are tied together. I think if we focus on the stuff in the middle versus the stuff at the extremes, that might allow us to actually have a very interesting set of ruins in our lives. These ruins are sometimes just there for us to reflect, but sometimes they’re there for us to inhabit in a very different way. Because in a way, the ruins are the projections for tomorrow. They set the tone of how we can imagine the world. That’s what I would say in a decade. I just want there to be more cross-cultivation of what’s important in our collective memory.

**Brent Leggs:** I’m mindful that you are a busy man with many jobs. You’ve got your own firm, and you are leading in practice, but you also have one foot inside of academia. You and I both share that duality in our careers, and I would even say, at least personally, it feels like a responsibility, a social responsibility, to train the
next generation of leaders. Why are you devoting some of your time at UC Berkeley as a professor in the landscape architecture department?

**Walter Hood:** You know, teaching was something I never set out to do. I always thought I was going to be in practice. But when I came to Berkeley to get my master’s degree in architecture and landscape architecture, I just had this renaissance. I got to a place where I had gone through my undergraduate. I had worked in the profession and the institutional world, the National Park Service, private practice. I felt I had done all of that. Then when I came out West, being an East Coaster, it was almost this amazing freedom to learn unfettered, whereas on the East Coast, it’s a little different, how you learn. I was privy to a lot of things when I came out here in the late ‘80s. Those things opened my eyes, and they made me want to learn more. As I started to learn more, I actually figured out that I had something to say. Teaching then gave me a framework in which to try to develop what I wanted to say. I knew I wanted to say something; I just didn’t know what I wanted to say. My first decade of teaching gave me this context—going through tenure, doing research—to figure out how I wanted to practice and how I wanted to teach. It was really tough, because the ‘90s was multiculturalism, riots.

The ‘90s was almost like 2020, if you think about it, spread out over a decade. It was a very interesting time to be in California, but also to be in academia. Twenty years later, it feels like being around youth and seeing generational change has also been very valuable to my growth, because I could imagine if you weren’t around that generational change all the time, you get set in your ways. Every year that I’m confronted with a different group of students who are from a different time, that forces me to change. I’ve really seen that transformation in my work, in my teachings, and also in how I think about the world. I think teaching allows me to be oral, to think orally, basically, so I’m not at home talking in a mirror. You can get your thoughts out there in the world unencumbered, and you can have that critique and dialog, which is different than the professional world. You have to take more care in the professional world.
**Brent Leggs:** What about your experience with the LOEB Fellowship at Harvard? When I think of the number of LOEB fellows who are historic preservation practitioners, it’s just a handful of us. And I would love to see more colleagues have sabbaticals in the space to contemplate their own careers, but everything that you just described. What was your experience like?

**Walter Hood:** Well, it’s interesting. I just did a LOEB fellowship in the spring, but that’s a senior fellowship. I’ve never been a LOEB fellow, but I’ve just been on juries to select LOEB fellows. I was teaching at Harvard, and they indoctrinated me, and I know a lot of LOEB fellows. It’s an interesting relationship, in that I’ve never been part of their club, yet I’m part of their club.

I think you’re right. I think it’s a wonderful gift for people. This is what I was getting at with teaching, where you’re just given this period of time and resources where you can take the things that you have and just take a step back and re-imagine a different way to move. Being around really smart people, and being at Harvard, a great place of resources, it only empowers. I just saw a LOEB fellow yesterday on a Zoom call who’s doing wonderful work here on transforming incarceration and those kinds of things. And so, it’s a wonderful program. If people don’t know about it, they should look into it.

**Brent Leggs:** I’ve got two more questions for you. One is, what’s your dream project, a dream project that connects the multiplicity of narratives in one shared landscape?

**Walter Hood:** Wow. I just did this installation at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It was called *Black Towers/Black Power*. That’s my dream landscape. It’s 10 buildings, tall buildings, imagined through the genesis of Black inventors who patented what I call mundane objects paired with the Ten Points of the Black Panther movement. That’s my project. Oh, it’s a futuristic project. It’s a crazy project, so you have to look it up. It’s something that I wanted to do. It’s a fiction, and I wanted to do it because it’s a critique on a landscape that I live in, and I use these Black inventions as a way to talk about bringing these memories that most of us don’t know, that the shucker, the pencil eraser, a bicycle, a
dirigible, I mean, you go on and on, a dustpan. All of these kind of mundane elements of labor are attributed to people of color, but we don’t know that. For me, marrying that with a larger set of ideas about how to construct a set of cultural landscapes was a critique against a lot of the social service nonprofits that are much more paternal. I use this term “paternalism” because it’s people getting in the way, of saying, “I know what’s best for you,” versus trying to understand me and then working with me to create a different future. It pushes back at this notion that Black folk can’t live in high-rises, that we can’t have high-end development in our communities because it just gets rid of us. It’s all of these fictions that we’re told. It challenges those things.

