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Self-Help for Preservationist Advocates: Growing Grassroots Constituencies and Effective Local Advocacy

By Chris Skelly

I asked the saleswoman at the bookstore where the self-help section is. She said if she told me, it would defeat the purpose.

– George Carlin

I asked the saleswoman at the bookstore where the historic preservation section is, she said try the self-help section.

– Local Preservationist

Actually, I've often thought it would be good to have a self-help section at the bookstore just for preservationists. We take the demolition of historic resources personally and it hurts. When a beloved building falls, we look for solace and sympathy and that comfort isn't always so easily found. I've also noticed over the years, sometimes, we preservationists have a hard time accepting reality.

I had a very typical call recently from someone who said, "That building should never have been demolished." It reminded me of Byron Katie, one of my favorite self-help authors and speakers. She has a lot to say on the word "should" and how it sets us back from accepting what is. One

of my favorite quotes from her is "When I argue with reality, I lose, but only 100% of the time." Of course, acceptance of reality doesn't mean we give up our efforts to save historic resources. Acceptance of reality is not the same thing as complacency.

So far, I haven't found a self-help book for preservationists but I haven't given up giving it some thought. We could sure use one. Not accepting the reality of the local political process, feeling overwhelming anxiety over the pending loss of a 200 year old building, expressing our anger and outrage to those who do not agree with our preservation philosophy, feeling alienated from

neighbors, these are the signature signs of why we might wander over to the self-help section. With that in mind, I've put together 15 Questions for Preservation Advocates to ask themselves. So, with research that includes no meme returned, no daily inspirational quote left unread, and no hippie folk music left unsung, here they are:

15 Questions on Being an Effective Preservation Advocate

1. Do I understand the background?

I am sick and tired of repeating myself. – History
Before speaking out regarding a preservation concern it is important to understand the full background on how the situation arose. Prior meetings, prior plans, city ordinances, state laws, federal laws, local regulations, various organizations and individuals have all brought this preservation concern to the present day. Investigating the background is essential so that you can speak with a deep understanding of how best to move forward and so that you understand all the players, personalities, and interests. Spending the time to investigate the how and why will be worth the effort. It may mean you are not easily dismissed as a latecomer, sounding uninformed. It may very well mean you chart a different course instead of repeating the same outcome.

2. Do I understand the decision-making process?

If you define the problem correctly, you almost have the solution. – Steve Jobs

Now that you've investigated the background it is important to understand the step-by-step process for what happens next. Who are all the

organizations and individuals involved in the decision-making process from here? These might be local officials such as elected officials or local boards and commissions such as the historical commission, planning board, or zoning board of appeals. Will public hearings, local approvals, and permits be needed? If you understand all the steps from here on out, you'll have a much better chance of finding a solution.

3. Did I or can I participate in the planning process?

Planning takes years, demolition takes hours.

The downside of planning is that it takes time.

Was a relevant plan such as a master plan, downtown revitalization plan, economic development plan or community preservation plan recently prepared? Were you part of that discussion? Does the proposed project meet the goals of that plan? If there is an upcoming plan being prepared, are you ready to participate in the development of that plan so that your concerns, recommendations, and goals can be incorporated into the community's plan. Historic preservation planning is a step by step process. It is best accomplished slowly and steadily over many, many years.

4. Am I bringing realistic solutions with me?

If I'm not part of the solution, does that mean I am part of the problem?

Showing up to meetings with realistic goals, ideas and compromises can go a long way to building success. Bring solutions to meetings, not your sarcasm.

5. Am I being patient?

Patience is not the ability to wait, but the ability to

keep a good attitude while waiting.

Preservationists aren't always known for being patient. After all, when a historic building is threatened, it could disappear by tomorrow. Time is short. Ideally, preservation advocates have already participated in relevant planning processes, understand the background, the decision-making process and have developed a broad constituency. When that is the case, it is far easier to be patient, as you are prepared. If you are trying to be a last-minute preservation advocate, it is still important to practice patience. However, recognize and accept that you've arrived late and will simply be less effective. With that in mind, it is important to be patient with yourself and what you can accomplish.

6. Am I asking questions and listening?

You can observe a lot by just listening.

Apparently, this is not a Yogi Berra quote, but I really want to attribute this to him. Listening is about trying to understand, not simply waiting for your turn. An effective technique is to calmly acknowledge those that do not share the same views as yourself, give them their voice, hear them out and let them know you heard what they had to say. To be an effective advocate, it is not about convincing anyone that you are right and they are wrong. By truly listening, you have the opportunity to seek common ground with a diversity of viewpoints.

7. Am I staying positive, respectful and enthusiastic?

Simply complaining to those around you is not a winning strategy for constituency building. It is a surefire way to alienate yourself from potential

preservation supporters.

