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## When marginal counterculture becomes accepted mainstream: Preservation and counterculture(s) heritage of the past

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## When marginal counterculture becomes accepted mainstream: Preservation and counterculture(s) heritage of the past

### Abstract

In recent years there has been an emerging phenomenon of places and things associated with counterculture becoming a central focus of the heritage preservation field, which in a manner of speaking, is an indicator that the places, tangible objects, and intangible traditions of counterculture gradually shifts in acceptance from being the margins to the center of cultural heritage values. Examples include the Haight-Ashbury Neighbourhood in San Francisco, California that was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 2011; and Bob Dylan being awarded the Noble Prize for Literature “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” in 2016. Are there underlying themes and reasons for this growing interest in preserving heritage that at one time was considered marginal to mainstream culture in what is a very mainstream expression of heritage conservation practice? Additionally, how does the phenomenon of “counterculture” and “countercultures” preservation compare in North America to other parts of the world? The objective of this study is to contextualize how and what ways society reflects and refracts on “counterculture” and through the practice of heritage preservation.

### Keywords

Heritage Preservation, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Conservation

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# **When Marginal Counterculture Becomes Accepted Mainstream: Preservation and Counterculture(s) Heritage of the Past**

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In recent years there has been an emerging phenomenon of places and things associated with Counterculture<sup>1</sup> as a central focus of the heritage preservation field, which in a manner of speaking, is an indicator that the places, tangible objects, and intangible traditions of this heritage had gradually shifted in acceptance from being at the margins to the center of cultural heritage values. Within this study I will cover the emergence and current state of the preservation of Counterculture-related heritage. By understanding how the preservation-interest of Counterculture heritage came about we can better comprehend what the Counterculture past means to those who identify with the mainstream present. Appreciating this relationship is important regarding what may become of Counterculture-associated material culture and intangible traditions for future planning and management purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> “Counterculture” within this article refers to the set of dissenting attitudes from the prevailing social norm of Western society, as well as way of life, that emerged as a cultural expression during the 1960s.

According to sociologist Bennett M. Berger, a counterculture specialist, “[w]hen deviance from the mainstream becomes widespread it makes the main channel of the stream harder to locate, and it is, of course, no longer very ‘deviant,’ even when it evokes strong opposition. Rather, it becomes an arena of legitimate disagreement or conflict” (Berger 1981, xv). While many of the objectives of classical 1960s Counterculture have been accepted as a legitimate part of political discourse since the mid-1970s (anti-war passivism, rejection of materialism, racial and gender equality, etc.), the proactive memorialization preservation of the historic sites, material culture, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a relatively recent phenomenon. In a manner of speaking, the preservation activities of Counterculture heritage are an official indicator reflecting Berger’s observations that it has now become an accepted part of nostalgic commemoration of the past. A high watermark for this came in 2016 when Bob Dylan was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature in 2016 “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition”, which had a far-reaching international influence (The Nobel Prize 2016). Ironically, ICH preservation has ideological roots in 1960s Counterculture rhetoric, as a counterculture to the traditional conservation of the historic built environment conducted by those of the AHD. ICH has since become mainstream and according to Chandra Reedy “it is already having a major impact, globally” (Reedy 2008). The history of ICH within heritage preservation practice as a counterculture to AHD is outside the focus of this study, however. Recent trends in heritage preservation critical thinking have focused on environmental and social issues that many communities are experiencing, such as climate change, socio-environmental justice, population growth, economic vitality, and quality of life. But the way these issues are being addressed is not always countercultural. Indeed, the interest in the preservation of 1960s era Counterculture is very much within the discourse of the mainstream.

