



# Deconstruction:

An effective tool for preservation or just another way to lose historic buildings?

PlaceEconomics  
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Cover photo from San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation

## Introduction

PlaceEconomics and our companion firm, Heritage Strategies International, work at the intersection of historic resources and economics. To inform our own research, but also to provide insights to those working in the field of heritage conservation, we periodically conduct online surveys which we call *PresPolls*. These surveys are conducted using Survey Monkey, a link to which is provided through our direct mail list and through social media.

This poll asked about deconstruction. As we explained in the survey, for polling purposes we defined deconstruction as "The systematic dismantling of a structure, typically in the opposite order it was constructed, in order to maximize the salvage of materials for reuse, in preference over salvaging materials for recycling, energy recovery, or sending the materials to the landfill." A link to the survey was shared via our three Facebook pages (*PlaceEconomics*, *Heritage Strategies International*, and *Donovan Rypkema*). It was also shared on *Historic Preservation Professionals*, a Facebook group with approximately 5,400 members that serves as a forum for discussing topics relevant to the field. The link was then shared by other Facebook pages including *Build Reuse* and *Heritage Forward*. Additionally, we sent a link to the survey to our international mailing list of more than 6,000.

The survey was open from March 8 through March 12. A total of 194 responses were received. Although the majority were from the United States, respondents from eight other countries also participated. It is important to understand this is *not* a random survey of the population. The vast majority of both our Facebook Friends and our mailing list have at least an interest in and are often vocal advocates for historic preservation. Many of them are professionals in the field in the private, public, or non-profit sectors. While not every respondent to this survey would self-identify as heritage conservation proponent, most would. So these findings should best be read as the current perspectives of preservationists towards deconstruction.

## Key Findings

Based on the responses of 194 survey participants, here are the eight most significant findings:

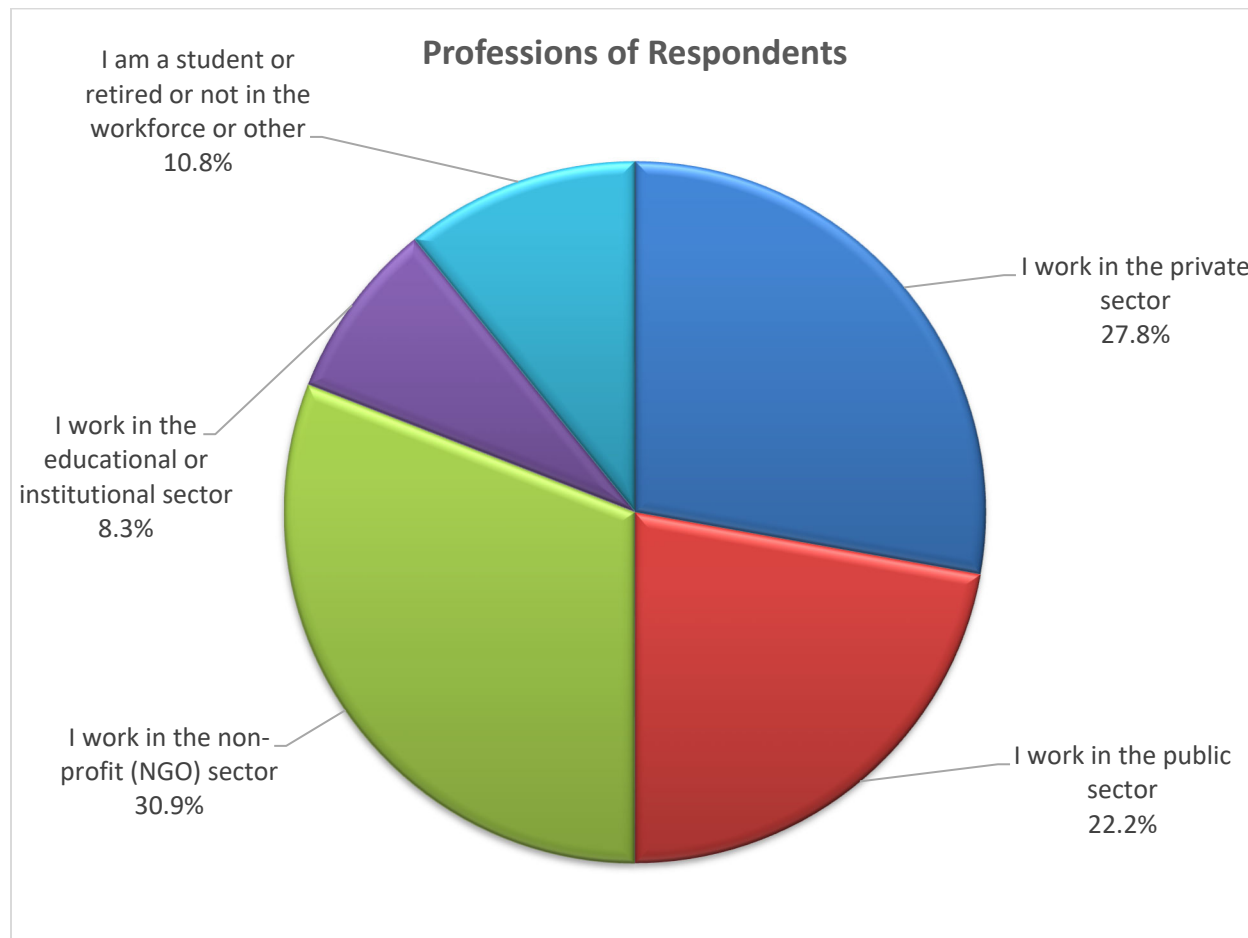
1. Although deconstruction is an emerging issue for historic preservation, the frequency of any serious discussion is small (See Question 2).
2. Even so, there is far more support among historic preservation advocates and professionals than might have been expected, with 58% falling in the “Believer” category (See Question 3).
3. The support for deconstruction is strongest among Millennials and Gen Xers (See Questions 2 and 3).
4. Fewer than 1 in 20 preservationists have concluded that deconstruction is not a good tool for heritage conservation (See Question 2).
5. Almost 1 in 5 preservationists are discussing the implementation of deconstruction strategies (See Question 2).
6. The potential positive benefit of deconstruction that respondents deemed most important is the reduction of materials going into the landfill, followed by saving embodied energy and other environmental benefits (See Question 4).
7. While deconstruction is viewed positively by all ages and professions among the survey takers, the highest support comes from workers in the non-profit sector (See Question 3).
8. The more frequently deconstruction is discussed, the higher the level of support tends to be (See Question 3).

