

Review of *The Monumental Challenge of Preservation: The Past in a Volatile World*

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Abstract

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In recent months, the preservation of monuments in the United States, and particularly the conflict surrounding the preservation of Confederate monuments, have become a topic of conversation in the media and popular culture in a way that is somewhat rare for cultural heritage and preservation issues. Michele Valerie Cloonan's *The Monumental Challenge of Preservation: The Past in a Volatile World*, enters into, but also moves beyond this conversation, providing a complex, interdisciplinary, and international exploration of preservation concerns related to cultural heritage in a myriad of forms. Cloonan comes from a strong background in preservation within the context of libraries, having worked as a conservator, preservation librarian, special collections curator, and now as Professor in the School of Library and Information Science and Dean Emerita of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College. However, she also acknowledges that due to the wide scope of her book, she also discusses realms of preservation that she is not as familiar with, such as nature conservation. This book's value lies in its breadth—it moves beyond the technical aspects of preservation to grapple with larger questions: Why do we preserve? How does what we choose to preserve (or not) impact the past, present, and future? And how might we find new ways to address the challenges of preservation in the modern world?

The over-arching premise of the book is that preservation, both of man-made monuments and of the natural world, is a complex, multi-faceted issue that requires a more collaborative, interdisciplinary approach moving forward. The book is organized into six parts: Context, Cultural Genocide, Approaches to Preservation, Information or Object?, The Greening of Preservation, and Enduring, Ephemeral Preservation. The chapters in Part I focus on a variety of preservation case studies the author took part in during her early career, which explains her own professional context.

Part II focuses on the challenges of preserving cultural heritage during periods of genocide and ethnic

cleansing, using both the genocide of the Nazis and the Syrian Civil War as examples. Parts III-V focus on various types of preservation, with chapters on historic preservation, i.e. the preservation of built environments (buildings, districts, and neighborhoods); issues surrounding digital preservation: on the interaction between sustainability, nature conservation, and the preservation of man-made materials. In Part VI, the book ends with a retrospective chapter in which Cloonan looks back at her previous writing on preservation, as well as an Epilogue that analyzes the ways in which the city of Berlin embodies the idea of “monumental preservation” through its history and its approach to reconstruction and preservation in the wake of both World Wars, and the division between East and West Germany.

Cloonan’s conception of “monumental preservation” provides a through-line that ties together a range of preservation topics so broad that they might otherwise seem tangential. While the title of Cloonan’s book seems to indicate that the piece focuses on the preservation of monuments, the author explains that her word choice serves a dual purpose, which in turn determines the nature of the book and the breadth of topics covered within it. As Cloonan explains in her introduction, the use of “monumental” does refer in part to physical and digital monuments themselves, but it also refers to the enduring challenges of preservation, or as Cloonan conceives of it, “the aspect of preservation that is broader than the day-to-day practices of conservation and preservation” (p. 7). It is important to understand Cloonan’s intentional use of this term, because it sets up the broad scope of the topics she covers. At times this feels loosely related to the issue of preservation, were it not for this concept of “monumental preservation.”

Cloonan situates her book within the tradition of earlier works on cultural heritage, cultural memory, and preservation, such as Pierre Nora’s *Realms of Memory*, the theories of social and cultural memory developed by Aby Warburg and Maurice Halbwachs in the twentieth century, and more

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recently, within the context created by Max Page and Randall Mason's *Giving Preservation a History*. However, Cloonan's wider twenty first century focus expands upon those earlier works to include digital preservation and future potential partnerships between those who preserve cultural heritage and those who work in the field of natural conservation.

While there are many books in the field that function as handbooks for the technical aspects of preservation, there are far fewer that grapple with the ethical, financial, and political implications and challenges of preserving cultural heritage. Cloonan's discussion of preservation is also valuable for her realistic approach to the challenges inherent in preservation. As she points out in her chapter on historic preservation, preserving goes hand in hand with loss: "we would not need a notion of preservation if there were no forces in the world that make preservation desirable" (p. 108). Cloonan does not advocate that everything can or should be preserved, nor does she indicate how various forms of preservation should be performed, rather, she opens the door to further discussion about the many factors at play when it comes to the challenges of preservation.

In *The Monumental Challenge of Preservation*, Michele Valerie Cloonan provides a valuable interdisciplinary exploration of the cultural, economic, ethical, political, social, historical, and technological factors of preservation using case studies and examples from around the world and across time. Rather than providing directions for the preservation of cultural heritage, Cloonan sparks discussions that should be ongoing in all fields that take on the challenges of preservation in its many forms. One of the aims of the book is to foster a more collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to preservation. By providing such a breadth of examples related to preservation of cultural heritage in both its natural and man-made forms, *The Monumental Challenge of Preservation* has the potential to serve as an important resource not only to archivists and librarians, but to all those studying or working in the fields of preservation and cultural heritage.