## **Origins of Heritage Preservation and Counterculture**

Since the 1980s, a centralized discourse has emerged on non-traditional heritage studies and its associated preservation, frequently called critical heritage studies (CHS). This discourse responded to more than a century's worth of western emphasis on the conservation of mainstream architectural monuments and archaeological sites. Until this time architects, archaeologists, and architectural historians had dominated preservation practice, and were the establishment behind what the CHS has defined as the authorized heritage discourse (AHD). Now others, including geographers, sociologists, landscape architects, and academics of related fields in the social sciences and humanities were advocating that cultural heritage comprised of more than just buildings. There were cultures and societies that did not make enduring monuments or structures, and their landscapes, material culture, and ICH were just as relevant to document for perpetuity. CHS practitioners wanted to devise means for the continued survival of non-western culture so that they would not become lost by existential threats from globalization processes, displacement by gentrification, or assimilation by larger host societies (Smith 2012). This is significant to the preservation of Counterculture-related heritage considering that much of it is rooted in musical, literary, and artistic expressions instead of the permanent built environment of conventional cities and neighbourhoods (though pre-existing places might be adapted or changed by those of Counterculture to meet their needs). There was also great concern about potential harm of the disneyfication of minority heritage groups by CHS, which is relevant to the small number of Counterculture sites.

In 2010, Thordis Arrhenius conducted explorations of Counterculture preservation studies in 1970s Sweden, particularly in the interpretation of intriguing struggle over plans for renewal of Kungsträdgården in Stockholm, but this appears to be an exception (Arrhenius 2010). The reasons for the growing Counterculture preservation-interest is likely to what David Lowenthal articulates as

nostalgic curiosity, that are only recently reaching a threshold to advocate for a preservation of the Counterculture past. Lowenthal reflects on “[t]imes beyond our ken can be as nostalgically comforting as times actually experienced. Few who flock to... or throw 1960s parties are old enough to recall them” (Lowenthal 2015, 39). This resonates considering that there are now many within the heritage field, including the author, who were born many years after this period of significance but who nevertheless are interested in Counterculture. Therefore, there is a demographic among those who came about after the 1960s who perceive the celebration of Counterculture as a subpart of popular culture. Re-enacting 1960s Counterculture and its milestones has some similarities to the way various groups observe other historical events, such as at battlefield commemorative events or outdoor museums like Fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia or Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. Various re-enactments of the Woodstock Musical Festival – both at the original location and elsewhere – have taken place on numerous anniversary occasions, including 1979, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2009, and 2019 (Perone 2005, Newman 2014). There is no reason to doubt that Woodstock Music Festival observances are likely to occur again in the future, more than half a century after the original event. Commemoration of events through re-enactment enables people who were unable to attend a precise historic moment to connect with it through a diversity of senses and memory making, even generations after the original occurrence.

Cornelius Holtorf describes “that in popular culture, heritage is often not valued for its literal content, that is, the specific information it contains about the past, but for its metaphorical content, that is, the topics and notion it alludes to and evokes among people who encounter in their lives” (2010, 43). Indeed, this is precisely what the Woodstock Festival Location in upstate New York represents for the multitudes of people who did not participate in this quintessential Counterculture event. Countercultural historian Klaus P. Fischer even explicitly states that “[a]s a metaphor, Woodstock, of

course stood not for a place but for a state of mind, perhaps even a new millennial age – the Age of Aquarius” (Fischer 2003, 303). Rodney Harrison emphasizes “that heritage actually has very little to do with the past, but instead emerges out of the relationship between past and present as a reflection of the future” (2013, 228). Hence, places like San Francisco’s Haight and Ashbury Street since the 1980s, Woodstock, New York, and Abbey Road in London have become contemporary tourist attractions (Lindsey 1987; Kiligannon 2015; Atkinson 2015).



Figure 1: The Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood in San Francisco, California; a major tourist attraction that has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 2011. Source: The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

Neil A. Silberman has found that “[i]n our mediated, consumption-oriented era, sites of heritage have all too often become themed places of entertainment, with nostalgia as their chief commodity” (2013, 29). Today, Haight and Ashbury Street is thoroughly commercialized and among the various establishments within this San Francisco neighbourhood are hippie-themed souvenir shops (Lescure 2017). So, studying the preservation and documentation activities of Counterculture associated sites, ICH, and artefacts makes for an intriguing opportunity of gauging learning assessing the broadly-defined heritage field because it reflects that the act of working with heritage is a creation of culture, and not separate from it.

