THE NEW COLLEGE OF DESIGN FOUND ITSELF WELL-POSITIONED TO CREATE TWO UNIQUE ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH INITIATIVES, BRINGING TOGETHER EXPERTISE IN INTERNATIONAL AND AMERICAN CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION PRACTICES

By Camille LeFevre

Throughout the United States, historic preservation is the accepted term for the professional study and practice of saving individual buildings with architectural and cultural significance. Historic preservation has also evolved to include multiple-block districts, landscapes, sites, and parks. Throughout the rest of the world, heritage conservation is the preferred term for a professional practice that encompasses not just buildings, districts, and landscapes, but also the temporal and intangible aspects of a culture, such as food, clothing, arts and crafts, societal customs and traditions, construction techniques and technologies, and economic relationships.

The new interdisciplinary College of Design (CDeS) found itself well-positioned to establish two unique academic and research initiatives in heritage conservation. In 2005, the Center for World Heritage Studies (CWHS) was founded, in conjunction with UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre in Paris. Concurrently, the School of Architecture established an M.S. degree program with a concentration in heritage conservation and preservation (MS-HCP).

The program brings international heritage-conservation policy and practices together with American preservation policy
and practice, making it possible for students to develop practical skills in historic preservation and to address critical questions about the implications of that practice, explained Kate Solomonson, associate dean for academic affairs and associate professor of architectural history.

In preserving a historic building, for instance, students may have to incorporate energy efficiency strategies while at the same time incorporating into contemporary construction the historic building practices and materials.

Besides collaborating with existing CDes programs, such as the Center for Sustainable Building Research (CSBR), CWHS and the M.S. program are "well-positioned within the context of a major research university to forge alliances with a variety of other fields and departments, from tourism studies and anthropology to art history, geography, and cultural studies, as we continue to build a distinctive program," Solomonson added.

The college’s heritage-conservation initiatives present enticing opportunities for visiting scholars and research fellows, learning-abroad options for students, and resource-rich collaborations with international heritage-conservation organizations in addition to UNESCO.

**CENTER FOR WORLD HERITAGE STUDIES**

“The best way to be known internationally as a leader in a new discipline is through international work,” said Arthur Chen, CWHS director and associate professor of architecture. As an adviser to the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO, Chen has already guided students in major international collaborations. Before initiating such projects, Chen and his colleagues assess the skills, knowledge, and technology they can bring to a country and its heritage project.

In 2006 and 2007, in partnership with the Azerbaijan University of Architecture and Construction, CWHS faculty and students conducted a UNESCO inventory of Icherni Sheher—the walled inner city of Baku, an endangered World Heritage Site. The team surveyed more than 500 landmark and vernacular structures built between the 7th century (when Baku was prominent on the Silk Road trade routes and a Caspian Sea port) and the present. The fieldwork was compiled into a catalog and database that has strengthened Icherni Sheher’s value as a World Heritage Site and contributed toward its protection.

In 2007, Chen and Lance Neckar, head of the Department of Landscape Architecture, advised China’s State Administration of Cultural Heritage and the Xi’an Municipal Government on a plan to open the Tang Dynasty Daming Palace to archaeological investigation while making the site the centerpiece of a new urban park. CWHS faculty and students will help Chinese authorities review proposals for the site and the adjacent landscape so urban development and cultural research both proceed in mutually beneficial, environmentally responsible ways.

This fall, Chen and Benjamin Ibarra-Sevilla, assistant professor of architecture and CWHS research fellow, completed the UNESCO nomination for the 11 Islands of Batanes Archipelago—the smallest and northernmost province of the Philippines—as a singular cultural landscape.

CWHS focused the nomination on the cultural and ecological value of traditional land-use patterns and practices in Batanes and how those customs shaped the islands’ cultural and natural landscapes.

“When we exercise heritage conservation effectively, we’re not only preserving tangible things like buildings, but we’re also preserving the intangibles, such as crafts, traditions, and customs people learned from their ancestors,” said Ibarra-Sevilla.

