

Catherine Buell, Esq. Interview



Catherine Buell Background

Catherine Buell was named Chair of the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) in June 2010. She's been a member of HPRB since 2008, is a proud resident of Historic Anacostia, where she was instrumental in the successful implementation of the Historic Home Owners Grant program, administered by DC Historic Preservation Office. Catherine is an attorney at Patton Boggs LLC where she assists clients with real estate matters.

In addition to her HPRB responsibilities, Ms. Buell is on the board of trustees for the National Urban League as well the board of directors for both the Southwest Renaissance Development Corporation and the Levine School of Music. Given her commitment to community service, it's no wonder that the Washington Bar Association named her its Young Attorney of the Year in 2008.

Interview

Earlier this month, DCPL Board Member Stephen Houff, of Forrester Construction Company, and Ms Buell sat down in her office on the edge of Georgetown to discuss her new position, historic preservation in the District, and role that DCPL can continue to play in supporting preservation efforts city-wide.

Stephen Houff (SH)

Thank-you for taking the time to talk with me as I know my fellow DCPL members are keenly interested in learning more about you and your views on historic preservation. **Let me start by asking you what led you to be an advocate for historic preservation?**

Catherine Buell (CB)

Steve, I certainly appreciate this opportunity to talk with you, and by extension, the whole of the DCPL community. I welcome DCPL's continued support of all the preservation efforts that come out of the Historic Preservation Office. As one of the leading community voices for historic preservation in DC, DCPL has a critical role to play moving forward.

But, let me answer your question by giving you a bit more of my business background. I come from the revitalization world, which included Section 106 negotiations for clients of my firm, Patton Boggs. Preservation and revitalization was in my blood, so when it came time to move from Logan Circle's historic district, I wanted the challenge of renovating a historic home. Quickly narrowing my search to Historic Anacostia, I was pleased to find a home that was just what I wanted. And from almost from the day I moved in, I was swept up with the community activism that you find in Historic Anacostia. I know that many of DCPL's members have been across the river to experience all that there is to see in our historic district, and to those that have yet to see our buildings, please come and visit. You'll be amazed, like I was, at the rich traditions of the neighborhood.

One program that my neighbors and I quickly focused on was the Historic Home Owners Grant program. We'd heard about it from Congresswoman Norton's office, but we learned more about the program from David Maloney, the State Historic Preservation Officer. Moving fast, we successfully lobbied for Anacostia's historic district to be the pilot for the program. Complicated tax rulings by the District's Office of Tax and Revenue jeopardized the program as it was being rolled out. Working with DCPL, among other organizations, especially Andrew Potts who prepared a favorable tax opinion that supported HPO's efforts, the residents of Historic Anacostia and the HPO staff overcame early challenges to form a model for working with low and moderate income home owners in historic districts. We now have a large community of historic preservationists in Anacostia, ready to extol the benefits of being in an historic district.

From these early efforts and interactions with the HPO, HPRB, and DCPL, I became intrigued by the role historic districts play in any city's revitalization and began to pay more attention to HPRB. When Mayor Fenty sought to identify a resident of the Anacostia Historic District for a spot on the Board, I was pleased when several of my friends suggested to Board and Commissions that I be considered for the position. Luckily, the Mayor agreed with their suggestion and I was sworn in, as a Citizen member, by Mayor Fenty in 2008.

SH : Where do you see the field of historic preservation going in the next several years?

CB: Wow, how much time do I have to answer that question? Let me try to do so by addressing three points, relevancy, sustainability and cultural stewardship.

The past two years on the Board have been intense ones for me. Working with the folks in Historic Anacostia prepared me well for the challenges ahead. The field is rapidly changing from a static one, set in preserving the structures and dwellings in well established historic districts to the dynamic tensions we see in the discussions over the Barney Circle historic district nomination.

Each of the easily identifiable historic districts there were has been nominated. We preservationists are faced with demonstrating our relevancy. Newcomers to historic neighborhoods question what they see as restrictive laws governing the exterior of their homes and businesses. We, all of us...HPRB, HPO, DCPL, the Historic Districts Coalition...have to do a better job of selling historic preservation to an increasingly skeptical general public. How we do that requires preservationists to have a whole new set of skills and alliances. We must learn to deploy our human capital more strategically.

My second point is that we can't move forward without recognizing sustainability. We have to change the internal discussions about sustainability to substantiating that the most sustainable building, whose renovation would produce the most sustainable jobs, is renovating a historic building. Again, we preservationists have only just begun to join the sustainability discussion in a systematic manner. We have to join together and make historic preservation and sustainability linked in the minds of our elected officials, civil servants and general public.