Fundamentally, preservationists are in the business of saving historic structures, not tearing them down. But pragmatic preservationists acknowledge that sometimes historic buildings won't survive. Rather than accepting that demolition debris go straight to the landfill, preservationists who responded to this survey see deconstruction as a potentially valuable tool. For years preservationists have been told, “you need to get closer to the environmentalists.” Well, that directive has clearly been heard. The number one positive benefit of deconstruction cited by respondents was not saving architectural elements, but about reducing the amount of recyclable material sent to the landfill.

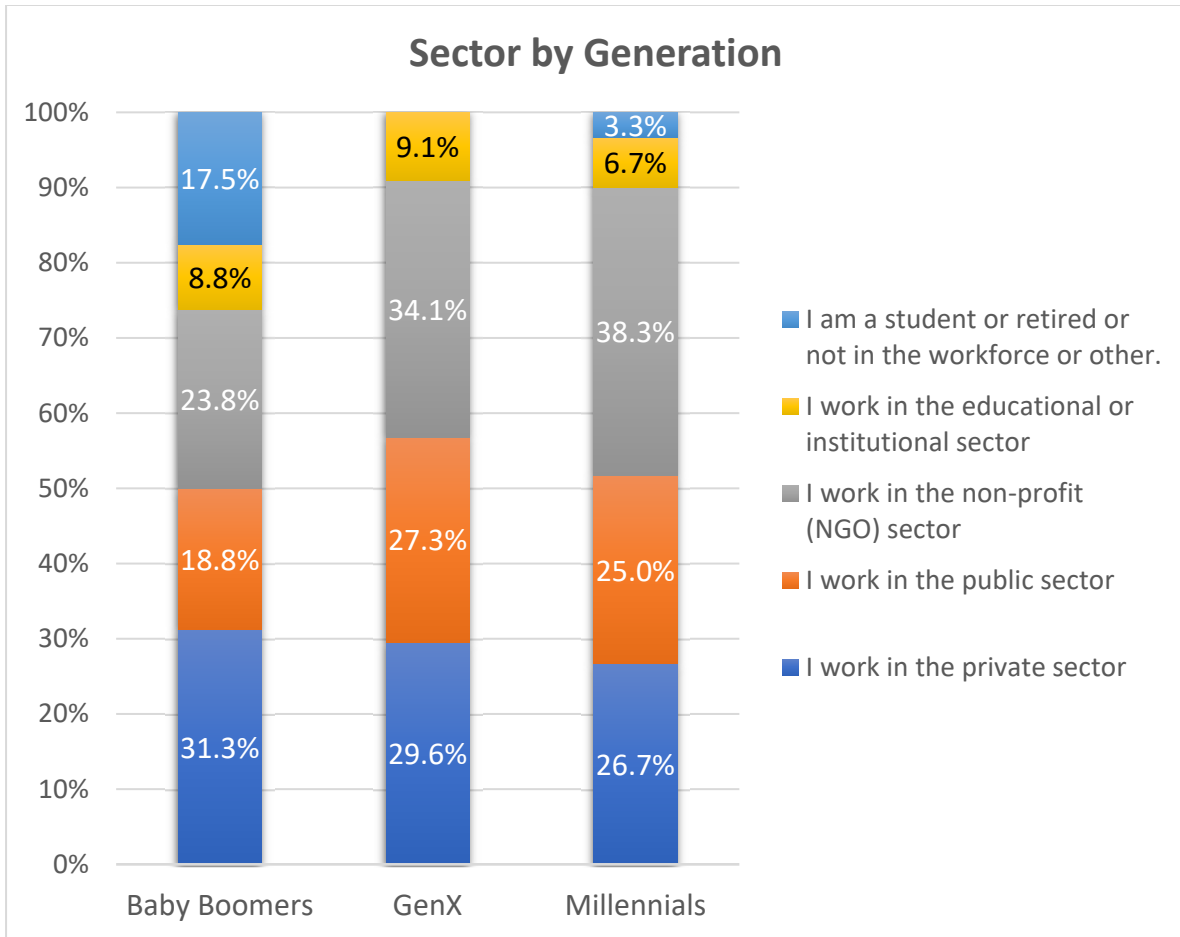
American preservationists have long been proponents of the adaptive reuse of buildings. With the emerging support for deconstruction indicated from this survey, many have now become proponents of the adaptive reuse of building materials. The results of the survey give a sense that the question on the minds of preservation professionals is not “do we preserve, or do we deconstruct,” but rather, “how can we make deconstruction a useful tool to advance both historic preservation and the larger environment?”

## Question 1 – Which best describes your professional category?

There was a relative balance among the respondents professionally with 80% coming from the three main sectors of the economy, Private (27.8%), Public (22.2%) and Non-Profit (30.9%). While nationally in the United States only about 14% of all jobs are in the non-profit sector (and around the same share in the public sector) it is not surprising that such a high number of respondents to this poll were from that sector, given the very important role that non-profits play in the historic preservation movement in the US.