Those are the projects that I want to do in the future, those that challenge the assumption that we can’t live in beautiful spaces because they’ll get gentrified. We’ve actually started drinking that Kool-Aid, and that’s not sustainable. That’s only going to allow us to basically perish. I have this notion that I want beauty in my landscape. I want commerce. I want diversity. One of the things that we were talking about with Black Tower/Black Power is just give me one millionaire per tower. I just need 10 Black millionaires, right? But we don’t think in that way. Other developers are coming

The Museum of Modern Art exhibit Black Towers/Black Power rethinks a concentration of low-income housing in Oakland, California. PHOTO BY SARITA SCHREIBER, HOOD DESIGN STUDIO, 2021
into our places. But it doesn’t take much. Just give me $120 million, and hey, we could create this amazing thing. That’s nothing these days, when you think about it.

**Brent Leggs:** The last question for you, Walter, is, what advice do you want to leave with the historic preservation profession?

**Walter Hood:** The advice I would leave with the historic preservation profession is: History is messy, and I do think the better way to leave a legacy and have an understanding of cultural sites, cultural landscapes, is to allow them to be messy, to allow them to be complex, and to have faith that people are intelligent. I know we can be critical about that at times, but just have faith in the intelligence of people, that by giving them that information in wonderful ways, for them to see something, it can be really powerful. And don’t do it in a reactionary way. You’ve seen, “We can’t have weddings on plantations anymore. We’ve got to do this thing on a plantation where we have to talk about slaves, but we’ll do it at the end of the tour.” Or, “Something bad happened here. Well, let’s just put a sign up over there.” That’s reaction, versus trying to say, “Okay, how do we come together with this history and tell this complex story? Maybe we just need more voices to help us, and maybe we have to get out of the way of keeping something stuck in time.” Because that’s my view of historic preservation in this country. It chooses a time, and it just stops it, versus saying, “It’s of this time, and look at all of these other things that came out of its time,” and choose ways in which to tell it in powerful ways. I was taken by the Tenement Museum. I don’t know if you saw this piece where they “discovered” that there were African Americans who lived in tenements, so they just recently restored a tenement to tell that story. They’ve had the Tenement Museum all along and never told that story. It makes it more powerful, because for years, you go through those images of the tenement and all those social studies, they never talk about Black folk. They always talk about the Italians, but we were there too! We were all down there together. I just think it makes it richer.

**Brent Leggs:** I think that was a beautiful conclusion. Walter, I want to thank you for a stimulating discussion and provocative
interview. I just want to close with words from *Black Landscapes Matter*, which you wrote in the afterword: “People should see that they themselves, and landscapes, have multiplicities. We should be moving through space that constantly reminds us that women are equal, that we owe responsibility to Natives who were here beforehand, that Black hands built our landscape. Having landscapes with multiplicities forces us not to reconcile; to see that maybe all these forces are irreconcilable, and that’s okay.”

I want to thank you for leading the change, sharing your voice with us today, and helping our nation value the link between landscapes, cultural heritage, and equality. Thank you, Walter.

**Walter Hood:** Thank you so much, Brent. I look forward to seeing you in person and having longer discussions about what I think is a place that we need collective voices to keep pushing this work along. FJ

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WALTER HOOD is the Creative Director and Founder of Hood Design Studio. BRENT LEGGS is senior vice president and executive director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.

**RESOURCE**

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Storytelling: Preservation at its Best

CASSIE CHINN AND JAMIE FORD

**Cassie Chinn:** Hi, I’m Cassie Chinn, and I am with the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. We’re located in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District. I’ve been fortunate to work at the museum for over 20-plus years now. I’m currently serving as its interim executive director. The Wing Luke Museum, for those of you who might not know, is the only Pan Asian Pacific American museum in the nation. We were created in the 1960s, and we’re over 50 years old. A number of years ago, we were named an affiliated area of the National Park Service in order to help tell all of America’s stories. I’m grateful to be here with Jamie Ford, who happens to be on the Wing Luke Museum board of directors, but is definitely amazing in his own right.

**Jamie Ford:** Hi, I’m Jamie. I am an author of several historical fiction books and a bestselling author. My wife says I should get used to saying that. I have books in 35 languages. The most recent language was Persian. I have books in Iran, which is just amazing. The story of this neighborhood in Seattle, the International District, home to Chinese American and Japanese American people, is being read in Tehran. It doesn’t get better than that.

