August 13, 2020

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Dear Mx. Leifeste:

We, the undersigned, are preservation educators, students, and practitioners who believe that racial equity is of utmost importance for the future of historic preservation. In response to your recent open letter on racial diversity and inclusivity in teaching preservation to the membership of the National Council for Preservation Education, we make the following recommendations and observations to illuminate the need for more impactful and systemic reforms than those listed in your letter:

1. The historic preservation field perpetuates the erasure of BIPOC and maintains racist and White supremacist institutional power dynamics

As mentioned in your letter, the field of historic preservation is predominantly white in terms of whose histories and sites are preserved and the people engaged in preservation education (including faculty and students). This observation is based on the perpetuation of rendering the historical and cultural contributions of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) as marginal, invisible, and insignificant. The preservation discipline has traditionally focused on integrity and standards of historic buildings and structures that honor “master” and colonial narratives. This priority fails to recognize and explore the historical legacies of systematic racism that have (and continue) to shape the built environment for BIPOC. As a result, historic preservation—in terms of practice, research, and education—perpetuates the marginalization of BIPOC and other underrepresented groups. This is not only in what is deemed significant and worthy of designation but also in who is involved in decision making. After-the-fact inclusion, post-decision-making is one example of this problem. In acknowledging racial disparity in preservation, your admission in having no solutions to address this is alarming, yet not unexpected. NCPE’s institutional membership includes few academic institutions that train or support stewards of BIPOC’s communities and none of the cultural institutions that organize, fund, and otherwise lead preservation of cultural heritage. What is NCPE leadership doing to interrogate the institutional power dynamics that maintain racial inequity in historic preservation within and beyond the academy?

2. The Need for Preservation Education Reform

NCPE’s goals and tasks propose incremental efforts in racial diversity and inclusion—most of which perpetuate the tokenization of BIPOC rather than elevate advocates of racial equity and justice. We urge you to take considerable steps towards reform in preservation education that from the start disrupt norms of authorship and authority in the academy—those norms that reinforce the exclusionary ways of thinking, convening, engaging, and co-signing that your proposed reforms are supposed to eradicate. Major reform requires a deep dive into one’s mission, structure, policies (or bylaws), values that guide programming and membership efforts, plus the curricula and cultures of educational and cultural institutions undertaking reforms. While the listed incremental tasks and activities may yield short-term gains towards racial diversity and inclusion in the field of historic preservation, transformative reforms
call for NCPE to join peer organizations, member institutions, and diverse cultural institutions in asking difficult questions about preservation leadership, membership, scholarship and stewardship. For whom are we preserving historic sites and cultural resources? How should university level preservation education be made more relevant to students, site visitors, and broader BIPOC communities?

3. Access, outreach, and membership as exclusionary acts (and tokenized at best)
For many of us, we are preservation educators, scholars, and activists that have little or no connection to NCPE. A few have attempted to engage with NPCE through internship applications, conference presentation submissions, or in article submissions to NCPE’s journal, Preservation Education and Research (PER). However, in these attempts to engage, little to none have been successful in being awarded an internship, accepted to present at your conference, or published in PER. These experiences with NCPE reflect how access, outreach, and membership are exclusionary acts that perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of BIPOC in your organizational activities. Furthermore, membership is exclusive and limited only to preservation education programs, while for many BIPOC scholars, educators, and leaders, our work is often based in other disciplines and organizations outside of traditional preservation spaces. While there are engagement efforts listed within NCPE’s website, outreach and engagement with BIPOC and other underrepresented groups are incremental and minimal.

4. NCPE’s objectives and activities in relation to support/elevate BIPOC preservation education and scholarship
In response to your call to action for structural change within NPCE and among its membership, we assert that recognizing white privilege and structural racism and developing tools to undo racial biases are just a few necessary steps. Such a statement also reflects an assumption (and reality) that NPCE’s composition (in terms of board members and organizational members) is predominantly white, which furthers our invisibility as BIPOC preservationists. It is imperative for NCPE’s objectives and activities to recognize preservation work as people-centered—how can we tell the dynamic, diverse, and difficult stories of our nation’s peoples through historic preservation? A shift is needed to move beyond traditional acts of diversity and inclusion to commitments to equity and justice to which institutions can be held publicly accountable. Conducting outreach at conferences may fulfill diversity and inclusion efforts but what more will NCPE do to change the makeup of its leadership and membership to reflect our nation’s diversity? We all agree that we need to fight racism. But what is NCPE measurably doing to contribute to dismantling systemic barriers and practices that have long maintained racism and inequality?

5. “Invest” in BIPOC Preservationists and Communities
We recognize your efforts in establishing a task force focused on racial diversity but take note that your open letter named a handful of preservation educators and scholars that contributed to your letter. Few BIPOC preservation educators, like those of us listed as signatories in this letter, were engaged or invited into the discussion. A task force on “Increasing Racial Diversity in Preservation Education” is an activity that perpetuates our marginalization and invisibility. An invitation for nominations--even self-nomination--invites guests to a table already set, and to continue the metaphor, suggests that the hosts can deny entry or revoke access on their own terms. Rather than invite us to the table, nominate us for tasks, or issue a “call for our participation,” why don’t you join us in conversations, convenings, and working groups that we and others are organizing around issues of equity, justice and reparation? These acts of solidarity can and should be substantive, not symbolic. NCPE—an established organization with
communication channels to academic institutions, expertise in accreditation, partnerships with practitioner organizations and other resources—is poised to work collaboratively with BIPOCs to scale up ongoing efforts and design justice-driven approaches to preservation education at scale.

6. Prioritize BIPOC preservation research and practice in NCPE’s activities
NCPE has an opportunity to not only address racism and race in its organization but to transform the field of preservation education. As the leading preservation education organization, you have the opportunity to take a deep dive into reforming how race and equity can be centered in preservation scholarship and education. Prioritizing funding through “Dollars Toward Diversity” is one step forward to advancing preservation education, but we challenge you to explore transformative actions in NCPE’s leadership, activities, and membership. It is important to not only work on being more inclusionary of BIPOC scholarship and outreach into preservation education but to highlight how these works are reshaping the future of historic preservation.

Transforming the field of historic preservation is essential and paramount given the diversity of our nation, its people, and its built environment. Addressing systematic racism and anti-Blackness is one step forward, and NCPE as a national organization must address more impactful and systemic reforms.

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