Book Review: Norman Tyler. Historic Preservation: An Introduction to its History, Principals, and Practice

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Norman Tyler provides the reader with a wide range of topics related to the preservation of historic sites in *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to its, History, Principals, and Practice*. The book follows a basic pattern and can essentially be divided up by topics. The first three chapters give an introduction to the field of preservation. Chapters four through nine give a detailed account of the process of designation which includes chapters on the economics and legalities related to the field. Finally, Tyler discusses ways to work with conservationists and efforts to link preservation with tourism. The book operates as a primer on historic issues. It is an informative reference book that provides vital information for students and historic district commissioners as well as local officials and leaders. Though the scope of the book can be overwhelming to the novice, the book is also an effective textbook for introductory preservation courses.

The first section of Tyler’s work covers basic preservation philosophies, a history of the movement in the United States, and a discussion on architectural styles. Tyler gives a good analogy to explain his view of what the focus of preservation should be. He argues that sites should be looked at as verbs rather than nouns. Sites cannot be viewed as static and stuck in the time that they are meant to commemorate. Instead they should tell dynamic stories by illustrating the historic context of the site. Although he becomes repetitious in his passionate argument of this point, his “nouns and verbs” analogy is easy to understand and apt.

Tyler also provides a good overview of the philosophies that govern the attitudes toward preservation in America. He discusses not only the views of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin but also those of other societies. While he gives an introduction to these ideas, I felt that he just stopped at the end of the chapter. I would have like to have read how these philosophies affected the preservation movement in America. He does return to these ideas later in the book but I was left wanting on this topic.

Tyler discusses the history of the preservation movement in great detail throughout chapter two. He provides a great deal of information about the institutions, legislation, and processes involved in preservation. This chapter is a great introduction to the preservation movement but becomes bogged down in detail. This topic could have filled an entire book on its own. Tyler does a good job of providing an overview and the lack of depth on the subject encourages me to learn more on my own. Perhaps in that way he was successful.

Chapter three traces the evolution of architectural styles in America. Tyler also provides a very important discussion about Contextualism. As a novice in the field of architecture, I feel that I profited from reading this catalog of architectural styles. I have found myself looking at every home and trying to figure out which styles it incorporates. Equally important is the discussion
about the importance of maintaining the context of a site. For a beginner like me, this chapter is the most informative and important one of the entire book.

The second section, which covers chapters four through nine, encompasses the bulk of this book. The reader is given a detailed glimpse of the entire preservation process. Every aspect of creating a historic district, from the history of several districts to the process of setting one up and the philosophies governing them, is meticulously discussed. I feel that this section provides the novice with a true sense of the daunting task that awaits a preservationist. Honestly, I found myself feeling overwhelmed while reading this section, particularly the chapters on the economic and legal issues.

This section moves from the theoretical to the practical seamlessly. I came away not only knowing why preservation is important, but also with an idea of how the process works. This section is a resource that can be useful throughout my career. I can envision having this book on the shelf and reaching for it over and over again. Tyler gives the novice preservationist several case studies that provide real-world examples and an honest view of the issues that we will face. It is too much information to swallow in one reading. While the detail is necessary and beneficial, I feel that it is only useful as a reference. The section requires the reader to revisit it many times to gain all of the knowledge that it contains.

Sadly, by the time that the reader makes it to chapter ten, they may feel exhausted. Again, this chapter is best suited to be reference material. It is a section that one would come back to if they were involved in something that was relatable or if they were writing a paper or proposal. Tyler rallies the reader to keep up with trends in sustainable technologies and procedures. This is an important aspect of this chapter. We as preservationists have to have an understanding of green technologies that limit wasted resources. These technologies should be incorporated into restoration efforts because they not only save the environment but also money. Tyler uses case studies that show how this partnership can be mutually beneficial to conservationists and preservationists. He gives the reader practical examples that will be beneficial throughout their careers.

Chapter eleven discusses a topic that I am growingly passionate about. Tyler describes the important link between preservation and tourism. As Tyler states, preservation efforts can be an important form of tourism that draws money and visitors to the site and community. I feel that too many sites fail to realize that in order to be sustainable they must find sources of revenue that rise above fifty cent donations and mailers to “friends of.” Heritage corridors and areas can be vital tools that focus the efforts and financial power of several different historic sites and municipalities. Rather than working independently, communities in a region can work together to create these areas. These corridors and areas can provide struggling regions with an important and sustainable industry. Many historically significant areas, such as the Rust-Belt states and urban areas like Detroit would benefit immensely from growing these kinds of
attractive sites. This chapter not only raises these philosophical issues but also provides examples of where they have been put into practice. I wish that more time would have been spent on this topic, but again, Tyler raised my interest in the subject and has caused me to want to work to learn more.

*Historic Preservation* as a textbook and introduction to historic preservation is an overwhelming success. It provides the reader with everything that they need to be aware of before embarking on a career in this field. It also succeeds in the fact that it makes you want to learn more. The only issues that arise come from the scope of the book. It is a great deal of information to digest in one reading. However, when used as a reference it shines. I would have liked to have had more of a sense of Tyler’s own feelings about the issues that he raised but that would have been a different book entirely. I would recommend this book to every novice preservationist and to instructors teaching an introductory course in preservation.

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