

Welcome to *Identifying, Celebrating and Preserving African American Landmarks*. I am Clement Price and it is my great pleasure to serve as session moderator.

The topic of this session is enormously important to me because I am at once a student of African American urban history, a product of the African American urban experience, and a historic preservationist.

Let me start off with the obvious. Historic preservation in the United States, as a movement, as a profession, a practice, and as public policy, has changed in some remarkable ways over the past few decades. What was once a not terribly subtle attempt to sentimentalize the past through amnesia, cultural prioritization, and a blatant indifference to the larger story of American places, is now something else.

Following the path blazed years ago by the so-called new social history, historic preservation has evolved into a more complicated and intellectually challenging movement that brings more citizens into the work of remembering, sustaining and reinterpreting the past.

We now also seek to make preservation more responsive to what is known about how America became America—the struggles over how race,

gender, class, and memory have played out on American soil and how a democracy must be willing to get the story, or stories, as right as possible.

Getting the story right involves rehabilitating American historical sensibilities, especially the scholarship that ultimately shapes what we come to know about the past and its complexities. Over the last forty years or so, profound changes in what historians have said about our history changed the American narrative found in words, revealed on film, spoken of at conferences and taught in American classrooms.

The two historic organizations with which I am affiliated, the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, see this session as terribly important to the future of the historic preservation movement in the United States.

So, let's get started.

In 1968, the *Journal of American History* published an enormously persuasive, though controversial, article by one of the leading urban historians of that period, the late Gilbert Osofsky. Professor Osofsky's most important book, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, had appeared a few years earlier, in 1966. It was essential reading for those interested in the black experience in the nation's most important city. And so was his journal article, titled "The Enduring Ghetto." In it Osofsky argued that the black American urban

i

experience had been a consistently marked by two centuries of what he called “an unending and tragic sameness.” Drawing upon the scholarship of DuBois, Robert C. Weaver, Ira DeAustine Reid, Charles Wesley, Kenneth Clark, and the 19th century observations of black life in New York City by Charles Dickens, Osofsky claimed that studies on black urban life “have droned on, but the conditions have endured.”

As persuasive as Osofsky’s argument appeared to be at the time, historians challenged the premise of an enduring, never changing, stagnate black community. Despite intergenerational poverty, the starker side of racial segregation and the permanence of racism in virtually every facet of public life, historians found considerable evidence that blacks carved out a world within a world.

That world within a world was in part institutional, aspirational and remarkable sturdy during much of the last century. It was also marked a built environment of structures, places and spaces that more than three generations of black Americans held dear and protected after the end of slavery.

Our panel this afternoon is more than capable of addressing the topic, *Identifying, Celebrating and Preserving African American Landmarks*. Our panelist will present at a time when such an objective is enormously important to the future of historic preservation in legacy cities.

Our presenters are:

Natoya Walker Minor, City of Cleveland and the Cleveland Restoration Society Legacy Task Force

Michael Fleenor, from the Cleveland Restoration Society.

Susan Hall, from the Western Reserve Historical Society

Debra Wilson from the Fairfax Renaissance Development Corporation.