

The Peculiar Purple Fog: A Book to Encourage Youth Engagement in Historic Preservation

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Career-related pedagogies build interest in primary age children, yet they rarely highlight the field of historic preservation. This project created a children’s chapter book to introduce a nearby mid-century house’s story to local children. Feedback through virtual interactions indicated this was a useful method for engaging students and encouraging their participation in an underrepresented field.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that career-related learning pedagogies build positive attitudes towards school and outlooks towards future goals and experiences for primary age students, defined as 6 to 11 years old.¹ Children of this age are already thinking, playing, and talking about jobs, so this education strives to illustrate a wide range of experiences that enables children to reach their full potential. Yet the current pool of children’s literature lacks architecture-based themes, and literature associated with historic preservation is even smaller. From the few extant examples, the National Trust for Historic Preservation highlighted “10 Preservation Books for Children and Teens” in 2017.² These titles range in character diversity, setting, and plot, but fall short of effectively introducing historic preservation to young readers in multiple ways:

- The characters participating in historic preservation are adults and, therefore, not as relatable to children.
- The historic building is only used as a story backdrop, which often minimizes the building’s history or its significance.
- The building(s) in the story are usually pre-20th century examples of architecture embodying the traditional archetype of historic architecture, rather than examples of Modernism and more recent styles.

The National Trust’s list is not inclusive of all existing youth literature on historic preservation, but these trends must inform future efforts to expose children to architecture careers through plot and relatable characters. Even if the plot is easily followed, children may not understand that they can participate in the field without deliberate character development and actions.



Figure 1. The cover for “The Peculiar Purple Fog,” a book that introduces children to historic preservation through relatable characters and a plot focusing on the concept of memories. Illustration by Jessica Radomski.

A NEW PEDAGOGY

Historic preservation is a field children are not typically exposed to, yet its concepts of reuse and restoration, even outside of the architectural realm, are invaluable lessons when learned early in life. “The Peculiar Purple Fog” was developed to communicate these concepts to children between 8 and 10 years old through the form of an illustrated chapter book using real architectural research, artifacts, and lessons about historic preservation. In early 2018, architecture students researched Richard Neutra’s Hassrick House, designed and constructed between 1958 and 1961 in Philadelphia. The research was significant and organized

into a successful exhibit in April 2018.³ “The Peculiar Purple Fog” derives its story from the acquired research of anecdotes and memories from past inhabitants of the house obtained through both digital and in-person correspondence, including interviews and emails.

The goal of the story was to present historic preservation to children as something that is attainable and can be influenced by them. This was accomplished through two young, relatable characters in a world based on the concept of memories and their importance in a building’s history. Through the lens of time travel, these characters progressed through various memories spanning the life of the house. A strong emotional connection grew between the characters and the house by the end of the book, when the characters helped preserve the house and its memories.

METHODOLOGY

A review of existing children’s literature was conducted after establishing the initial storyline to analyze effective elements utilized by authors and illustrators to increase reader engagement and comprehension of the intended concept/theme. Key elements included the engagement of illustration style, the presence of and interaction between young characters throughout the story, and the personification of objects or settings. The illustrations and refinement of the storyline corresponded to these findings.

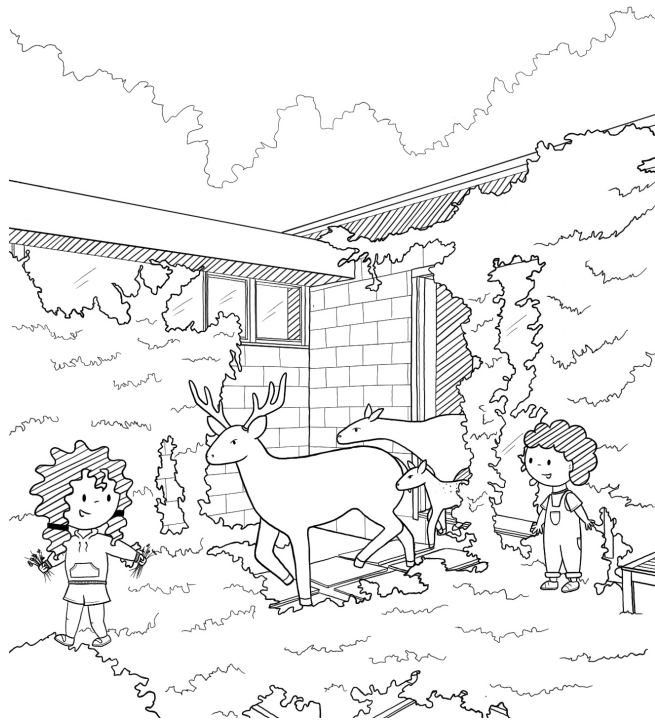


Figure 2. An illustration depicting the characters in a memory during an era when wildlife inhabited the house and the site was overrun by vegetation. Illustration by Jessica Radomski.



