

THESIS: The Architecture of Erasure: Revisiting the Site of the MOVE Bombing through a Genre Criticism of the National Register of Historic Places

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ABSTRACT:

The historic preservation ethic can be understood as two sentiments in support of one ideology. First, history in its traditional iteration of narrating and recounting of past events should be protected from human oblivion. Second, certain histories are referenced by and within certain physical places, objects, and locations – and vice versa. Therefore, to preserve those physical places, objects, and locations is to preserve the histories that they signify or embody. This ethic was established into American law by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA). This law provided lawful guidelines for the preservation of historic sites, primarily by creating the State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) and the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

Nineteen years after the passing of NHPA, in an incident seemingly unrelated to historic preservation, the City of Philadelphia’s police department dropped two C4 bombs on 6221 Osage Avenue, the home and headquarters of the Philadelphia-based Black liberation group MOVE (which is not an acronym). After the bombing literally ignited the entire Cobbs Creek neighborhood ablaze, Mayor Wilson Good staved off fire department intervention and ordered emergency responder to “let the fire burn.” By the next morning, approximately sixty-one homes were burned to the ground, eleven MOVE members were found dead, including five children, and more than 250 people were left homeless (Assefa and Wahrhaftig, 1988).

Thirty-one years after the bombing, even with the reconstruction of the entire Cobbs Creek neighborhood, there is no formal physical reference to the historic event at the site via of a memorial or plaque. Considering the recent passing of the 50th anniversary of the NHPA and the 30th anniversary of the MOVE bombing, I intend to investigate present-day interaction between the preservation law and the historic event (or lack thereof) as a rhetorical situation. Specifically, I establish “historic places on the National Register” as a rhetorical genre, then I examine the site of the MOVE bombing as an example of this genre, before finally discussing the implications relevant to historic preservation as an ethic and profession and the intersection between race, place, and public memory. In doing so, I intend to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the National Register limit or expand the public’s understanding of racialized violence and marginalized histories?

RQ2: How can the National Register of Historic Places help or hinder understanding of the MOVE site?

In the spirit of reflexivity, I acknowledge that this thesis is itself a rhetorical act. Through this genre criticism, I do not necessarily argue that the site of the MOVE bombing must be recognized by the NRHP. Instead, I assert that the current preservation ethic privileges cultures and histories that have physical references. To ignore this evidence is to be subservient to White dominance in place-making and history-telling.