### **Heritage Preservation Activities Related to Counterculture**

The push for expanded heritage studies of preservation practice began in the 1980s. The early milestones included Lowenthal’s *The Past is a Foreign Country* in 1985 and Howard’s founding of the *Journal of International Heritage Studies* in 1994, UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001, and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, which as of 2018 has been ratified by approximately 175 national governments (UNESCO 2003). This Convention created the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices as alternatives for ICH, which did not mesh with UNESCO’s World Heritage List of cultural and natural sites, created by the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

In preparation for this paper all four UNESCO lists were searched for “Counterculture” and related terms (“hippie”), which produced no results. So, searches were then conducted on various national-

level heritage registries where Counterculture is known to have occurred, including Australia, France, Ireland, Jamaica, New Zealand, and South Africa. Results were only encountered for Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This isn't to say that Counterculture has not been documented or studied, but that at the central repositories of heritage inventorying Counterculture is not appearing as the focus within the statement of significance abstract. There are likely multiple reasons for the search results. One is that those of the counterculture may not feel the need to contribute their work to the mainstream repositories due to differences in ideology. Another is that the Age Value for Counterculture – how people appreciate the antiquity of something – has not yet approached a broad enough level in the public. Regarding terminological and interpretations issues is Pasaquan, which has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 2008. Historian Keith S. Hebert places Pasaquan, the home and studio of artist Eddie Owens Martin in Marion County, Georgia, as part of the Counterculture in passing (Hebert 2014). However, within the actual National Register nomination document Martin is identified as an “outsider artist” who produced “Visionary art” (Lupold 2008). The term “Counterculture” does not appear. While the Visionary art movement can be considered counterculture art and was influenced by 1960s Counterculture, it was not beholden to it (Szulakowska 2017). Like the Visionary art movement, Martin began, partook, and continued his career (1957-86) before, during, and after 1960s Counterculture and was not exclusive to it. Therefore, there are places like Pasaquan that have Counterculture associations but transcend what we are specifically searching for, which are that of a Counterculture patrimony. Counterculture was, of course, influenced by other social movements and also had its own impact on movements that were contemporary and post-dated it. In these instances, places like Pasaquan, associated material objects, and traditions illustrate the fluidity of heritage and that not everything (or everyone) has a singular cultural identity.

The preservation of Counterculture places of significance from the 1960s has been largely ignored, and what has been accomplished has been relatively recent. This should not be confused with the presence of hippies and other members of counterculture groups residing in a historic place where the cultural significance is of something else – this is very common. The most significant example of this is perhaps Liverpool, England. In 2004, the Maritime Mercantile City was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List because it was “one of the world’s major trading centres in the 18th and 19th centuries” (UNESCO 2018) *not* because of The Beatles, even though the museum about the band located in the historic district draws throngs of tourists.

The earliest identified listed preservation effort related to Counterculture is 56 Powell Street in Vancouver, British Columbia placed on the Canadian Register of Historic Places in 2003. Fifty-six Powell Street lies within Vancouver’s Gastown historic district, an important old neighbourhood that consists of many late nineteenth-century commercial and residential buildings. Specific to 56 Powell Street, in addition to its architectural contributions to the district, was that:

here in the late 1960s and 1970s of the *Georgia Straight* newspaper. A key institution of Vancouver’s vibrant youth counter culture, the ‘Straight’ was constantly in trouble with ‘authorities’, who viewed it as a threat to civilization. Within the counter culture, the Straight also had its critics.... These actions all reflect the social unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was a feature of life in Vancouver and many other parts of the world (City of Vancouver Heritage Conservation Program 2003).

No media commentary or coverage could be found on the historic designation of 56 Powell Street, not even in the contemporary *Georgia Straight* newspaper (2018). The study and recognition of 56 Powell Street appears to have been a procedural assignment by an unnamed staff person at the City of Vancouver Heritage Conservation Program, who worked within the AHD. The recognition of 56

Powell Street occurred in the same year that the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was created, though presently the Canadian government is not a signatory state. According to folklore scholar Gerald L. Pocius, “provincial governments and NGOs across Canada have been more involved with ICH, and it is here that the most recent initiatives are occurring” (2014, np).