Do you know why we are called the hysterical committee? I like to think it is because we laugh, have a great sense of humor and have an all-around spectacular outlook on life. While advocating for historic resources can have many challenges along the way, staying positive and enthusiastic will encourage more people to join you. Additionally, it is important that you, as an advocate, find within yourself ways to feel the enthusiasm, excitement and energy of building preservation momentum. This may mean coming up with some easily achievable goals, fun activities and finding the humor along the way.

8. Am I making an effort to walk in their shoes?

Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way when you criticize them, you are a mile away and you have their shoes. – Jack Handey

Well, this certainly is a common strategy but it isn't a winning strategy either. When listening to others are you assuming good intent with those that share different viewpoints, backgrounds, and needs than yourself? Are you reaching out, talking constructively and respectfully with those with whom you disagree? Bringing in more tax revenue through new development, keeping taxes low for senior citizens, making money, building more housing can all be laudable goals. Are there ways that you and other stakeholders can find win-win solutions? Can developers still make lots of money in a community that regulates the protection of its historic resources? Absolutely. Can a variety of affordable housing options be offered while keeping significant historic resources and landscapes? Definitely. Can property tax revenue

go up with rehabilitating historic buildings? Yes, even more so than new construction on the edge of town.

9. Am I building relationships and bridges?

People support what they help create.

Be the bridge that brings together diverse viewpoints. Bring residents, neighbors, elected officials and business owners together so that everyone has a voice and interest in protecting what is best about their community.

10. Do I understand the need to build a constituency comes first?

Friends, they may think it's a movement. And that's what it is. – Arlo Guthrie

I was only 3 years old in 1969. So, I didn't make it to Woodstock. It would be another 20 years before I even realized Alice's Restaurant by Arlo Guthrie wasn't actually about going to a restaurant and having a wide selection of options. Nowadays, when I take a call from a local preservationist and hear how things aren't going well with convincing their local elected officials, Arlo often starts singing to me. Alice's Restaurant is one song, a meandering 18 minutes long. Yet, the message has broad application. To me that is, as a preservation advocate, it is important to not address your local government officials alone. Show up alone and you are easily dismissed, labeled the village idiot or considered the local annoyance. Always bring a group of preservation constituents with you. If you don't have preservation constituents to bring with you, focus on building your grassroots preservation constituency first. Then, go meet with your local officials.

11. Am I targeting my outreach?

What is your escalator pitch?

You've heard of an elevator pitch, making your sales pitch in the 20 seconds you've got a captive audience in the elevator. Well, imagine you are on an escalator going up. Someone you know is on the opposite escalator going down. As you pass each other, they say to you, "why would you ever want to save those buildings?" By the time you have a chance to think, they are already ten feet away and now you've only got 2 seconds to make your pitch. What you call out to them has to be short, like 3 words or less, and it has to be so directly targeted to their interests that they leave with your words stuck in their head. You might call out "better paying jobs" or "lower taxes" or "children" or "healthy living." By understanding the background, the organizations, the individuals involved and by already listening to all the various stakeholders, outreach can be personal and custom designed to specific needs, easily and succinctly answering the question, "what's in it for me?" Ultimately, with all of the benefits preservation offers, there really is something for everyone.

12. Am I keeping my message simple?

Saving this building is a no-brainer. The house includes typical Italianate trim, such as canted bay windows and paired brackets. These apertures are also embellished with robust caps, with pilasters flanking the door. We must save this building. Preservation terminology and acronyms may make sense to you and other preservation advocates. However, the words you choose may not be well understood elsewhere. Trying to keep your communication simple and in plain language will achieve an effective message.

13. Have I formed a preservation organization?

Electricity is really just organized lightning. –

George Carlin

Having a local preservation advocacy non-profit organization or even just a simple friends group can elevate your message. Either way, choose a name for your group that is specific enough to the issues at hand but adaptable enough to last beyond an immediate need. From there, consider a logo, electronic communication through social media, as well as stickers, magnets, pens and other methods that get your organization noticed. Effective advocacy organizations have a small group of dedicated people that do the behind the scenes work and a large group of people that are only called on occasionally when needed.

14. Can I accept setbacks and move on?

Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery and today is a gift. This is not easy work. Setbacks in

preservation are common. Keeping your thoughts focused just on today is one of the best self-help techniques out there.

15. Have I thanked others and shared the credit for success?

It is amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit. – Harry Truman

Share the credit for success widely. A person's greatest emotional need is to feel appreciated. Recognize the value of each individual, even if their contribution was small. Importantly, find ways to recognize and thank your local politicians when there is a success.

So, I have ended without a quote attributed to Mark Twain. I'm not sure how that happened.

The secret to getting ahead is getting started. –

Mark Twain. ■



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