Accelerating Disability Justice at Historic Places

Info: REPAIR gave this presentation on July 26, 2021, at the National Park Service's Scholars' Roundtable. It focuses on how the fields of historic preservation and public history could rethink and reimagine our professional methodologies to be in better alignment with disability justice principles.
Video Runtime: 10:46

GAIL DUBROW:

We are a collective of learners exploring how to accelerate disability justice at historic places and integrate what we learn into our shared and independent projects. Based at the University of Minnesota, we are extending our partnership and building an infrastructure that can be used by our collaborators in Wisconsin, Oregon, and beyond. The past two years have been devoted to considering how attention to ableism and disability might transform heritage preservation.

Our projects include developing a new course on disability justice and cultural heritage for Fall 2021, taught in collaboration with partners at public universities at Wisconsin and Oregon; preparing case studies of sites significant in disability history, three of which we will share today; and creating a website intended for public audiences that uses StoryMaps to present the case studies. Its underlying design has the capacity to integrate grassroots initiatives throughout the US into a national mapping project.

We are currently working with graphic designer Morgan LaCasse and digital access expert Shana Crosson to prepare the three sites in StoryMap format. These samples will be ready for public comment right after Labor Day. Fifteen other case studies will be prepared by students enrolled in our Fall class, providing a second opportunity for public review in January. Laura?

LAURA LEPPINK:

Our key project goals include to identify the intersections of disability justice and historic preservation and apply resulting insights to all aspects of practice; to identify

stakeholders and organize with them to formulate the processes, practices, and products of an action plan; to use case studies to explore how disability histories can be illuminated at sites; to formulate strategies to increase access at historic places, and to develop tools for more comprehensive assessment of policies and practices informed by the lens of disability justice.

Given the systemic inequality faced by people with disabilities, issues including health care, employment, and housing are priorities for advancing justice. But we are the "bread and roses" school of thought, and believe we must also attend to cultural justice. Every social movement requires cultural initiatives that center the perspectives of groups often denied their full humanity. In this sense, cultural justice isn't really about "roses." It is metaphorical "bread" in a larger transformational agenda.

At the end of this meeting, Luann Jones will share our handout asking critical questions under each of this five categories that bring the critical lens of disability justice to bear on assessing and creating an action plan for specific historic places. To you, Sarah.

SARAH PAWLICKI:

Disability justice is a method through which any historic site might be interpreted. This framework is best articulated by the disability justice collective Sins Invalid: "The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, created in the context of colonial conquest and capitalist domination. A single-issue civil rights framework is not enough to explain the full extent of ableism and how it operates in society.

We can only truly understand ableism by tracing its connections to heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism." Big concepts, I know, but our intention is to be fully inclusive, and this approach informs the strategies we've taken in selecting, researching, and writing our case studies. The map in the upper left corner of this slide shows the distribution of the sites we're currently preparing. Today, we'll briefly discuss three cases, two in Minnesota and one in Wisconsin, marked by the purple arrows on the lower right map.

Charles Thompson Memorial Hall, in St. Paul, Minnesota, pictured on the upper left of this slide, was the first social club for the Deaf in the United States. Its architect, Olof Hanson, was Deaf, and he incorporated physical features like the large windows pictured on the lower right, that facilitate conversations in ASL. Advocacy by the Save Thompson Hall Committee led to its designation as a National Historic Landmark in 2011, and they are now raising funds to improve the site's accessibility, particularly an elevator to accommodate

aging members and become wheelchair accessible. This site points to the possibilities of identifying historic properties that reflect the agency of people with disabilities in adapting and designing elements of the built environment to meet community needs.

This slide shows the Milwaukee Ordnance Plant, which operated during World War II. The plant's foreman, Arthur Wolff, specifically sought out Deaf women as workers, because, he claimed, "Noise does not distract them. There is never any idle conversation." The building is unfortunately no longer extant, but the history is important to interpret, as it combats ableist stereotypes by representing disabled people as active contributors in labor histories. The site could easily be integrated into already funded initiatives, such as the NPS/NCPH cooperative agreement, to prepare essays on World War II heritage cities.

These two case studies, prepared by our team's graphic designer, illustrate the use of a StoryMap template for the case studies in our mapping project. Now, over to you, Laura.

LAURA LEPPINK:

This black and white historical photograph of the Minnesota State Fair includes tents, people, and larger permanent buildings. Known as the "Great Minnesota Get-Together," the Fair, established in 1856, is central to the state's and citizens' identity. The Fair remains a point of pride as one of the most popular tourist attractions in the region, with more than two million visitors each year. Nestled alongside the happy memories and food on a stick are the stories of people who labored on the Ramsey County Poor Farm, which once occupied the site. Missing are the accounts of people with disabilities once displayed as spectacles, or eugenic improvement regimes intended to produce "better" citizens through events like Better Baby Contests.

Pictured here is the Ramsey County Poor Farm, on the left a water tower, in the center a two-story building. The remains of the former poor farm are now located in Maplewood, several miles from the former fairground site. What roles do state fairs play in constructing, circulating, and performing inequality? They are places that bring people together for a celebration of agricultural production and local crafts. However, they are also critical venues for disseminating ideologies like settler colonialism, scientific racism, classism, and eugenics. They have historically contributed to the stigmatization and devaluation of people with disabilities. As stated in a 1909 report of the fair's activities, "The growth of the state fair as an institution has been consistent with the continued and marvelous development of the state. No state in the union can boast of a citizenship superior to that which Minnesota possesses in point of sturdiness of character, I mean the

spirit of determination to attain ultimate ideals of an exalted social condition." So, what makes fairgrounds significant sites for interpreting disability histories?

The Minnesota State Fair's history has been represented exclusively in an upbeat way. Confronting a more difficult past might not be popular, but doing so would ensure people with disabilities are welcomed into the "Great Minnesota Get-Together." This site also illustrates the possibilities for preparing multiple property nominations for fairgrounds and commercial entertainment venues of all sorts. To you, Sarah.

SARAH PAWLICKI:

My priorities in the year ahead include continuing to write case studies that illuminate the intersections of privilege and oppression at historic sites, while also exploring these themes in my dissertation, which is focused on seventeenth-century Indigenous and colonial religious history. Laura?

LAURA LEPPINK:

My priority is digging deeper into the history of eugenics and its physical manifestations in fairgrounds and public universities - both because we need to reach beyond asylums as the primary sites associated with eugenics, and because I'm a Minnesotan personally grappling with my love of fairs and ignorance about their difficult histories.

The NPS handbook will need to address themes of scientific and popular eugenics, sites where the display of people with disabilities were a form of entertainment, and ableist conceptions of citizenship, among others. All of these notions were made manifest in varied property types.

We're committed to finding those places. Going forward, we place a high priority on building a mutually beneficial network that centers the experiences and perspectives of BIPOC people. For us, and for the NPS project that we have gathered to discuss today, this must be a priority. Thanks so much for having us come to speak today.