

Stephen Hartley

***Maintaining a Complex Building Culture:
The Precarious State of Heritage Crafts in
the United States***

***Mantener una cultura de edificación
compleja: La precariedad de los oficios
tradicionales en Estados Unidos***

***Preservação de uma cultura de construção
complexa: O estado precário do
patrimônio artesanal nos Estados Unidos***

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

This article examines the current shortage of heritage craft workers in the United States and how the nation has reached the current situation of crisis. It considers the complexity of America's building tradition and the role that immigration has played in the shaping of its built heritage. Through those immigrant traditions, it studies the desire for assimilation into American life through successive generations transitioning away from building craft. It concludes by exploring the current issues facing the heritage craft industries, the initiatives being undertaken to address these concerns, and the need to expand such practices.

En este artículo se examina la escasez de artesanos en Estados Unidos y cómo ha llegado el país a la actual situación de crisis. Asimismo, se considera la complejidad de la tradición constructiva en América y el papel que la inmigración ha desempeñado en dar forma al patrimonio edificado. A través de las tradiciones de los inmigrantes, se estudia el deseo de asimilación a la vida americana de las sucesivas generaciones que van abandonando el oficio de la construcción. El artículo concluye con el análisis de los actuales problemas a los que se enfrenta el sector de los oficios tradicionales, las iniciativas que se han emprendido para responder a estos retos y la necesidad de ampliar dichas prácticas.

Este artigo analisa a atual escassez de trabalhadores do artesanato patrimonial nos Estados Unidos e a forma como a nação chegou à atual situação de crise. Examina a complexidade da tradição construtiva da América e o papel que a imigração desempenhou na definição do seu patrimônio construído. Através dessas tradições imigrantes, estuda o desejo de assimilação na vida Americana através de sucessivas gerações que se distanciaram dos ofícios da construção. Conclui explorando as questões atuais com que se confrontam as indústrias ligadas ao patrimônio artesanal, as iniciativas que estão a ser realizadas para responder a essas preocupações e a necessidade de expandir essas práticas.

The United States, like other countries around the world, is currently undergoing a labor crisis. Few industries are experiencing a greater shortfall than construction and its supporting businesses, leading to higher building costs and a loss of affordability in the built environment. Within these industries, the heritage craft sector is suffering from an acute shortage of workers, and there are few places to receive training in these skills. Indeed, a recent groundbreaking study by PlaceEconomics, commissioned by Preservation Maryland and the National Park Service, reports that the rehabilitation of historic properties contributes 85 billion USD annually to the economy, creating 165,000 new jobs every year, 60% (99,000) of which require training in conservation trades (PlaceEconomics 2022).

Yet even with these reported shortcomings, there are just four schools in all the United States offering certificates or degrees at the associate level, and only one that offers a degree at the bachelor level, producing in total less than 150 graduates per year. Any remaining training opportunities are within interest engagement offerings which range in length from one day to a few months and offer no recognized certifications upon completion. The current situation facing the heritage craft sector is not new, with the National Park Service noting in its 1967 White Hill Report that a concerted effort to establish pipelines to replace craft practitioners that were aging out of the industry needed to be established, but the heritage industry has done little to address this, leading to the current crisis in the workforce, which places all of the U.S.'s built heritage at risk. The economic impacts of the heritage industry have long been proven, so how did we allow this crucial subset to be ignored for so long, and what can we do to remedy this? This essay will examine the historical makeup of the craft industry in the U.S. and offer solutions for developing a sustainable labor force.

In global terms, the U.S. building stock is relatively young. The country possesses few sites comparable in age to those of Europe or Asia, and most of these, such as the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings (1150-1300 CE) in Colorado and the Cahokia Mounds (1050-1350 CE) in Illinois, are treated as archeological sites due to their Pre-Columbian origin. Most of the U.S.'s historic building stock is from the 17th to 20th centuries, chiefly the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The complexity of the nation's historic fabric exists not in its age but in the building traditions which were brought to the country by the numerous waves of immigrants which populated the country. From English settlers in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states to Spanish settlers along the Gulf Coast and the Southwest, to smaller groups such as the Dutch in the Hudson Valley of New York, each community adapted their traditions to the building materials and climate of the New World. Later immigrant groups, primarily from the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, created unique cultural landscapes in both the open lands of the west and the rapidly expanding population



Anti-Italian immigration cartoon published in Judge Magazine, 1903



Jean Hasbrouck House, New Paltz, New York (ca. 1721). Example of Dutch stone house construction in the Hudson valley (Ian Stewart)

centers of the east coast. Because of this, there is no singular American building tradition but rather a complex amalgamation of building cultures forming a diverse tapestry of architectural heritage such as is found in few other countries. While this cultural and architectural melting pot has proven to be fertile ground for the study of architectural history, it creates challenges in the training of heritage craft workers.