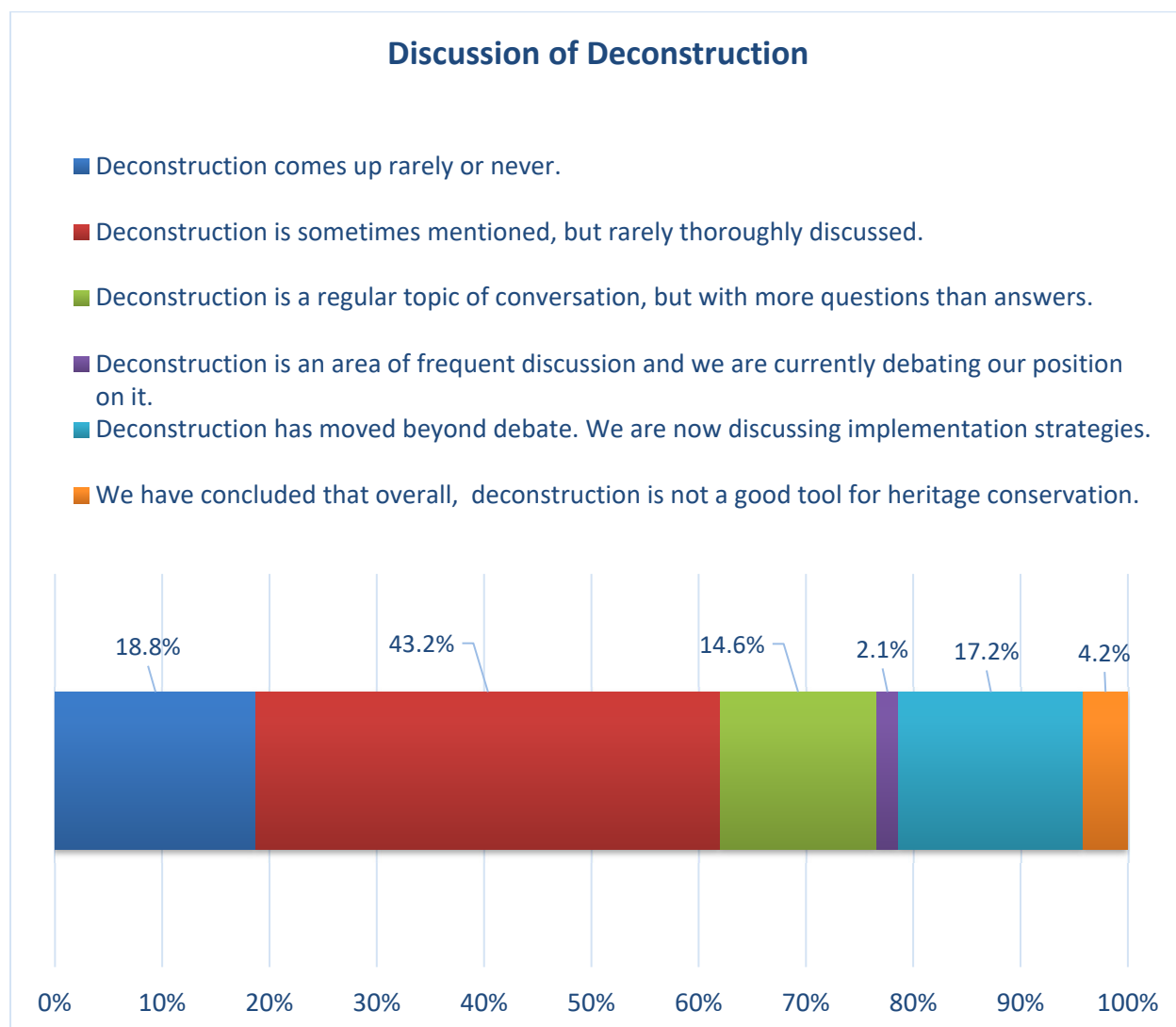
There were significant differences among generations, however. A greater share of Baby Boomers (1946-1964) held jobs in the private sector (31.3%) than either Gen X (1965-1976) or Millennials (1977-1995). The other two generational cohorts – Silent Generation (1945 and earlier) and GenZ (1996 and later) did not have sufficient numbers of responses to be statistically significant. Millennials, however, had a plurality (38.3%) who worked in the non-profit sector. Among the three groups, Gen X had the largest share (27.3%) working in the public sector.



## Question 2 – In your professional or heritage advocacy circles, which best describes the discussion of deconstruction?

