ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the use of age criteria in historic preservation, focusing on how the fifty-year rule has contributed to the field’s current concept of the recent past. Within contemporary governmental practice, preservationists have largely concentrated on protecting the inherited resources of previous generations. Now a rising constituency in the field seeks not only to protect resources from the distant past, but also those of its own lifetime, namely, the recent past. I examine how the notion of the recent past has emerged in historic preservation, relating its development to fundamental struggles with age, collective memory, and historical objectivity. Relying on the passage of time to achieve a level of objectivity, governmental preservationists have instituted age criteria to differentiate the recent past from the distant past and exclude it from consideration. However the rise of interest in the recent past among nongovernmental preservationists is evidence of the shortcomings of the current age criteria. In particular, I argue that the fifty-year rule has perpetuated age biases, facilitated the neglect of recent resources, and impeded the ability to establish valuable links between living collective memory and the built environment. I discuss the benefits and drawbacks of current age criteria: the gain of claims to detachment and historical objectivity versus the loss of resources and living collective memory. Ultimately I conclude that governmental practice should eliminate the fifty year rule as a determining criterion for evaluation, as well as suggest how the recent past might be incorporated into the mainstream activities of historic preservation.