CWHS also addresses key issues of heritage conservation in the United States, including a new field evolving around the preservation of midcentury modernist architecture, design, and master plans. In 2007, Nancy Miller, CWHS associate director and adjunct assistant professor, and research fellow Carole Zellie completed the application for Cranbrook Educational Community, to be included in the tentative list of World Heritage Sites in the United States. Finnish-American architect Eliel Saarinen led the design team for Cranbrook, which is in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

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"I'd like to see CWHS continue to become a center for research in midcentury modernism," Miller said. A critical area of her research, Miller explained, focuses on authenticity: Because midcentury architects were creating new systems and aesthetics with novel materials, conservationists need to balance authentic materials with structural and aesthetic considerations, while considering greater operational efficiency using 21st-century sustainable technologies.

**M.S. IN ARCHITECTURE—HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION**

The M.S. degree program, directed by Miller, began this fall with five students. While students "receive training in methods and practices of historic preservation," Miller explained, the program also maximizes interdisciplinary learning opportunities in heritage conservation by encouraging students to "individually shape their course of study in the direction of their interest."

To complement their coursework in the School of Architecture, the program allows students to take courses in such departments as anthropology and geography and the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, and to pursue research and study opportunities throughout CDes. Students in the college's M.Arch. program interested in heritage conservation also have the opportunity to pursue a dual degree (M.S.-HCP and M.Arch.).

The M.S. degree program means that, for the first time, Minnesotans interested in pursuing a graduate degree in preservation do not have to move out of state. The closest programs were in Illinois or Indiana, or students could participate in an online program, explained Bonnie McDonald, executive director of the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, the statewide historic preservation organization. McDonald and the alliance view the new degree program as a vital step forward for preservation in the state.

"Prior to the creation of this program, our future leaders would relocate to programs far afield and remain in that area to begin their careers," McDonald said. "Minnesota was losing the innovators we need to ensure a strong future for preservation, particularly coordinating our work within the sustainability framework."

"We clearly see preservation as a sustainable practice," Miller said. "In the past year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has started promoting the idea that preserving buildings is often more efficient than tearing them down and replacing them with green or even LEED-certified buildings." CDes is developing a conference examining sustainability and heritage conservation for fall 2010.

**HERITAGE CONSERVATION AS A SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE**

The Center for Sustainable Building Research is a resource for the state, the design professions, the building industry, and the general public. Its newest initiative, said Virajita Singh, senior research fellow and adjunct assistant professor, is sustainable predesign assistance for communities, nonprofits, and local government organizations. One project is helping the Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership and the Depot Preservation Alliance, a citizen-based advocacy group, in the adaptive reuse of the historic Baudette Depot, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

"We address core sustainability issues in any project we take on," Singh explained. "With the depot, key issues are energy use, heat loss, and stabilization of an existing building. But more important are the funding and design options we're providing to them, given the building's social and cultural context, and the financial issues the community faces in reusing the building." Thus far, ideas include an artists' exhibition space and marketplace, a transportation-history exhibit, and rental space for incubator businesses.

"Throughout the College of Design, we're looking at heritage conservation and preservation in terms of technology, cultural sustainability, and sustainable development," said Kate Solomonson. "Every dimension of heritage conservation connects with preservation as a sustainable practice. This can range from retaining and responding effectively to our existing cultural landscapes and buildings to an understanding not just in terms of building technology and issues like embodied energy but also the way people live and what they value. Embodied energy refers to the types of energy needed to design and construct a building, from the creativity to the manufacturing and transportation of materials to the site to the energy used to build the building."

"We can't solve problems like climate change without looking at what we value and how we live, which connects to our existing cultural systems, buildings, landscapes, and decisions we make for the future," Solomonson continued. "Right now, the college is uniquely positioned to develop research and opportunities for students unlike anything else in the country."

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