Is sustainability, by definition, incompatible with historic preservation in the built environment? Is it possible for a globally-renowned historic landmark to implement sustainability while staying true to the principles of historic preservation?

Although the academic literature in this area is not dense and real-world examples seem to be relatively few in number, these are the primary questions that the leadership team at Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin West intend to explore in the coming years as they simultaneously pursue both historic preservation and sustainability at the nearly 80-year old property. The ambitious goal of the Taliesin West leadership team is to build a reputation for the property as one of the greenest historic preservation landmarks in the world. So … is “green historic preservation” an oxymoron, or can it really be done?

The path to sustainability planning for Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin West began in 2012, when the property gained both notoriety and significant energy savings from the successful installation of a solar array placed conspicuously away from the historic buildings. A few years later, facing water infrastructure issues, the property’s Director of Preservation decided to take a step back, to a systems-level view of sustainability at Taliesin West. Indeed, the timing might have been fortuitous; the property was also in the process creating a new historic preservation plan and priorities. The Director initiated a project that will – over a series of years – result in the property’s first holistic sustainability assessment and plan. The early steps of this journey are documented in the final capstone paper.
The process of creating a sustainability assessment and plan for the historic property represented a unique challenge for many reasons. Many of the dozens of structures scattered across more than 600 acres are in their eighth decade in a harsh desert climate. The property employs more than 100 people, and it operates under significant financial constraints.

The director of preservation chose to focus the sustainability planning work on several key pillars: energy, water, waste, education and transparency. Some work was already underway in several of these areas; in other areas, however, the work had not yet begun. In the end, the plan also considered future research in other key areas like greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and purchasing/supply chain.

What became clear through the project is that Taliesin West will need a multidimensional sustainability plan, implemented over perhaps a decade or longer and focused on strategic investments to create efficiency, to earn a place on the top of the list of green historic preservation properties.

The final capstone paper recounts key milestones in the journey so far—primarily the creation of a sustainability assessment for Taliesin West, with suggested objectives in short-, mid- and long-ranges. The paper offers lessons learned for others who might also be interested in pursuing the unique combination of historic preservation and sustainability. The project sponsor believes that if these parallel efforts of historic preservation and sustainability are executed with care, the results will increase both visitors and revenue and create a compelling new story for Taliesin West, enabling the property to reassert itself as an innovative world leader nearly 80 years since its founding.