A key factor in the growth of the United States has been immigration – although xenophobia has restricted the entrance of migrants over the years, beginning with the Scots-Irish in the mid-19th century, continuing through exclusionary policies for Chinese immigrants in the late 19th, and recurring today with the current debates regarding immigrants from Central and South America. The “push/pull” factors drawing these groups from their homelands, such as the promise

1: Masons at work in Highlands, New Jersey, 1935 (Library of Congress)

2: The shoemaker and his apprentice by Emile Adan (1839-1937)





Belmont College student practicing repointing (David Mertz)

of inexpensive land and better economic conditions along with social and political upheaval in their countries of origin, brought waves of workers with skills in various trades who contributed to the making of the nation's built environment. Italian stonemasons from the Cervo Valley of northern Italy, for example, were often quarrymen and stone carvers for the granite industries of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine between 1870 and 1910. Immigration to these industries in North America became so popular that a school was set up in the village of Valle Cervo to train stoneworkers before their departure (Audenino 1986). While many of these workers returned to Italy after the collapse of the granite industry, additional waves of immigrants from the region found more permanent employment as contractors around Philadelphia and in the mountains of West Virginia. These immigrant workers would be viewed by their native counterparts with distrust, as they often worked for lower wages and commonly served as strikebreakers in labor disputes. This pattern of immigration of semi-skilled and skilled workers to the U.S. for both temporary work and permanent settlement continues to this day, as do the tensions with the existing workforce.

The construction industry, along with food service and domestic work, have often been viewed by new arrivals as gateways to the "American dream", and both census and labor records have historically reflected this. Numerous studies on the historical and sociological patterns of various ethnic groups have demonstrated that as these cultural groups are assimilated into American society, second and third generations are often dissuaded from entering those industries, instead being encouraged to engage in more "professional" pursuits, which require advanced study at the university level, according to their parents' or grandparents' concept of success in their new homelands. The construction trades are therefore left to the successive waves of ethnic groups, with longer-established cultural groups often joining the nativist positions regarding newcomers.

All of this leads to some significant barriers to the training of heritage craft workers. Perhaps the most pressing issue in training such workers is that in the U.S. there was never a need or desire to establish a national training framework. Bernard Elbaum, in his study of apprenticeships in Great Britain and the United States, argued that the constant influx of immigrants from Europe with skills in the building trades meant that the establishment of formal apprenticeship systems such as City and Guilds (now NVQ) in the U.K. or Compagnons du Devoir in France was never a necessity, and therefore never initiated (Elbaum 1989). While many both within the industry and in society espouse the need to return to the "old system of apprenticeship", this desire is based more

on a romanticized vision of the history of construction than on the realities of the country's past experiences. Often in the U.S. the term “apprentice” is used when anyone takes on a trainee without an understanding that an apprenticeship system is formulated with specific rules and learning objectives, often occurring over multiple years and having numerous benchmarks that need to be met by both the apprentice and the trainer, none of which exists or has ever existed in the heritage craft fields. It is therefore an issue not of reestablishing a defunct system but of creating one from scratch.

Unfortunately, the framework of the construction industry does not support the development of this type of training. The “low-bid” method of contract procurement in the U.S. means that profit margins for construction companies are often slim, and training workers onsite is a significant expenditure, as it can slow down production and therefore reduce profit. Furthermore, apprenticeship frameworks elsewhere in the world are commonly supported by training levies, in which companies contribute to a general fund which supplements the costs of taking on apprentices onsite. No such system exists in the U.S. outside of the union system, which is not



American College of the Building Arts students repairing a plaster ceiling (American College of the Building Arts)



Clatsop Community College student installing western redcedar shakes (Clatsop Community College)

prevalent in all regions. The establishment of such a system would prove difficult, as companies would be reluctant to contribute their already limited funds to support training which they may not view as having a direct benefit on their operations. Finally, due to insurance liability issues, many companies hire their workers as “independent contractors” who technically do not work directly for the company, thereby allowing the employer to avoid insurance costs and to better compete in the low-bid process. Because of this, construction numbers, as regards both practitioners and wage rates, are historically underreported, further limiting any desire to develop such a national training framework.

As there is no national framework, there is no mechanism to verify the skills or training of workers in the field, and the industry is rife with untrained or undertrained workers, many of which are proficient in new-build construction techniques but have little to no experience in heritage structures, often acquiring such work through the low-bid method. This lack of verification of skills has placed historic building stock at considerable risk, with inappropriate repairs being prevalent, particularly in privately owned structures with no oversight from professionals in the field. Private buildings not on the National Register of Historic Places represent a significant percentage of heritage structures in the U.S. According to PlaceEconomics, of the U.S.'s 96 million total buildings, there are 1.9 million on the National Register, but an additional 467,000 in recognized historic districts not individually listed and another 1.9 to 3.8 million that are potentially eligible for nomination, most of them privately owned (PlaceEconomics 2022). While the number of historic structures in the U.S. currently represents only between 4 and 6 percent of the country's total building stock, its pecuniary impact is outsized for such a percentage, and the lack of verification of the skills of those tasked to restore or maintain it can be seen as having a greater indirect impact on the revitalization of neighborhoods and cities than on the individual structures themselves.