Figure 3. An early storyboarding mock-up to revise plot progression and establish initial illustrations. Photo by Jessica Radomski.

These elements then became the base for developing questions for childhood development professionals in an attempt to understand what cognitively engages children on a fundamental and developmental level. The interviewed professionals included a leading Pennsylvania early childhood education expert, a childhood special needs development instructor, elementary librarians, and a child neuropsychologist. The storyline and illustrations were presented to each professional in a series of virtual interviews; their input expanded upon successful techniques already being utilized in the proposed story and identified additional developmental insight for young reader engagement.

After these initial reviews, a second series of virtual meetings was held with young reviewers between 8 and 10 years old to test the effectiveness of the story and its message.

RESULTS

The immediate feedback from the young reviewers and their accompanying families after hearing the story was overwhelmingly positive. The children understood the concept and importance of memories within families and the spaces they inhabit and were excited that the Hassrick House was near their own. Being able to read this book and subsequently experience the story through visiting the house reinforced the lessons taught and provided a memorable educational experience.

CONCLUSION

“The Peculiar Purple Fog” established a new way of teaching historic preservation to children through familiar medium. The presentation of historic preservation in this way employed a hands-on method of career-based primary learning for an



Figure 4a. A historic photograph of the Sawyer family and their Karmann Ghia car in the living room, one of the memories highlighted in the book. Photo from the Center for the Preservation of Modernism.

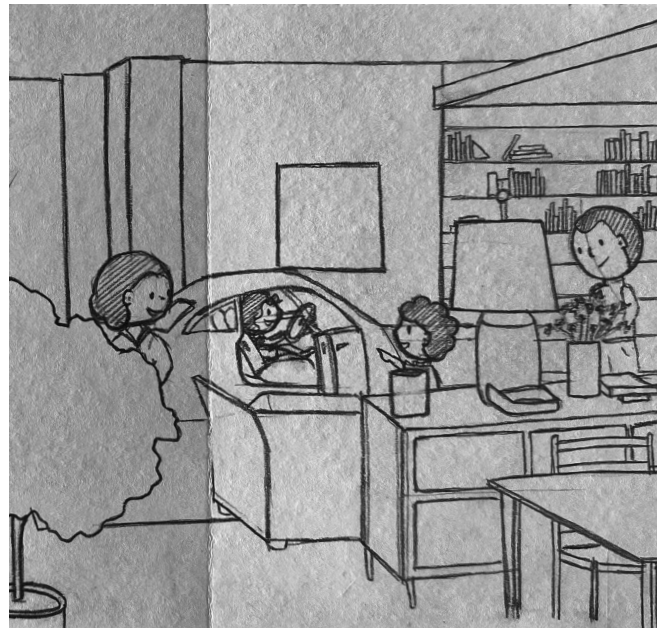


Figure 4b. An initial sketch drawing based on the historic photograph showing the main characters interacting with members of the Sawyer family. Illustration by Jessica Radomski