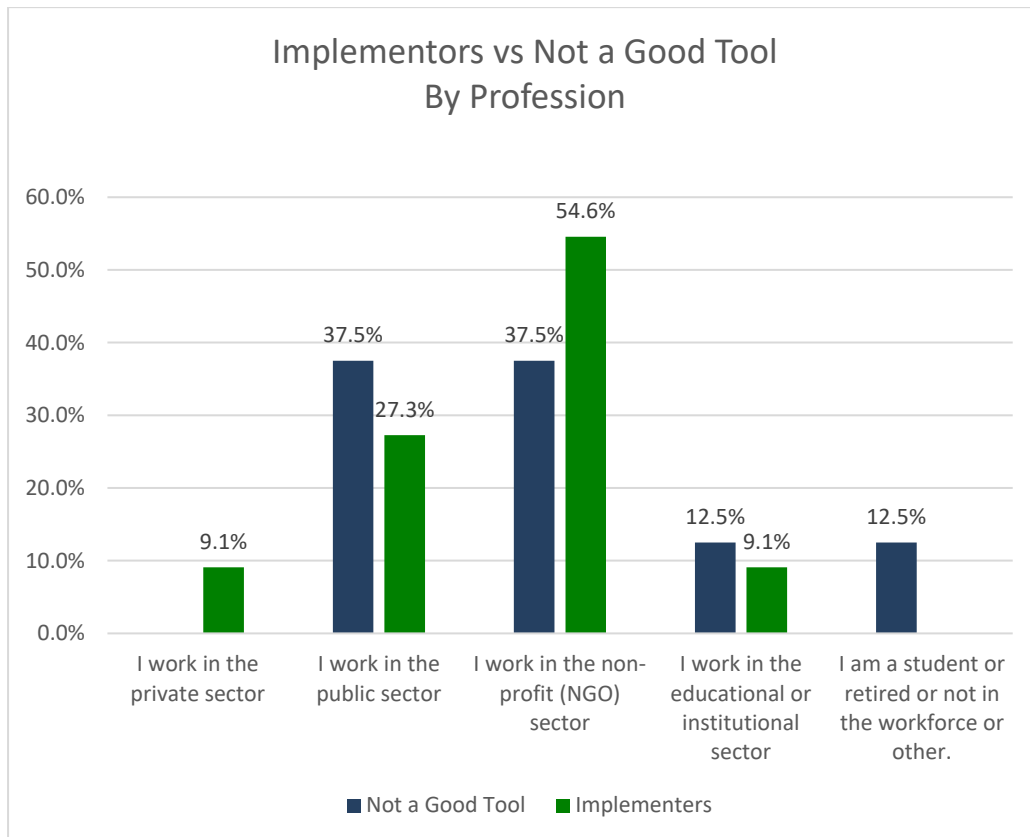
While the concept of deconstruction is not new, it has not yet emerged as a major point of discussion among preservation professionals. More than sixty percent of respondents said that in the subject of deconstruction comes up rarely or never (18.8%) or is sometimes mentioned but rarely thoroughly discussed (43.2%). An additional 14.6% said the subject is a regular topic of conversation, but with more questions than answers.

Just over 4% said they have concluded that deconstruction is not a good tool for heritage conservation, while more than 4 times that number said they had moved beyond debate and were now discussion strategies to implement deconstruction.



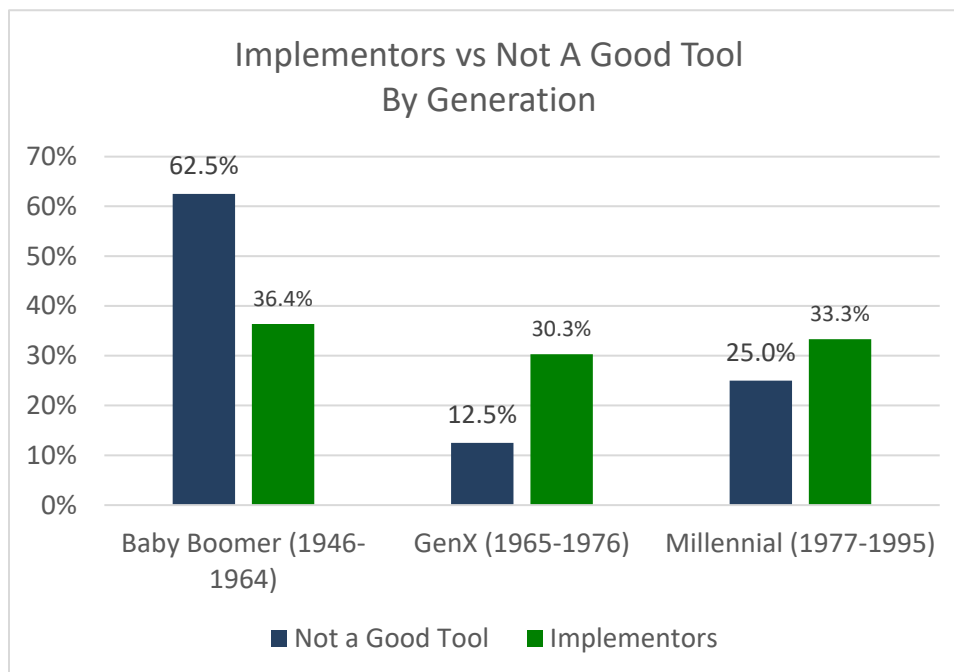
## Implementors vs Not A Good Tool

There were notable differences between those last two groups. Comparisons were made between those deciding that deconstruction was not a good tool and those who are in the process of implementing a deconstruction strategy. By profession, three quarters of the “not a good tool” group work in the public (37.5%) or the non-profit (37.5%) sectors, while none were in the private sector. Among the “implementors” more than half (54.6%) work in the non-profit sector.



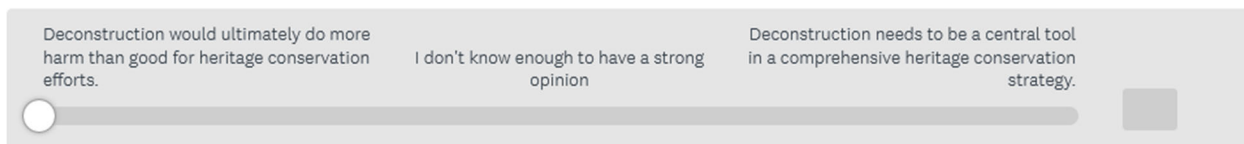
There was also a measurable difference among generations. Among those who have concluded that deconstruction is not a good tool, 62.5% were Baby Boomers. Among the “implementor” group, the generations were basically divided with 36.4% coming from the Baby Boom era, 30.3% from Gen X and a third from Millennials.