Finally, I believe that historic preservation is moving away from its positions of staunch protectionism to a more nuanced stand that looks at cultural preservation. Cultural preservation can be viewed as a preservation approach that includes not only the buildings, but landscaping, archaeology, and other aspects of neighborhoods that are important to its residents. And preservation must take this cultural preservation ethos into low-income neighborhoods and look for the natural allies that reside there. The question that I keep asking myself, and others, is...."how do we keep preservation relevant and cool".

SH: What was a difficult case you've heard and how did you decide which way to vote?

CB: The Meads Row on H Street nomination jumps to mind. They would have been great contributing structures in an H Street Historic District, but on their own they didn't rise to the level of an individual historic district. I certainly would have wanted to do more to protect the buildings, as they were an important part of the H St cultural landscape, yet we were constrained by the lack of a historic district nomination for the area.

SB: How can DCPL and the HPO/HPRB continue to work closely together?

CB: First, I think it's important for DCPL's Board and its general members to know the HPRB Board. DCPL has an important story to tell about its preservation journey here in DC and what a real asset they are to the preservation community. Likewise, HPRB's members have a depth of preservation experience that's been beneficial as I continue to grow into this new position. Our views on preservation may differ at times, but we shouldn't be adversarial in voicing that difference. Speaking for my fellow HPRB members, we look forward to our close working relationship with DCPL.

SB: How can HPRB integrate itself in the development/preservation community?

CB: Well, we can't integrate ourselves too much as we need to be ready to make decisions that at times will be viewed harshly by the development or preservation community. But most of the regulatory matters before us are handled administratively by the staff, almost 90% of the cases are resolved by the staff.

Yet, this leaves a big arena for the Board to become more integrated with the preservation community. We've set up three Board subcommittees to address areas where we see we can improve our focus and communication with the development and preservation communities. They are in the areas of sustainability, community outreach, and landmarking.

Look for some new initiatives from the Board and HPO staff in each of these areas, and invitations for DCPL and others to play an important role in shaping new approaches for these three topics.

SH: You've spoken about sustainability as being important initiative for you and the Board, but to many people sustainability and historic preservation seem incompatible. Do you see these two issues merging?

CB: This question loops back to what I was saying about helping make historic preservation more relevant to the citizens we serve. In many ways, DC is at the center of the preservation community for the US. We have tremendous federal and local resources to bring to bear on this question. We want to build bridges with the development community, the smart growth community, the regulatory community, including the DC Council, our friends at DCPL, and at the National Trust so that we all can agree that the greenest building is one that you've renovated according to our guidelines.

To do so is going to take a lot of effort. Steve, I know that your firm was recently involved with sponsoring a historic preservation/sustainability seminar. DCPL has an ongoing sustainable outreach effort. We should build on these sorts of things to convince the uninitiated that the future of sustainability lies with preserving what we have, not with building new LEED certified buildings in the suburbs.

Sustainable conversations seem to be happening all around us here in Washington, but rarely do they include our preservation community. We need to change that discussion. But it's up to us to make it happen. Together we can do it, and we look to DCPL to play an important role in helping us.

From the Board's perspective, we realize the need to have an up-to-date set of sustainable design guidelines. We're starting the preliminary work on these guidelines. We'd like DCPL and its members to be an active participant with them. Steve, I know your firm is actively engaged in historic preservation/sustainable work and that you'll continue to take a leadership role.

SH: Can you give me another example where DCPL might assist the Board in its efforts?

CB: Sure. I was hoping that you'd ask a question like this as DCPL wrote an important brochure on testifying before the Board for a layperson. I think it was in the 1990's. We need this basic information that you're good at producing. We need it to strengthen our public outreach efforts. DCPL's tips on testifying was a brochure that I'd like to see updated and brought back into production, both on-line as well as in a hard copy.

SB: Any last comments for the DCPL members?

CB: I trust this is not the last chance to make comments, as I'd like to have an on-going dialogue through you to the rest of the DCPL Board and membership.

You'll be hearing shortly about some outreach efforts that we'll undertake this fall and into the spring, trying to answer some of the very questions you asked me today. Basically, we need to listen to residents and the design/development/preservation/ communities about where we are with historic preservation, what works well, where we can improve, and what we need to scrap. We need historic preservation visionaries. We need the same creativity, the substance and the foresight that DCPL brought to the historic preservation community beginning in 1971.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today and let's make a promise that this is the beginning of a long discussion between the two of us and the historic preservation organizations we both represent.