



The battles of Germantown: Effective public history in America, by David W. Young

Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2019

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BOOK REVIEW

The battles of Germantown: Effective public history in America, by David W. Young, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2019

Through waves of migration, demographic change, economic upturns and downturns, and growth and deterioration, cities and their neighborhoods are in constant flux. In the face of that persistent change, historic preservation movements strive to memorialize key locations, intervening in the churn of urban creative destruction in order to draw attention to important pieces of the built environment that, through their association with specific historic events and prominent individuals, have left an indelible mark on the character of a place. Just as, at each sequential moment in a place's history, we can observe ongoing struggles between groups over claims to urban territory, we also see protracted struggles between groups with competing claims to the right to shape the historical narrative that prevails in that place. This can pose significant challenges to the historic preservationists tasked with enshrining and relaying the story of a building, a neighborhood, or a city. Whose history matters, and how should we adjudicate between competing claims to historical relevance in our cities?

These are the questions that motivate the detailed and powerful new book by David W. Young, *The Battles of Germantown: Effective Public History in America*. Young, currently the executive director of the Delaware Historical Society, served for over a decade in leadership positions at two prominent house museums in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Drawing on his own personal experiences in historic preservation in Germantown, as well as his expansive knowledge—based on years of scholarly research—of the neighborhood's past, Young walks readers through this ever-changing part of one of the country's most historic cities. From its critical role in the American Revolution (culminating in 1777 in the famed Battle of Germantown), and its place in the abolitionist movement in the 19th century (including what was likely a station on the Underground Railroad), to its 20th-century struggles with economic decline, demographic turnover, and historic preservation in the face of proposed highway incursions, Germantown has been the home of many histories. For centuries, prioritizing among those myriad stories has been a source of tension and conflict between various groups in this diverse neighborhood.

The central chapters of the book explore those tensions, as well as attempts made by preservationists and activists—including Young himself—to find resolutions. Framed around thematic titles like "Conversations," "Amnesia," and "Projections," these chapters examine important moments in Germantown's history and in preservationists' attempts to save, record, interpret, and share that history with the public. In Chapter 1, Young highlights several attempts to reconcile a present-day Germantown that is predominantly Black with a historical portrait of Germantown that has tended to emphasize colonial-era White histories while largely excluding Black lives and Black achievements. Through a series of community conversations and concerted attempts to more fully incorporate the long legacy of slavery and African-American lives into the history of Cliveden, one of Germantown's most notable and distinguished colonial-era house museums, Young and his collaborators rethought the purpose, relevance, and impact of historic preservation in an era when contemporary residents of Germantown felt left out of their neighborhood's collective account of itself.

The downplaying of African-American contributions is nothing new, however, as Young documents in Chapter 2. In 1928, Germantown hosted an impressive weeklong celebration of Negro Achievement Week, featuring a keynote address by W.E.B. Du Bois. Within a matter of decades, though, that celebration was all but forgotten in Germantown, as were other 20th-century civic and artistic achievements by African Americans in the neighborhood. Recovering those histories, and

problematizing the reasons for their disappearance from the historical record in the first place, is crucial, Young argues, for creating and sustaining what he calls “effective public history”—that is, history that engages with the community and welcomes socially informed and evolving interpretations of the past.

In Chapter 3, Young delves further into issues of authenticity and authority, detailing the quixotic campaign from the 1940s through the 1960s to create an ersatz colonial revival development in Germantown modeled on Virginia’s Colonial Williamsburg “living history” district. As Young notes, this plan would have entailed building a false narrative about colonial Germantown, while simultaneously displacing an existing monument to the real history of Germantown residents’ service in the Civil War. The chapter further recounts mid-century attempts to modernize Germantown through urban renewal projects and freeway construction, which would have had profound and destructive ramifications for the neighborhood’s historic character. The community ultimately rejected all of these projects—a result, in large part, of “the rise of black political leadership in Germantown” alongside a diminishing “ability of the neighborhood’s white elite to assert its power over the community” (p. 156). The struggles over these attempts to reshape the community are reflected in present-day struggles over the community’s historical and current character.

Those struggles are further examined in Chapters 4 and 5, which deal with the treatment of significant, but contested, buildings in Germantown. Young uses Chapter 4 to recount efforts to substantially rewrite the history of the Johnson House, a historic house museum on Germantown Avenue, by recognizing its place in the American abolitionist movement, including identifying the house as a likely station on the Underground Railroad. These efforts, involving historians, preservationists, and the broader Germantown community, exemplified the deployment of “Criterion P,” a term that Young uses to describe “the passion and political influence that frequently determine which historic places are designated as nationally significant” (p. 26). He turns in Chapter 5 to spaces in Germantown that, though significant to many, have failed—perhaps due to an insufficient quantity of Criterion P—to garner sufficient enthusiasm to merit preservation as historic sites. Among others, he highlights Upsala, a stately 1798 home, which attracted fewer than 10 visitors per year when it was professionally preserved as a house museum, and which was ultimately sold, returning to private ownership.

While valuing historic structures like Upsala is important, Young asserts, not all buildings with historic significance have to be museums. Much of *The Battles of Germantown* is devoted to expounding on this theme. Young is eager for public history to move beyond what he calls “building-ism,” the disproportionate focus on the architectural features of historic places, and to focus instead on “beingness,” a fuller appreciation for the communities and social engagement processes that make and remake history on a daily basis. Preserving structures, of course, is critical; after all, adapting and reinvigorating the historic record of a place are nearly impossible if the sites where historic events occurred face the wrecking ball. But “effective public history” is fundamentally about people and their communities. How the history of a place is made, interpreted, and preserved or discarded depends on who occupies that place and whose voices get heard. As such, this book, while tailored primarily to an audience of preservationists and historians, should also be of great interest to social scientists, urban planners, and activists interested in how urban communities develop, change, and record their memories.

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