Even before I was on the Wing Luke Museum board, it was a place that I went. It was a resource for me. And the old location was about as big as my office. It was very small, and now it’s in this wonderful historic building.

My first novel, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, is based on the actual hotel in Seattle, and it has very special, important historical significance, as does the entire neighborhood. Which is why most of my books and even my short stories all are set in that neighborhood. Some authors make everything up—“Here’s a street, and here’s a town”—and it’s all fictional. I try to use the real places, and I try to use not just the streets, but the actual businesses that were there at the time, the restaurants. I even dig up old menus from the ‘40s. I try to re-create that whole neighborhood as closely
as I can, so that when people read this book, it’s an immersive experience and they can step back into that time.

Cassie Chinn: I think that’s going to be our connection point as we think about place, story, and connecting them with people.

I am grateful for the opportunity to spend this upcoming time in conversation with you, Jamie, on a topic that is near and dear to both of our hearts: storytelling. We’ve known one another awhile through the Wing Luke Museum, but we haven’t quite had a chance yet to have this conversation, to sit down and talk about storytelling and to explore its power, its impact in personal lives, communities in place. I thought I would start by asking you for a story. What’s the story of your storytelling? Why is it such a critical part of your life?

Jamie Ford: For me, much of it comes from a deeply personal thing, being that I’m biracial. I’m half Chinese, and so I have one foot in two different worlds. I call it the “demilitarized zone between cultures.” You get the best of everything. And because of that, I’ve been super curious about my dad’s childhood, my grandpa’s childhood. Basically, the history of my Chinese family in the Seattle area and, by extension, San Francisco and Nevada, where there is so much rich history. The more that I dig in, it’s a rabbit hole that just keeps on going. It’s super fascinating. I think everyone has those kinds of stories in their family, but because my dad grew up in a very specific part of Seattle—the International District, the Chinatown neighborhood—there’s a physical footprint. The buildings that have been there have been the silent sentinels for several generations.
Cassie Chinn: It’s interesting you talk about the buildings. The buildings in the Chinatown-International District hold a special part in why I started storytelling as well. In my family, we didn’t talk a lot about our family history and stories, but every time my dad would go by one of the buildings, which happens to be the building that the Wing Luke Museum is in right now, he would point to a balcony. And that would be his opportunity to tell me a story about his father, my grandfather, and that would spark an entryway into hearing my family’s stories. I think if it wasn’t for that balcony, that place, I might not know as much about my own family history or have that reason to dive into it.

Jamie Ford: Definitely. All of those places, if you walk through the neighborhood, you’ll look up and you’ll see the family associations. Those places have been there for 100-plus years. They’ve been these fixtures in the community. That’s where my grandma went and played mahjong and won and lost money, depending on the day. But those places were often built with collective, pooled money from a ton of families. So everyone has a piece of that history.

Cassie Chinn: I love that. I’m even thinking about the building that the Wing Luke Museum is in, the East Kong Yick Building, and the story of that building. One hundred seventy-plus Chinese American pioneers pooled their money and decided to start an investment company, the Kong Yick Investment Company. Kong Yick means “for public benefit,” because they wanted to create a new home in the Chinatown-International District.
I like to tell myself the story that maybe there were a bunch of pioneers—it could have been your grandpa, my grandpa, I don’t know—sitting around a table, and they said, “We need to create a place. What if we did this?” I don’t know if that happened, but somehow me telling me that story gives me that sense of community members coming together to do something powerful and strong.

Reflecting on your professional storytelling, your books, and how rooted they are in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District, the places themselves read like characters in your book. How do you go about choosing those places?

**Jamie Ford:** I’m an author of historical fiction. Authors have a choice, and some will just make up streets and names and buildings and places. But I like to re-create the past. I basically like to re-create that world to the best of my ability through interviews and the historical record and photographic evidence and all the stuff that goes with it. I love using the actual places. Basically, my first book is a love letter to that whole neighborhood. The book is called *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. The hotel in that book is the Panama Hotel, built in 1909. And it is a silent character.

My book is a split narrative. The building occupies a footprint in both time periods, the ‘40s and the ‘80s, but was a working man’s hotel. There was a sento [public bath] in the basement, and it was a part of the community there. But during the time of the Japanese internment, dozens of families stored their belongings in the basement. And those belongings still reside there today, so that building is really a repository of all of these families’ stories and their possessions. That’s one of the reasons why that building is so important. We don’t want to see it turned into condos or a Starbucks. It’s important for places like that to be recognized as not just historically
significant, but awarded the status of a national treasure, local treasure, so it doesn’t disappear and then the historical record with it.

