Earlier this month, Historic Savannah Foundation (HSF) honored Louise Lauretti, a devoted advocate of historic preservation who passed away too soon. A beloved wife and mother, she was also a dedicated local philanthropist whose work on the board of HSF had just begun. The annual Louise Lauretti Lecture was moved to a new time of year and was a highlight of the non-profit organization’s 63rd annual meeting, which took place at the DeSoto Savannah Hotel in the historic Landmark District. There was standing room only and rapturous applause for the inspirational lecture which, appropriately, focused on the topic of women in preservation.

Guest speaker Justin Gunther presented “Shaping Preservation: Ann Pamela Cunningham to Ada Louise Huxtable and Beyond.” Gunther is the director of Fallingwater, one of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright’s greatest architectural triumphs. Gunther has almost 20 years of experience in historic preservation, managing restorations at George Washington’s Mount Vernon, serving as the architectural historian at the Virginia State Capitol, and a former professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD).

Gunther grew up in Richmond, Virginia, and attended Virginia Commonwealth University in the city’s historic Fan District. “I started my academics in biology and medicine, but after taking courses in architectural history and then visiting Savannah, I decided to make a shift.” Gunther explains. “Savannah embraced its architecture and history, and I was enchanted by its beauty. The visit inspired me to explore the possibilities.”

Leaving medical school, Gunther pursued his newfound passion by working for preservation non-profits in Richmond while applying to SCAD’s graduate program in historic preservation. As a student, he lived in the Victorian District on Duffy Street and in the Landmark District on Columbia Square. Completing grad school in 2004, he took a position at Mount Vernon as manager of restoration, and then Fallingwater as curator. Savannah lured him back in late 2011, when he was invited to teach full-time in SCAD’s historic preservation department. During his second sojourn in Savannah, he inhabited the garden level of Alvin Neely’s house at 225 East Hall Street.

“Alvin has been a tireless steward of this remarkable house, and living in one of the city’s finest examples of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture was an honor and a real treat!” Gunther explains. “Then, I got
the itch for a project and purchased a derelict Victorian on Habersh- 
sham Street. A labor of love, I spent the remaining six years I was in 
Savannah restoring the property with my friend and colleague, Jim 
Abraham.”

Gunther’s passion for Savannah shines through in conversation when, for example, he enthuses about his frequent visits to Skidaway Island State Park for hiking and running. It was clearly a tough de-
cision to leave the Hostess City when his career took him back to 
Fallingwater. “Savannah is a city that I love,” he explains. “It is a won-
derfully enchanting place, and its beauty is intoxicating. I hated to 
leave, but (Fallingwater) is another place that I truly love and one that 
presents remarkable opportunities for inspiration and learning.”

Like Savannah, Fallingwater is unlike anywhere else in the world. Edgar Kaufmann Jr. spoke of it as “a place of vigorous beauty, of 
self-renewing enchantment, of adventurous picturesqueness, that 
answers perfectly a romantic need . . . to be natural, to experience 
nature. That ability to connect us with nature through design is the 
real power, the romance, of Fallingwater.”

Frank Lloyd Wright abandoned conventional notions of architec-
tural design and living, and the house has long served as a labora-
tory for unique challenges of preservation and interpretation. Being 
involved with the development and implementation of these and 
sometimes unconventional strategies clearly continues to inspire and 
broaden Gunther’s understanding of acceptable museum practice and 
to expand his thinking about successful ways to balance stewardship 
and long-term sustainability.

Fallingwater, located in southwestern Pennsylvania, is a historical 
home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1935.
The Louise Lauretti Lecture offered much more than a chronology of women’s roles in the preservation movement. Instead, Gunther took a personal approach and talked about the women who inspired him throughout his own journey in historic preservation: Richmond’s Mary Wingfield Scott, Mount Vernon’s Anne Pamela Cunningham, Fallingwater’s Lynda S. Waggoner, and New York’s Ada Louise Huxtable. “Each woman featured helped to define the past of the preservation movement and possessed characteristics that can help guide preservationists moving forward,” Gunther explains.

“As you know, women were at the forefront of preservation from the beginning and, in many ways, they continue to define the discipline,” he continues. “Women are leaders of preservation non-profits, academic programs and consulting firms. And I long for just a few ounces of the energy that powered these women. Each one proved unafraid to challenge societal expectations of what defined womanhood and used preservation as a tool to reshape cultural understanding.”

Gunther clearly admires the work of Historic Savannah Foundation, commenting that the organization “understands the importance of responsible development, promoting change that enhances our understanding of the past while accommodating economic growth. The organization is a model for others throughout the country, and is a vital force in the balance of preservation and progress.” He notes that Savannah’s primary challenge is the responsible management of change.

Gunther concludes, “Tourism pressure and economic growth, while positive forces for revitalization, must be carefully managed to
ensure the preservation of Savannah’s culture, character, and sense of place.”

We are grateful to the Lauretti family for facilitating the provision of such inspirational and timely speakers to our beautiful city and on the doorstep of Skidaway Island, where this philanthropic family made their home.

HISTORIC SAVANNAH FOUNDATION

HSF has grown into one of the most respected local preservation organizations in the country – emphasizing not only the protection of individual historic buildings, but also the revitalization of blighted neighborhoods. HSF demonstrates the cultural, social and economic benefits of preservation as good public policy by proving that preservation and progress go hand-in-hand. HSF saves buildings, places and stories that define Savannah’s past, present, and future. Following its formation in 1955, HSF started a Revolving Fund to save endangered historic properties. To date, HSF has saved and protected 406 buildings throughout Savannah’s historic districts. For more information about HSF, please visit www.myHSF.org.