Several years after 56 Powell Street was listed on the Canadian Register of Historic Places as part of a district, the Abbey Road zebra crossing and Abbey Road studios in London were given a Grade II listing (the second highest recognition) by English Heritage in 2010 due its national significance. However, Roger Bowdler, the head of designation at the organization, commented, “although a modest structure, the crossing has international renown and continues to possess huge cultural pull” (2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-12059385>). In contrast to 56 Powell Street, the heritage designation of Abbey Road zebra crossing and Abbey Road studios attracted national as well as international attention, with coverage in the *BBC News*, *The Associated Press* (2010), *The Seattle Times* (2010), and *The San Diego Union-Tribune* (2010). English Heritage has also listed the childhood homes of John Lennon and Paul McCartney in Liverpool as historic and has developed historic house museums furnished with the period-appropriate material culture of the music artists. Conversely, the period of significance of the Lennon and McCartney homes is of the 1940s and 1950s, before The Beatles became figureheads of Counterculture (McKinley 2012). Like Canada, the United Kingdom also has not ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

A year after the designation of London’s Abbey Road zebra crossing and Abbey Road studios in London was the listing of the Richard P. Doolan Residence and Storefronts in San Francisco, United States. These historic property designations in 2011 also coincided with the creation of the ACHS. The Doolan Residence and Storefronts is the official name for this property, which is more popularly

known as the northwest corner of Haight and Ashbury Street. It was this intersection and surrounding neighbourhood that was “directly associated with the “Hippie Movement” in America...” (Marsh 2008, 1). According to the “exceptional statement of significance,” since the historic events associated with these events occurred within fifty years of the time of the nomination, “[p]olitical and social changes that occurred during this period in this neighborhood profoundly changed our culture and American society making this site one of exceptional significance” (Marsh 2008, 1). The Doolan Residence and Storefronts are actually given two separate periods of significance, similar to 56 Powell Street in Vancouver. The first is an earlier period from 1903 to 1907, associated with San Francisco’s architectural development shortly before and after the city’s earthquake of 1906. The second, associated with events and “persons of historical and artistic significance and to the Haight-Ashbury’s role as the epicenter of the counterculture in the late 1960s” (Marsh 2008, 6). The Doolan Residence and Storefronts had also been a subject of historical interest by the City of San Francisco since 2006. A private consultant, Vincent Marsh, conducted the nomination of the Doolan Residence and Storefronts/northwest corner of Haight and Ashbury Street to the National Register of Historic Places. In contrast to the Abbey Road zebra crossing the Doolan Residence and Storefronts/northwest corner of Haight and Ashbury Street did not receive as much media attention. The local newspapers *Hoodline* and *San Francisco Chronicle* were the only ones found to have covered this story (Stephenson 2016; “Haight-Ashbury to be designated as SF landmark district” 2016).

The most recent place to be recognized by a heritage designation listing is the Woodstock Music Festival Site in Sullivan County, New York, which occurred in 2017 for the events that took place there between August 15 and August 18, 1969. Excerpted from the summary statement of significance, “The Woodstock Music Festival Site is nationally significant in social history as the site of one of the most important cultural and social events of the second half of the twentieth century. The three-day

music and art festival, which took place on 600 acres of rolling farmland in rural Sullivan County, was the seminal expression of the musical, cultural and political idealism of the 1960s and embodied the ethos of the post-world World War II generation” (LaFrank 2016, 19). For approximately three pages more is the lengthily descriptive statement of significance on the importance of Woodstock to 1960s Counterculture within the National Register of Historic Places nomination. Of all the properties associated with Counterculture the Woodstock Music Festival Site presently have the most quantifiable analysis devoted to the subject, which was authored by a practitioner of the AHD, Kathleen LaFrank of the New York State Historic Preservation Office. However, Woodstock contrasts differently from 56 Powell Street, the Abbey Road zebra crossing, and Haight and Ashbury Street in that it is a vernacular landscape and not a building or place-specific site.