**Cassie Chinn:** I love how you’re piecing things together. There are the historic collections materials that are in the basement, there’s the structure of the building itself, and then there are also the stories of people who passed through the space, bringing all those together. Were you able to connect with individual people who had lived experiences in the Panama Hotel as you were doing your research?

**Jamie Ford:** Oddly, my great aunties had a laundry, and they brought laundry back and forth from the people who lived there. My aunties spent lots of time in that hotel when they were young.

As a writer, I think of myself as someone in the compassion creation business, and these places really create compassion. They work your empathy muscles, and by retaining them … what’s the quote by Mark Twain? “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.” You don’t have to travel, you can go to a museum and all of it is right there. Whether it’s a monument or battlefield or a place of industry, these places are super important. I think you take one of these things, inject it into our culture, and it inoculates us against narrow-mindedness, bigotry, hatred, a lot of the things that cause a lot of stress on the world.

**Cassie Chinn:** You know, through our work at the Wing Luke Museum, we think about place as a way to connect with people and how to center people in what we do. It’s interesting, your creation of the book parallels in a sense our work in creating exhibits each and every day, to tell stories centered on the people we bring together—community members who have some type of connection with whatever the subject matter is or the place—to find out from them directly what’s important to them. What do they want other people to learn about? What are the walkaway messages that they want people who experience that place or that exhibit to have? And then how can we tell their story? We tell it often through gathering photographs, artifacts, archival documents, recording people’s oral histories and stories, and then bringing them together. We actually work with our community members to
develop the storyline as you’re going through the space. We ask community members, “What do you want people to be able to see, hear, and feel as they’re going through the exhibit?”

All that layering of what goes into a good story, we do that through our exhibitions, but toward what point? We definitely want to educate people about what happened, but we also want to make those connections. Strong stories have some way to move people’s hearts to connect with universal things that we as humans experience. Through our exhibitions, we also hope that the story will motivate people to action, to do something, and to have some type of response. I think if we’re thinking about increasing compassion and empathy for each other [when creating these exhibits], that will play out in our daily lives, too.

Jamie Ford: Sure. These places, not just the Wing Luke Museum, but so many of these preserved historic sites, are our grandparents’ legacy. They’re what we enjoy in the present, but there’s another generation. That story has continuity now because of the physical location. Oral tradition is the oldest form of story, but when you have a place that people can go to and that story comes alive, then it’s sustained. It helps the community and the people who live there retain their identity, have a source of cultural pride, understand that they, too, are part of the American story, the American experiment, and the tapestry of all the immigrants who have come to this country to find a new life and redefine themselves in this great new context.

Cassie Chinn: That brings to mind places that maybe are not there, that have been leveled. I can’t help but think about the
history of Chinatowns in the U.S., and early Chinatowns that unfortunately have been leveled. You go to a town like Walla Walla here in Washington, or some early mining towns in Nevada, and it’s always that story. “There used to be a Chinatown here, but it’s been leveled.” I know we’ve been trying to do work to go back and do all that heavy research to uncover what was once there. Oftentimes that lack of presence speaks volumes to the history of what happened in the case of Asian Americans, Chinese Americans. The removal of people from place speaks volumes to the experience of the people and to the history of our nation. Jamie, how have you reflected on the absence of place, the absence of material presence, the silence of stories, and what does that mean?

Jamie Ford: It makes me so sad, it’s so heartbreaking. You may not be aware of it, but the China Gate Restaurant that’s just right around from the Wing Luke Museum, that building has been there forever. It was originally built as a theater. The rake seating and all has been long since removed. 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.

Cassie Chinn: It’s making me think about value. What stories or what materials do we value, and what materials can we do a better job at expressing value to? I know when I started working at the Wing Luke Museum, I was the first collections assistant that was hired. Collections was really my forte, and I remember at that time, about 20 years ago, we were always one step behind. We would hear from family members, “Oh, you were looking for that? I just sent a box away to Goodwill.” And we’d respond, “Don’t do that. Please don’t do that. It’s so valuable for our communities.” It’s taken a while to demonstrate that value through our exhibits and to say to community members, “This is the power of the materials that you have. They contain your stories, contain your historical records.” It’s taken showing and demonstrating that to members
for them to recognize, “Oh, yes. Now, of course we wouldn’t throw this away. We need to check with the museum first.” I think that’s that ongoing process just as we get better at opening up what is the full American story that we value and want to tell.