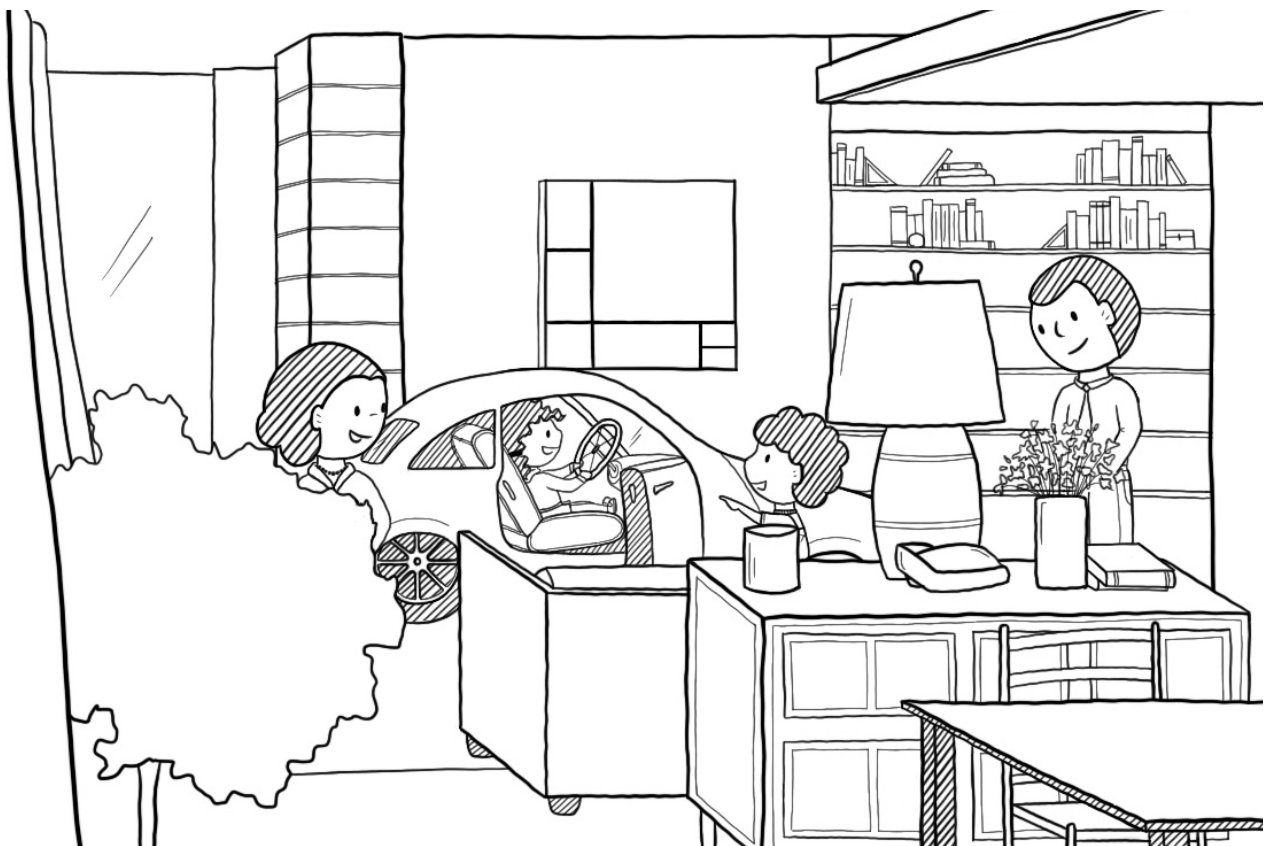


Figure 4c. The final illustration, refined based on the feedback from young reviewers during virtual meetings to emphasize the car and the difference in character of the Sawyer family's furniture. Illustration by Jessica Radomski.



Figure 5. A photo of the house as it would appear to children if they were to visit today. Photo by Madison Emig.

underrepresented field. For elementary children in the house's vicinity, this book established a direct connection between the importance of historic preservation and their own community. Additionally, focusing the story on a mid-century modern house may persuade future generations of historic preservationists that modern architecture can be as significant and historically-rich as that of previous eras.

In the future, this project will move towards planning and establishing an outreach program at elementary schools and libraries in Philadelphia to reinforce the learning of these concepts of historic preservation in the Hassrick House itself. The story will endure in a continuing series of books following the same characters as they discover additional modern homes nearby and participate in various practices of historic preservation.



Figure 6. The restored interior as it was when the previous owners inhabited the house in 2017. Photo by Jim Albert for Craig Wakefield.

ENDNOTES

1. Chris Percy and Alice Amegah, "Starting Early: Building the Foundations for Success," *Education and Employers*, 2021: 1-66.
2. Sarah Heffern, "10 Preservation Books for Children and Teens," *The National Trust for Historic Preservation*, published December 12, 2017, <https://saving-places.org/stories/preservation-books-for-children-and-teens#.YVtey9rMJPa>.
3. The Center for the Preservation of Modernism, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America.

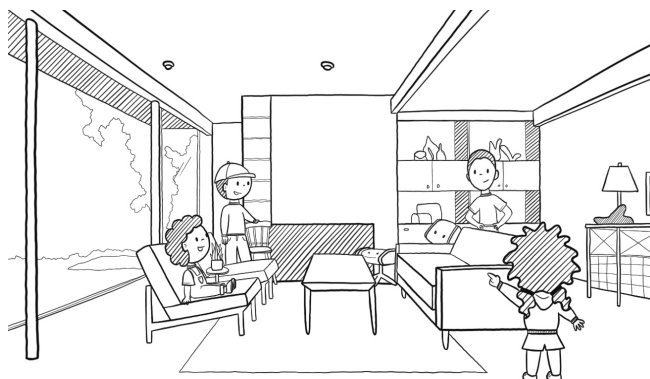


Figure 7. An illustration of characters talking about the importance of the memories the house holds. Illustration by Jessica Radomski.