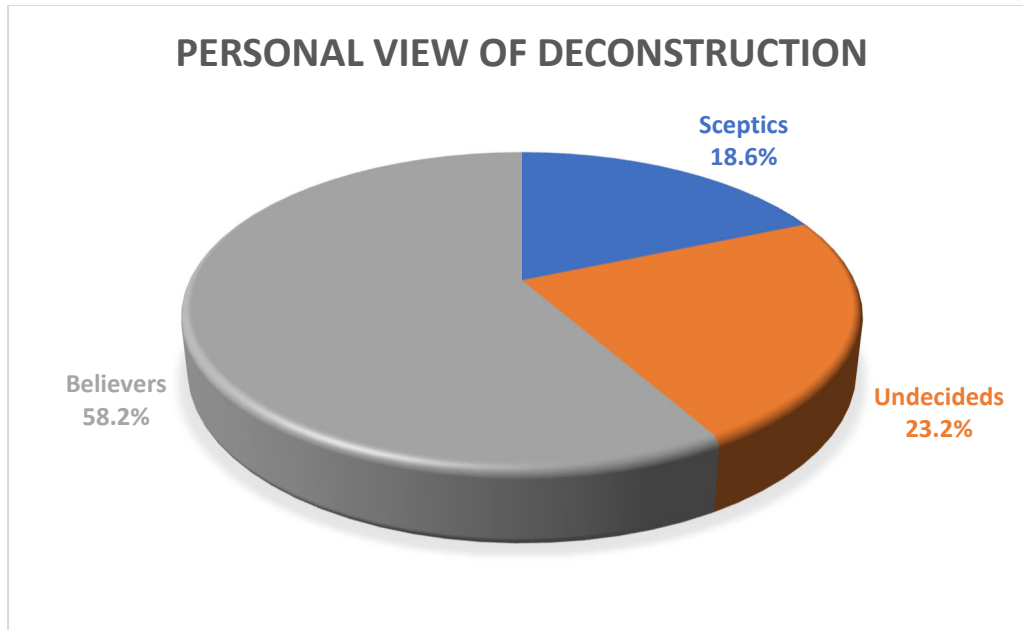


### Question 3 – What is your own view on deconstruction?

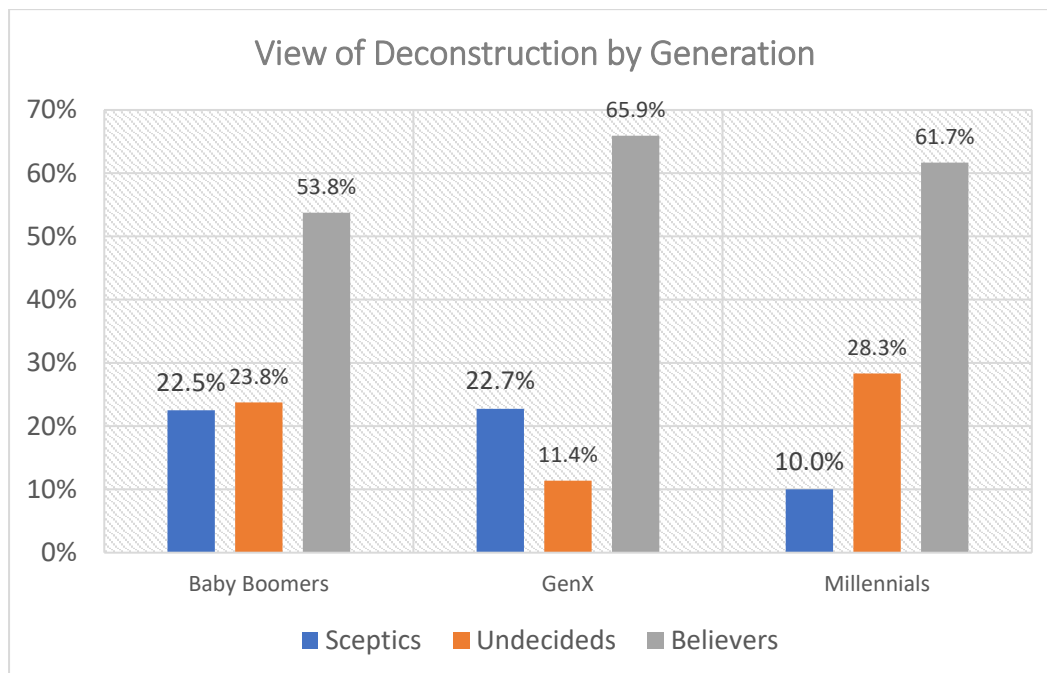
Respondents were then asked about their personal view on deconstruction. The poll provided a scale to locate their own position, ranging from 0 (Deconstruction would ultimately do more harm than good for heritage conservation efforts) to 5 (I don't know enough to have a strong opinion) to 10 (Deconstruction needs to be a central tool in a comprehensive heritage conservation strategy).