Jamie Ford: I have a question, if I may: How do you decide what to collect? With the way the world is now, with Twitter and social media, there’s not room for nuance. But in a museum, there is room to tell the whole story, the good and the bad. I know there was a building that when it was purchased and they went in the basement, there was all this gambling equipment from when it was a backroom casino. And I thought that was super cool. People can speak of Prohibition times, even though there was criminal activity. We look back on it now and see it as this interesting part of our history. How do you decide what to share with the public?

Cassie Chinn: That’s a great question that comes up. We start with our place of values and what’s important for us. And for us, people give us meaning and purpose, and our goal is long-term relationships of trust. So we’re going to make decisions based on that, and that leads us to collecting, gathering, and sharing stories hand-in-hand with community members. I love that aspect because it also brings ownership of the story back into the hands of the community members. They get to determine the readiness to be able to tell a story. Are they personally ready to share these stories? I think we heard already in our conversation a lot of these stories reflect real, lived trauma, intergenerational trauma, wounds that people carry. And we need to respect where they are in that healing process, either personally, in families, or across generations. Who am I to say, “This is what you need to do,”? Instead, let me center, “What will help you heal? What would bring restoration to our communities?” And make decisions based on their answers. I know sometimes that’s not satisfying, because people question, “But it’s what happened. Everybody should know.” But because we’re centering people, we’re centering community in the decision, then I trust that time will come when that readiness, that time to tell that story, that time to give birth to that story happens at the right moment.
I come from a position of relative privilege being a fourth-generation Chinese American. I’ve been protected from real-life retribution or consequences that could happen from me telling a certain story. But I think back to within the Chinese American communities, people who were coming as “paper sons” or “paper daughters,” under a different identity, because the Chinese exclusion laws prohibited them from coming to the United States. Well, if they told that story right then and there, that would have negative impacts for them being able to live in the U.S., for them to be able to start their families here.

I think about other stories within our Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, refugees who had to purposefully protect themselves, put aside whatever their cultural traditions had been, because of the cultural genocide that was happening under the Khmer Rouge. Those real-life consequences for being who you are impact your ability to tell your stories. I understand the impetus to protect and to keep things within. We try to provide a safe place for people to join together in community. I think there’s safety in numbers, which allows people to feel more empowered and to tell their stories. To create that safe space, we have to say, “It’s your story, you can tell it when you want to.”

Jamie Ford: I like that. That’s incredibly thoughtful, measured, and respectful, as it should be.

Cassie Chinn: I think I first connected with you and knew about your storytelling through the graphic novel Secret Identities. Being deeply embedded in storytelling, what have you learned about storytelling over time? How have your techniques or your thinking about the process improved?

Khmer American exhibit Naga Sheds Its Skin 2015
PHOTO COURTESY WING LUKE MUSEUM
Jamie Ford: Being half Chinese, I’ve realized, once I start writing something, especially in a genre that I haven’t explored, what I bring to the party is a different cultural perspective. I was asked to write three apocalyptic stories by a friend who’s a very famous science fiction author. “Do you want to write about the end of the world?” I replied, “Yeah, I want to write about the end of the world. That sounds great!” And so I wrote stories set in 1910 in Seattle in the International District, in the genre known as “steampunk,” using the actual streets and locations and hotels. Once I had sent it in, the editor remarked, “Wow, I’ve never seen anything like this,” because so many of those stories have been through a Caucasian lens. There was a wonderful African American science fiction author and Seattle resident who passed away a number of years ago named Octavia Butler. And she said, “The future is scary, because there are no people of color in the future.” She looked at science fiction and the future was always white people and robots. The reality is much more diverse. So everything that I do, I try to bring that wrinkle.

I was asked to write a middle-grade horror story for a collection, and I wrote one based on a Chinese folktale. In a collection of about 50 stories, mine is the only story with the character who’s a person of color. I thought there would be others, but sometimes the cultural inertia is one way. I come at it with a point of passion, and I want to write about these things. It’s fortunate for me that there is a space there, that people haven’t been vigorously telling these stories or telling these stories through an Asian American lens.

Secret Identities was a superhero graphic novel anthology, and it was looking at Marvel Comics and DC Comics. So many of the artists and writers, even those in upper management, Jim Lee, who is the chief creative officer for DC Comics, is Asian American, and yet there are so few Asian American superheroes. There are Asian American villains, oddly enough, because that’s how our culture rolls sometimes. It was an opportunity to create a whole world akin to the Marvel Cinematic Universe but populated with people who are Korean or Filipino or Chinese or Japanese, just to tell a different kind of story. And of course, everything that we bring to it is
unique and hasn’t been told and so the readers just love it, because it was something that they hadn’t seen before. These places that we talk about preserving, the stories are there. I think of myself as a cultural archaeologist. I turn over the rocks and look at the squishy things underneath. You just sift the sands, and every once in a while, you find something of profound significance, and you can build a story or a book or a world around those items.