In addition to the lack of qualifications needed for heritage craft practitioners is the long-held perception in the U.S. that the pathway to success lies in a university education. As previously stated, as immigrant populations have been assimilated into American society, they have encouraged their children and grandchildren to attend college, even as well-paying jobs in the construction sector remain unfilled. Indeed, a common metric by which compulsory education systems are judged is their college placement rate, with those with a greater number of advanced placement or dual enrollment programs with local universities being more desirable. As schools have pivoted

Savannah Technical College student demonstrates plastering techniques to a local architect at a continuing education event



their focus toward college placement, they have often reduced or even shuttered their vocational programs, denying those interested in trades any exposure before leaving obligatory education. As more students are persuaded into a university education by their families and their schools, they are unintendedly denied the opportunity to explore craft careers. Currently there is only one high school, the Stephen T. Mather Building Arts and Craftsmanship High School in New York City, dedicated to training students to enter the heritage craft industry, enrolling approximately 400 students in grades 9 through 12.

While heritage craft jobs remain unfilled, the U.S. is experiencing a growing student loan debt crisis, with many taking out large loans to attend universities. As only 62% of those who begin higher education actually receive degrees (Pew 2022), it is apparent that many who have attended university would have been better served in alternative training programs, including in trades. Yet even with these numbers and the attention given to the student loan crisis, the general perception is that success is tied to higher education. There is anecdotal evidence that younger generations are questioning the value of continued education which does not lead directly to employment, and further, extended research should be undertaken to study the impact this changing perception has on heritage craft practice.

While the issues facing the heritage craft industry in the U.S. may seem insurmountable, there is a growing movement to introduce more interested parties to heritage crafts careers. Preservation Maryland, in conjunction with the National Park Service, has launched a *Campaign for Historic Trades*, commissioning studies on various aspects of the industry which need demonstrable data, including the 2022 PlaceEconomics Report. They are currently developing an open-source curriculum able to be adapted to suit the various building traditions found regionally, and launching a “train the trainer” program to assist practitioners who desire to pass on their knowledge and develop teaching abilities. Concurrently, the few programs which do exist in the country remain stable, with the only four-year program – at the American College of the Building Arts (ACBA) in Charleston, South Carolina – receiving accreditation status, giving their students access to federal funding to support their education and thereby eliminating a major barrier to enrollment. Since the award of accreditation status, ACBA has experienced exponential growth, and they are looking to expand their facilities to accommodate new entrants.

These initiatives represent the most concentrated effort ever made to address this long-ignored issue in the U.S. heritage industry. While they can be seen as steps forward, larger initiatives need to be originated to address this crisis. It is estimated that each year over the next decade there will



Savannah Technical College student practicing coping saw techniques

be more than 10,000 openings requiring heritage craft skills in the U.S. (PlaceEconomics 2022), with the programs available producing only some 150 qualified trainees. Additional short- and long-term interest engagement programs exist, but their graduate and placement numbers are not tracked, nor can all of their training practices be verified due to their transient nature. The programs and initiatives that do exist cannot reasonably be expected to address this shortcoming on their own, and a multifaceted approach must be initiated to confront this crisis. This must include a concentrated effort to educate parents and school officials about the career potential in the heritage crafts, a redefinition of how compulsory education evaluates success in its graduates, and a reintroduction of exposure to vocational training in schools. Additionally, industry must take a lead in formulating standards for training of workers, and clients must abandon the low-bid mentality, which would require them to see that they are merely stewards of their historic structures, and that saving a few dollars may cost them significantly more in the future.



Master plasterer Jeff Orton instructs Savannah Technical College students

These are not small initiatives, and will take years to accomplish, as they require multiple facets of the United States to reconfigure how they approach their business practices. The country did not find itself in this position overnight, and each component of the training and operational framework should acknowledge its past and current practices which have contributed to the industry's situation. Without a concerted effort to tackle these issues, the intangible craft heritage of the U.S. will remain in a precarious situation, and the future of its built tradition at significant risk.

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Biography | Biografia | Biografia

Stephen Hartley

Dr. Stephen Hartley is an Associate Professor of the Practice in the School of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame. Before teaching at the University of Notre Dame, he founded the Historic Preservation program at Savannah Technical College in Savannah, Georgia, the Building Arts program at Bryn Athyn College in Pennsylvania, and the Construction Management specialization at Williamson College of the Trades in Media, Pennsylvania. In addition to his work at the University of Notre Dame, he is the Principal of Heritage Craft Partners, a consulting firm which assists organizations throughout the world to establish craft training programs. He has received multiple awards for his work including the artisan award from the American Institute of Architects Savannah Chapter, and the Adler Award from the King-Tisdell Cottage Foundation for his work in preserving African-American sites in the Lowcountry of Georgia. Dr. Hartley holds a Bachelor's Degree in History from Coastal Carolina University, an MFA in Historic Preservation from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and a PhD from the University of York in Conservation Studies.