Why are amateurs often far more assertive in public debates about preservation than trained professionals? One could argue that professionals have more to lose. Preservation architects running independent businesses might shy away from taking positions on controversial preservation conflicts for fear of alienating current or potential clients. Preservation professionals working in governmental bureaucracies tend to remain silent about their private views, and to only publicly express their institution’s official positions, possibly out of fear for their jobs. However, one could contend that amateurs also have a great deal to lose, like their reputation and credibility. Yet amateurs, from advocates running non-profit organizations to the philanthropists that support them, from community activists to movie stars and public figures like Jackie Kennedy, have openly taken up the “cause” of preservation, and in so doing have gained political influence, actively shaped preservation policy, and therefore also professional standards. This asymmetrical participation in the public sphere has stoked the myth that preservation at its best is a grass roots movement, when in fact professionals always work closely, if often behind the scenes, with amateurs. Edward Said (1935-2003) believed there were deeper structural reasons why professionals seemed politically disengaged. Professionals, he argued, derived their authority from three sources of social recognition: 1) specialization in a narrow area within a discipline, such as historic preservation law; 2) expertise in a particular skill, like the compliance of U.S. Federal Agencies with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act; and 3) association with institutionalized power, such as being accredited as a preservation law expert by UNESCO. For Said, to assume the position and status of a professional meant committing oneself to behaving according to the expected norms of professionalism. Such conventional behavior might make professionals appear a-political and objective. But Said warned that the superficial game of conventional behavior was animated by deeper and more powerful political interests that gently nudged professional activities (like research) in the direction of strategic geopolitical problems—like studying ways to instrumentalize heritage for the purpose of post-conflict resolution. Said romanticized amateurs to a certain extent when he called upon professionals to emulate amateurish audacity and to free themselves from the safety of disciplines and the institutional positions they inhabited, if not financially, at least intellectually. Said was born in Jerusalem, in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine, to Palestinian Christian parents. He spent his childhood in Jerusalem and Cairo, Egypt, before attending preparatory school in the U.S., where he went on to attend college, at Princeton University, and earn his doctorate in English Literature from Harvard University in 1964. He joined the faculty of Columbia University in 1963, and in 1978, published one of his best-known works, Orientalism, one of the most influential, and most intensely debated, works of cultural criticism of the 20th century. In addition to his literary scholarship, Said gained prominence as an outspoken advocate of the Palestinian cause and critic of Western policies in the Middle East.

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