Cassie Chinn: It’s pretty exciting to be in both of our positions, because you get those moments that shake your world. I had a recent experience, where we’re fortunate to be partnering with community members here to create a Chinese American legacy artwork project. It’s a public artwork that will finally recognize publicly the anti-Chinese riots from 1886 in Seattle, which you referred to. It’ll be a public work that Stewart Wong, the artist, has been commissioned for. It’ll be near the original space where the Chinese were rounded up along Seattle’s waterfront. It tells that story, but the location of the artwork is adjacent to what is currently transitional housing and a shelter for unhoused people. It’s the Compass Center. We were talking, sharing about the artwork with them, the history and how the Chinese Americans were removed. We started talking about this idea about who belongs and who doesn’t, who is displaced for whatever reasons.

I just had never thought about it in that context, thinking about the displacement of these Chinese pioneers way back in the day from their homes, how they made a living because of racist structures that were in place, and then thinking about current day issues around who is housed and who’s not, who’s forced out of their homes and why, in the context of enduring racist structures as well. It made me have to pause a moment and take it all in and have my worldview perspective shifted in such a good way.

Jamie Ford: I love that. I’ve been to the Minidoka reunion several times. Minidoka is, for those of you not aware, an internment camp in Idaho, where 10,000 Japanese Americans and nationals were sent and put behind barbed wire. I’ve gone to the reunion, and one of the best parts of the reunion is they have a “talk story” session where they have one of the elders who’s in their late 80s
and spent four years in that internment camp sit there with college students and share and exchange and let them ask all the questions. They may seem like silly questions, but they’re questions. It carries that record and it keeps it alive. There are always things that have been lying dormant, and these stories have not been told.

My great-grandfather, his name was Man-Chung, but he changed his name to William Ford in the late 1800s. He came from China to San Francisco and ended up in Tonopah, Nevada, a little mining community. I have access to newspaper archives and found that he’s mentioned in the Tonopah newspaper 20, 30 times. Tonopah is a little town, but one of its tourist places is this old pioneer cemetery. But my grandfather and my grandmother who died in that town are not there because people of color were not buried in that cemetery. That’s part of the story too, and it’s not something that we’d want to dwell on with any kind of animus, but I want to recognize that my ancestors had a tougher go of it and are often left off the pages of the history books.

Cassie Chinn: Your reflection reminds me of some brief moments where I’ve uncovered materials from the past where I was so grateful that those stories hadn’t been left off the history books, as you say. I remember doing some work and finding out that in the 1930s under the WPA, there was a group of social scientists who went around and interviewed business owners in Seattle’s Chinatown. Here were names that I heard of, and then suddenly I had transcripts of interviews that they did. They’re incomplete in the sense that you’ve got a stranger wanting to do interviews and capturing maybe not the full story, but at least that material was there.

Then I think about how in the late 1980s, in Seattle, a group of community members came together and did the Chinese Oral History Project, to interview folks who were passing away. They wanted to capture those stories. I found out that they had done an interview with my grandmother. I found that out in the early 1990s. I wouldn’t have known my own history if that interview hadn’t taken place. So that always causes me to say, “Okay, what work can we be doing in the here and now?” To preserve these stories, to talk to the people while they’re still living, to have that material
in abundance, instead of it being a rare find that you can’t believe happens. I’d love to see greater and abundant activity and all the different stories that we can collect. I was wondering, as you think about this time period in the here and now, what stories really stand out to you that are ripe for the collecting?

**Jamie Ford:** I think there’s a lot of great work already being done. Like you mentioned the Chinese oral history project or Densho with Japanese Americans’ internment. I think people don’t realize that in many communities of color, they’re not monocultures. Because of redlining, it often compressed a neighborhood together. And so you would have Black people, Hispanic people, and Asian people, and Jewish people, and in some cases, Italian Americans, all congregated in one area living together and their kids going to school together, and a very diverse kind of microcosm of the American experience, as everyone is fighting to catch up, riding on the coattails of the dominant culture, which was the European culture.

That’s why I love the Wing Luke Museum, because it’s a Pan-Asian museum. Yes, there’s a museum in New York about the Chinese in America, and there’s the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. But the Wing Luke Museum is the only Pan-Asian museum where, like in Hawaii, there’s just a beautiful mix of everything, and everyone has their own unique identity. They are as American as someone in the Midwest, but they just have a different cultural point of view, and they all have equal weight and merit. I see that at the Wing Luke Museum, where there’s one group’s story and then another group’s story. There are all of the heroes in media and sports and entertainment and fashion, all together in an exhibit. It’s one of those places where the aggregate is so much more powerful than the individual pieces.