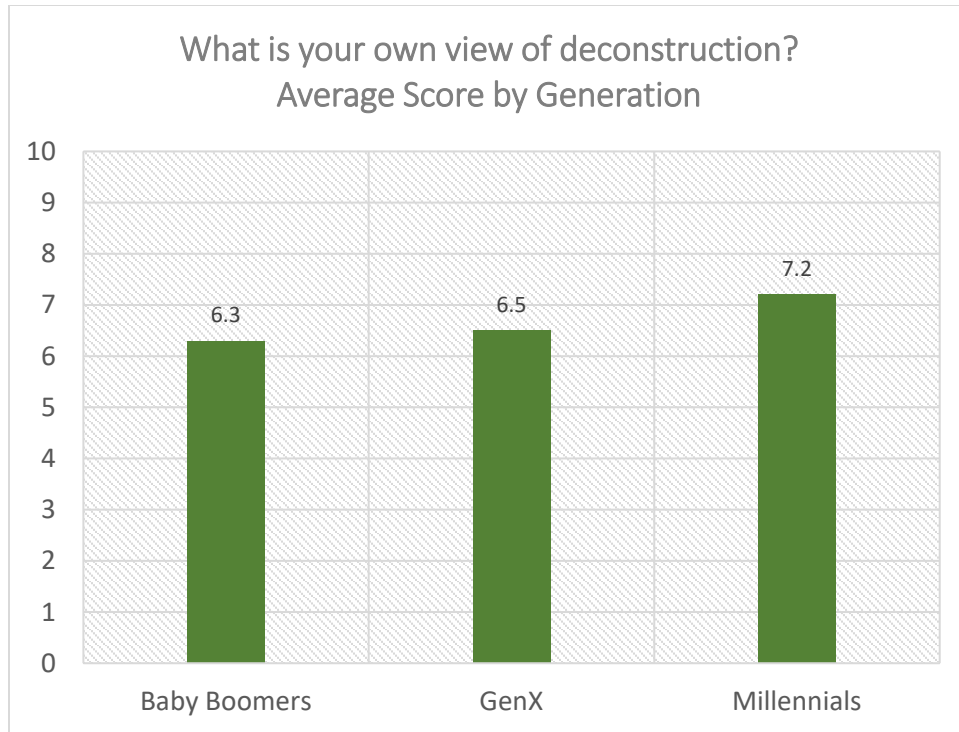
Those responses were then divided into “Sceptics” who had assigned themselves a score of 0 through 3; “Undecided” with scores of 4-6, and “Believers” with scores 7 through 10. Slightly less than 1 in 5 (18.6%) fell into the Sceptic category with another 23.2% classified as Undecided. But a majority of all poll takers (58.2%) rated as Believers.



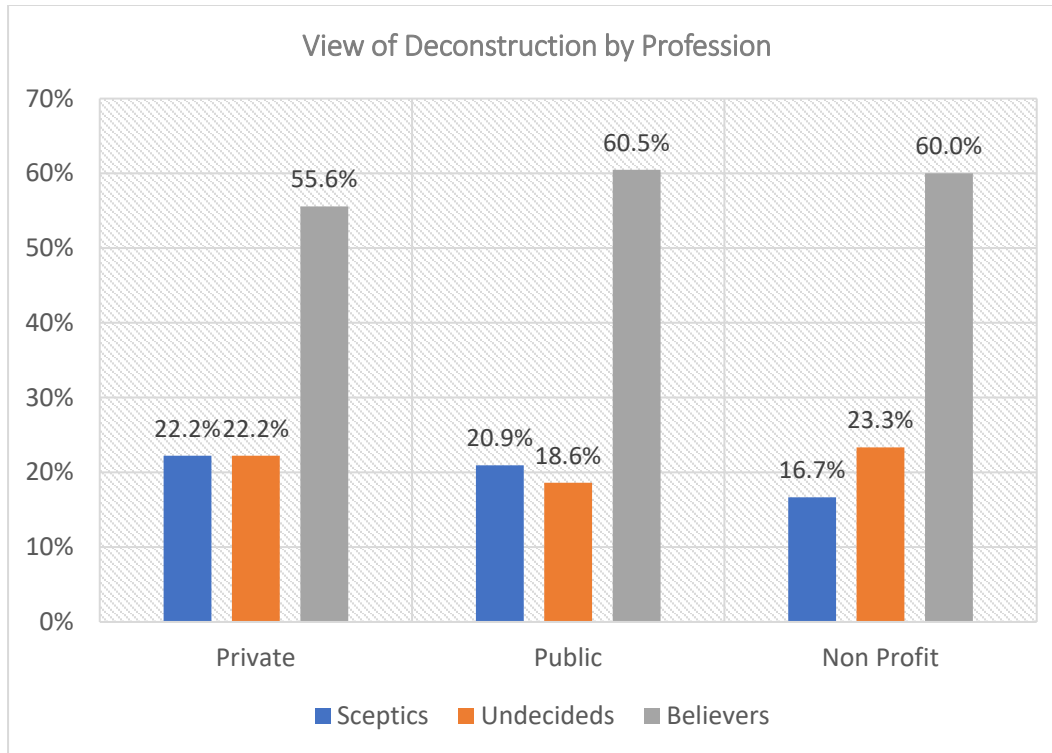
Among survey respondents more than half of all generational groups classified as Believers, but Gen X had the highest portion of Believers (65.9%) as well as the highest share of Sceptics (22.7%). There were not many undecideds among the Gen Xers. Only 1 in 10 Millennials fell into the Sceptic category, but they had the highest portion (28.3%) of undecideds.