The addition of the Woodstock Music Festival Site to the National Register of Historic Places received broad media attention, which included *USA Today*, the *Associated Press*, *National Public Radio*, and *Rolling Stone* magazine (Reed 2017; Associated Press 2017). The media coverage of Woodstock’s National Register of Historic Places listing was more substantial because it was a historical event that many Americans are aware of. Andrew Flanagan of *National Public Radio* observed that

on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Summer of Love, the confluence of the hippie movement [on Haight and Ashbury streets] in San Francisco which cemented the countercultural wave in the minds of more mainstream observers that took place two years prior to Woodstock (Flanagan 2017).

Flanagan’s observation is likely why the listing of the Woodstock Music Festival Site to the National Register of Historic Places received far more attention than the Doolan Residence and Storefronts/northwest corner of Haight and Ashbury Street.

Like Canada and the United Kingdom, the United States has not ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Nonetheless, a number of non-government organizations and the Smithsonian Institution, which serves as the national museum of the United States, are involved in the study, documentation, and preservation of ICH. Within the Smithsonian these activities are largely conducted through the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (“Intangible Cultural Heritage” 2018). Among the projects that the Center has completed is the “Worlds of Sound™: The Ballad of Folkways”, in association with Spark Media. Completed in 2010, the documentary by Folkways producer Richard Carlin and others, “takes viewers through the Folkways story, from the passion of founder Moses Asch to the New York Jazz scene in the 1940s, to the 60s counter-culture and its folk heroes” (Smithsonian Channel 2010) and was the recipient of several documentary and artistic film festival awards. No mainstream media coverage of this documentary could be found, but it is the one identifiable instance of a CHS approach to preservation that took an interest in a topic related to 1960s Counterculture.

Taken all together, we have an intriguing situation where the most frequently found activities related to the preservation of Counterculture-related heritage occurs in those countries that do not participate in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which came about from those that had been exposed to Counterculture to create a counterculture within heritage preservation. Within Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, activities related to ICH continue to remain counterculture to mainstream preservation practice, though there is interest primarily among academics. For instance, as of this writing, seven of the fifteen members of the Executive Committee of the Association for Critical Heritage Studies come from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom (“Executive Committee” 2017). The other represented countries on the Executive Committee are Australia, China, Sweden, and Zambia. It is among the 175

other countries – the signatories to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage – where ICH preservation has become mainstream (Australia has not ratified this Convention either) (UNESCO 2003).

One country that has managed to successfully balance the tangible heritage of sites with ICH has been Jamaica. In 2008, the Maroon cultural heritage of Moore Town was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2008). The region that Moore Town is located in, the Blue and John Crow Mountains, was subsequently added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2015 as a mixed cultural-natural site due to the Maroon culture there that inhabits a highly biodiverse environment (UNESCO 2015). Of interest to those in 1960s Counterculture heritage is that Jamaica's reggae music was added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2018 ("Reggae music of Jamaica" 2018). Thus, there is emerging interest by ICH practitioners in the Counterculture past, but this is occurring outside of Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Jamaica is also becoming an exception outside of the North American-European milieu to take an interest in preserving some aspects of its 1960s Counterculture past.

## **Conclusion**

56 Powell Street in Vancouver, Canada; Abbey Road zebra crossing and studios in London, United Kingdom; Haight and Ashbury Streets in San Francisco and the Woodstock Music Festival Site in New York, United States have, ironically been the primary interest of traditional preservation practitioners. The heritage recognition of 56 Powell Street is a unique circumstance for its significance is that at the local level, in contrast to the sites in the United Kingdom and United States having

national and international acclaim. This reflects that 1960s Counterculture can be accepted as mainstream at different rates of progression, and that authorities in some localities like Vancouver, Canada can be more open to values counter ideas within public society and associated nostalgic reflection. The preservation of 1960s Counterculture heritage has also thus far primarily taken place within the traditional paradigm of preserving the historic built environment. ICH practice has not yet taken much of a formal role in the preservation, documentation, or future perpetuation of the 1960s Counterculture experience, though there have been numerous informal revivals re-enactments of associated music festivals and clothing styles. As the Age Value of the 1960s Counterculture era continues to appreciate, the manner in which we approach, think, and conduct our relationship with this past heritage will continue to sway between progressive and conservative perspectives well into the future.

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