**Cassie Chinn:** I’ve been thinking, we’ve been providing examples from our own personal experience, within our Chinese American experience. I know a lot of folks are learning and getting more exposure to the Japanese American experiences as well. One thing from a Wing Luke Museum perspective I was thinking about is what are more stories and places that we want to share out all the more?
I’ve been thinking lately about temple locations, places of worship within the Southeast Asian American communities that often reside in residential areas. Under the COVID pandemic, I’ve been doing a lot of walks in my neighborhood and getting hyper-local and noticing things that I might have passed over in the past. Stories that I’d love to see more, which I think are just perfect. People are living there, and places being used. There are incredible places to study and to gather information about. Temples that are right in our neighborhood. It’s that opportunity to be able to record, gather, preserve the materials, and then maybe that material can go to help in preserving that place. To build the significance, to build that value in a city like Seattle, where displacement is happening at an incredible rate. Before we lose places like that, we could actually use stories and preservation and all the tools that we have to not need to 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.

**Jamie Ford:** There’s a Buddhist temple in Seattle’s International District. You can stay there for about $30 a night. Basically they bring out a bunch of cots, and they put them in the main temple where the altar and the shrine and the statuary are. It’s kind of like being able to sleep in the chapel of a really amazing Gothic church. That building is important, too. Having tourists crash there in the temple and experience the vibe of the place, I think, is really amazing.

**Cassie Chinn:** What are the multiple ways that we can strategize to bolster these places up? How do we value them, and how do we raise the awareness and the value of them? Let’s say for instance, with the Panama Hotel, in your book *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. Telling that story bolsters the value of that place and broadens how we think about it.

We need to think on an organizational level, too. What are the organizations, where are they at to be able to sustain places like this? To be able to steward them well? Even when I think about the Wing Luke Museum, we’ve grown over time, we’ve been fortunate to develop intergenerational leadership being passed on from one generation to the next. Now the Wing Luke Museum has grown into
its own being where I don’t think any board member or staff member views themselves as the owner of the museum at one time. We’re stewards of the place, we’re stewards of the organization. We’re meant to fulfill our role and ensure that the museum continues on for the next generation. So how do we build the organizational strength to be able to do that as well?

Your example is interesting when it comes to that temple in the Airbnb. We do have to think about, financially, how do we sustain? How do we support and make these things feasible, in the face of incredible market forces? I think that’s going to take a lot of hands. It’s going to take public investment. It takes hopefully private investment, where foundations see it as mission driven, where businesses see it as attractions, to strengthen the business core, to be those amazing places that we love to go visit and spend money in and support all of the businesses, too. Also, how do we think financially from the perspective of whatever that place’s business model is, too? I think we can find ways to be able to contribute to making those aspects come together.

**Jamie Ford:** How do you feel about the future of the neighborhood?

**Cassie Chinn:** On the one hand, I feel like Seattle’s Chinatown-International District has some of those elements that I think it takes to preserve a place and to help a place thrive in place. We’ve got a number of anchors. We’re fortunate to have the Wing Luke Museum. We’ve got the Seattle Chinatown-International District Preservation and Development Authority. We’ve got InterIm Community Development Association, as well. We’ve got organizations that are working to sustain and to support our neighborhood. Even in a newer part of our neighborhood, Little Saigon, we’ve got...
the Friends of Little Saigon who were able to open their creative space and create a new anchor.

The neighborhood itself is a National Register Historic District, so there are some safeguards, at least for the core. We can go into depth on what’s in the core and what’s not, and what can and cannot be done in our special review district. But that is still a point of protection for us. And yet there are still all these forces that are happening within our neighborhood that cause the future of our neighborhood to be uncertain. There are a number of cranes, a lot of new buildings that are being built in our neighborhood. We also have a new expansion of Seattle’s light rail and a new station that is being planned, yet another kind of public project that will impact our neighborhood, on top of stadium one, stadium two, and stadium three, and I-5 freeway.

Also, how well and how long will it take us to recover and emerge out of the pandemic for our small businesses? I think on good days, I’m probably a little bit more optimistic. Some days are hard, and it hurts my heart to think about what could happen. But then I lean back on just drawing on the strength of all the amazing community folk who are involved in all the different ways. And I know we’re going to fight hard, and we’re going to come together, and that gives me strength.