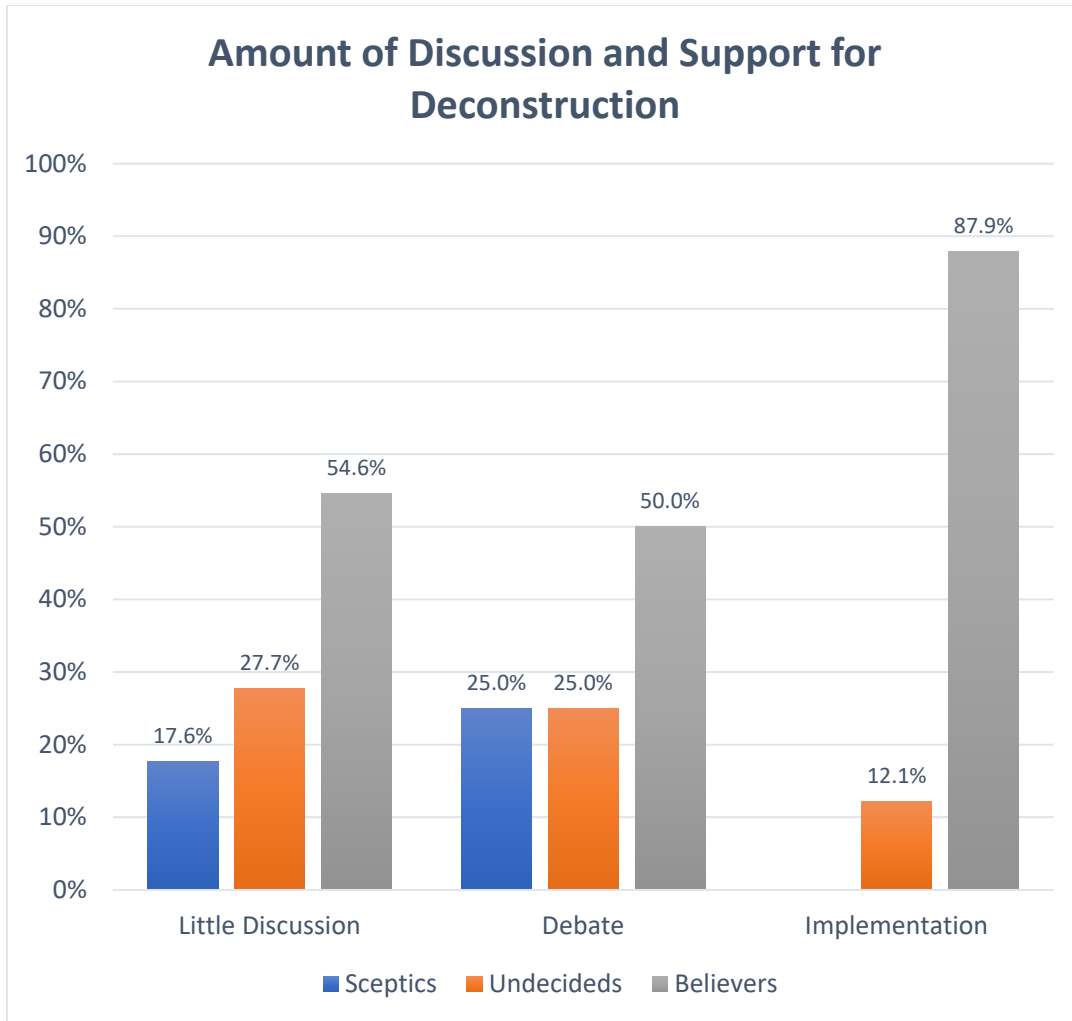
When the average score on the sliding scale was calculated, it was Millennials who appear to be the most committed to deconstruction.



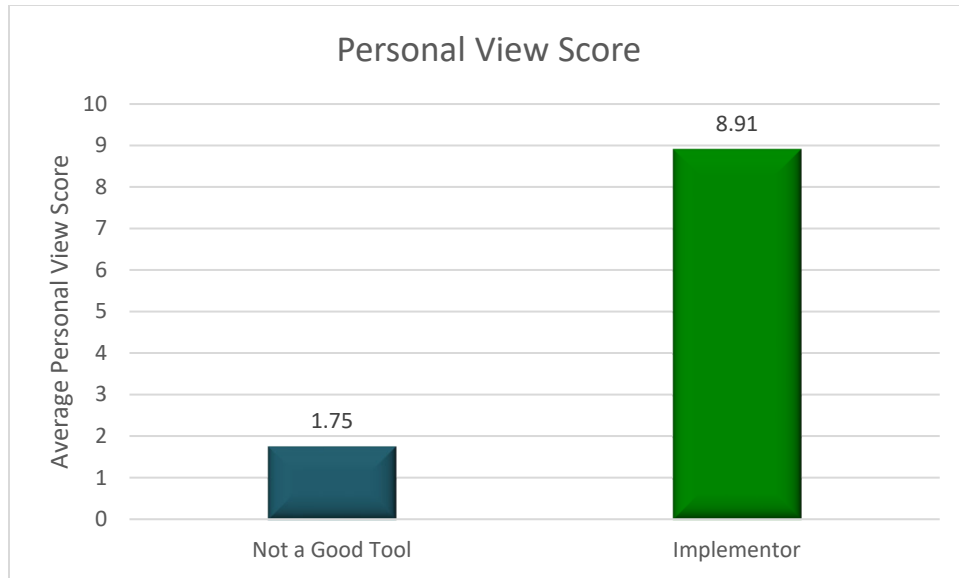
Unlike the generational breakdown, the results show less discrepancy when examined in relationship to profession, with more than half of survey respondents from all three sectors falling into the Believer category. Millennials, however, had the fewest sceptics.



As with many issues, debate and discussion regarding deconstruction are both useful and, in the end, move in the direction of supporting the concept. When there is little discussion about deconstruction, there is still a high share who constitute Believers (54.6%) but also a large number of Undecideds (27.7%). When discussion and debate about deconstruction occur more often, the number of Believers goes down and the number of Sceptics goes up. But when the time for debates is over and discussions focus on implementation, there is a dramatic increase in Believers and the Sceptics disappear.

