Abstract

Recognized internationally by UNESCO as a site of universal heritage, Le Havre, France, is an ideal case for presenting the utility of oral history to the field of Historic Preservation. Reconstructed after World War II by Auguste Perret, the city’s importance has, to this point, been defined by expert scholars and institutions as it relates to the fields of architecture and urbanism. The detachment from a first-hand understanding of Le Havre’s rebuilding has limited these groups’ concept of significance. Through oral histories, this thesis gives voice to Le Havre’s residents (the insiders) and complements the accepted outsider perspective with a social dimension previously ignored, creating a more complete history of Le Havre’s postwar reconstruction.

The question posed here is “How can oral history strengthen a case for significance and does it, thus, merit more regular use in the field of historic preservation?” First, presenting the oral history method of historiography as it relates to historic preservation is necessary to begin to answer this query. Doing so frees the historian and preservationist from the claim that oral histories are an unreliable or overly individualized resource. Next, a selective survey of European cities reconstructed after the war provides context for Le Havre’s own rebuilding program. Presented individually, Le Havre’s uniqueness is lost; examining it alongside contemporary reconstruction programs is essential. Finally, the oral history method is used to re-examine Le Havre’s postwar reconstruction, incorporating the testimony of Le Havre’s residents and enriching the historical record. This informs the case for significance and demonstrates oral history’s efficacy.
This thesis argues that oral histories do indeed provide an avenue of historical research integral to the process of evaluating a historical site’s meaning. Oral history can and should be considered a primary tool by which to inform preservation’s work.