Jamie Ford: That’s good. The whole neighborhood, the Chinatown neighborhood, was originally the site where Seattle planned to build its first giant sports stadium, the Kingdome. It was a huge effort on the community to say, “Hey, people live here. These people have just as much value as the other people. And there’s some industrial area to the south that you could use.” It’s funny that I say this because the Kingdome only lasted 20 years before they tore it down. The city wasn’t even done paying for it. No one wanted to preserve the Kingdome. If there were any preservationists, they were just like, “Nah.”

But how do you feel about people from within the community redeveloping some of these places? There was a hotel called the Publix Hotel. Generations of immigrant families lived there and have lots of stories of kids playing basketball in the basement.
It had fallen into tremendous disrepair, and then it was given a facelift by someone within the community. How do you feel about those kinds of things?

**Cassie Chinn:** I think about two questions, for me, at least initially. I think about community wealth building versus displacement. If we’re able to build community wealth from within and not be displaced from the neighborhood and be able to benefit from giving a place like the Publix Hotel a facelift, providing a place for new business incubation to happen there, then there’s goodness that had happened. They went through an outstanding relocation process for the residents who were in the Publix Hotel. I think about these issues of displacement and community wealth building, I also think about the connection to the community itself. The community ecosystem. How connected are you to all that is happening in the neighborhood and really becoming a part of the neighborhood and what’s happening there and contributing to the ecosystem in a way that helps build up the neighborhood overall? I think if those aspects are in place and in good ways where the goodness gets to stay inside of the neighborhood, instead of it being extracted out of it, then those are some ways that we can pinpoint thinking about new developments, preservation, rehabilitation of places, and what makes sense within the context of where they’re at.

**Jamie Ford:** Years ago, I took my kids on the Wing Luke’s International District Tour. The woman who was our tour guide, Bi, took us to all the places that were not very established and known outside of the community. She took us to the places that are perhaps lesser known, and they need our dollars to sustain them, and that was a message that was never lost on me. Whenever I’m going there, instead of going to a well-established place for groceries, I’ll go to this lesser-known place. Instead of going to this popular bakery, I’ll go to this other bakery. And it’s just a way to sustain everybody as well as just to discover some really cool stuff that other people may not know about. There’s so much there.

I love how you talk about worrying about people being displaced, because first-generation immigrants, they are the hardest
working, most law-abiding people you will ever find. They just are on the lower end of the economic spectrum, and they need a place to live and a place where they can build a life just like everyone else’s ancestors. When we turn all of these places into condos, we turn them into office buildings, we rip the heart out of the neighborhood. You’re removing the only real place of comfort for people coming from afar to our country. The analogy I always use is if someone travels to Tanzania and there is a McDonald’s. My wife and I went to Tanzania and were there for a month, and when we saw McDonald’s thought, “I’m going to go there, because it’s a piece of home, that quarter pounder.” For this other wave of immigrants from the Pacific, this is their piece of home. It’s not a gated, walled community. Everyone can go there. Kids can go there on field trips, businesspeople can go there for lunch. There’s so much to offer. If we displace all the people, then it is Disneyland and not real anymore, and no one wants to live at Disneyland.

Cassie Chinn: I think your point is a great one. Maybe that’s a nice place to wrap up, because when I think about place, these places, I think about the people, I think about the stories that they bring. We bring our stories because we’re trying to find places of comfort and belonging and home. Where is that? What does that mean for us as we try to connect? I think that’s the power and the potential for stories, and place, the combination of them, because it’s trying to figure out what our roots are, where can we find that place of belonging?

Jamie Ford: It reminds me of Maneki, a Japanese restaurant in the International District. It is one of the oldest operating Japanese restaurants in the country, and in the ‘20s and ‘30s, the Asian workers who would come here, they’re bachelors, they came to make money and they’re far from home. They would go there not just for the food, but the waitresses would sing Japanese folk songs because all the boys were homesick. They stayed and raised families here and became part of the grand American experiment. These places are so special and they’re still open and operating. I went there and had dinner last time I was in town because I just love being in that place where you just feel the spirit of all those people who came before.
Cassie Chinn: Thank you, Jamie. It’s been amazing to spend this time talking with you. We don’t get to do it enough.

Jamie Ford: We’re always too busy doing other things when we’re together.

Cassie Chinn: I’m looking forward to future times that we can keep talking about the power of storytelling, because there’s a lot of power there.

Jamie Ford: I agree. I could write about that neighborhood forever.

Cassie Chinn: I hope you do.

Jamie Ford: I’m planning to. Thank you. FJ

CASSIE CHINN is the interim executive director of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. JAMIE FORD is an international best-selling author of historical fiction.

RESOURCE
Preserving Chinatowns in the United States