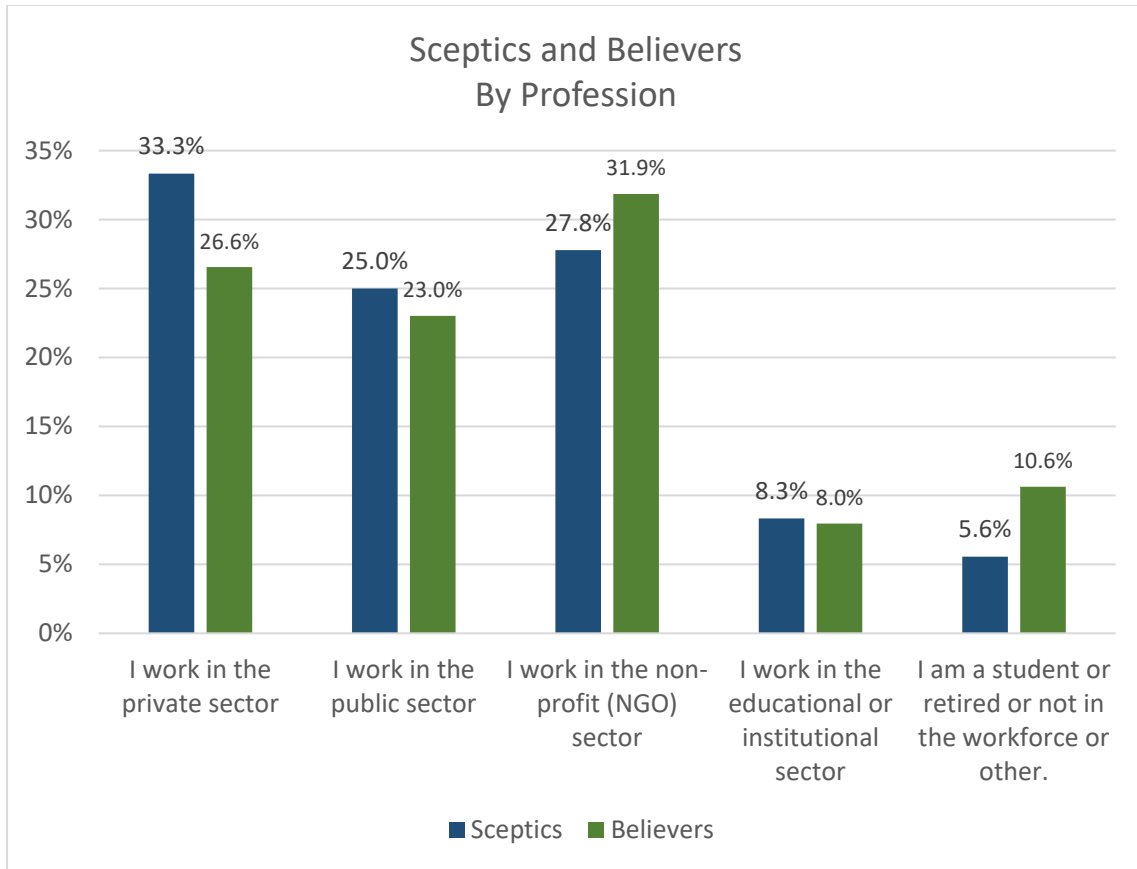


Not surprisingly there was a huge difference in the scores of those at the polar ends of the scale. Those who have decided that deconstruction is not a good tool for heritage conservation had an average score of 1.75 while those looking to implement deconstruction had an average score of almost 9.

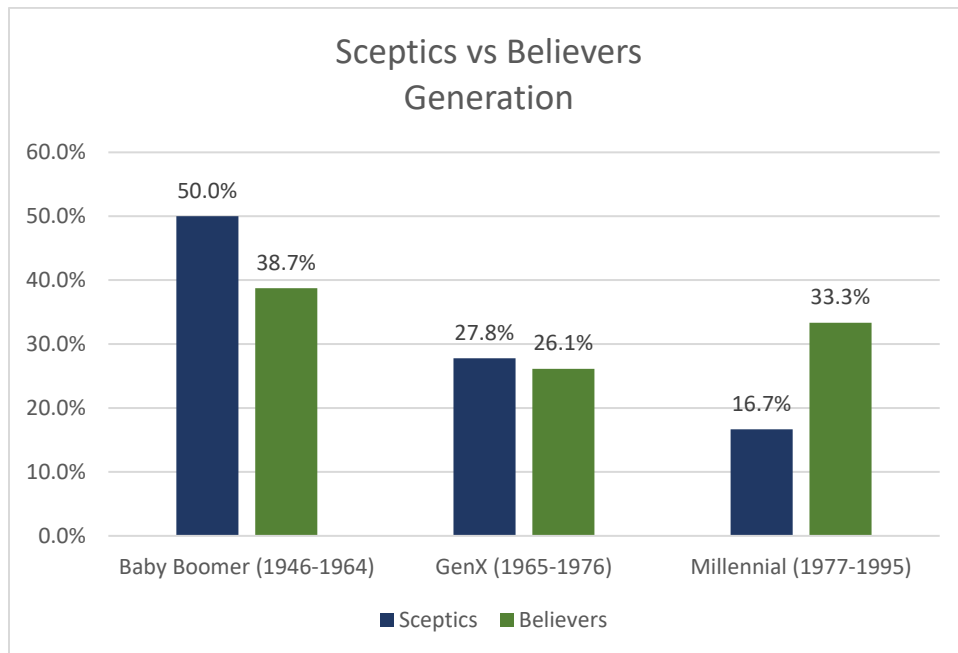


### Who are the Sceptics? Who are the Believers?

Comparisons were then made between the Sceptics and the Believers. There were some nominal differences among professions. A third of all sceptics work in the private sector while nearly 32% of the Believers are in the non-profit sector.



Generationally the differences were slightly more pronounced. Fully half of the Sceptics were Baby Boomers but 38.7% of the Believers also came from that age cohort.



## Question 4 – How would you rank in importance the possible positive benefits of deconstruction?

A number of positive benefits of deconstruction have been offered by its proponents. Survey takers were asked to rank the relative importance of eight of those benefits. Topping the list was reduction of materials going into the landfill. Since in most communities between a quarter and a third of everything added to the landfill is from construction debris, proponents of deconstruction argue this approach could dramatically reduce materials from what would otherwise be demolition.



Regardless of where a survey respondent stood in overall support for demolition, the highest-ranking positive benefits were substantially the same as seen in the table below:



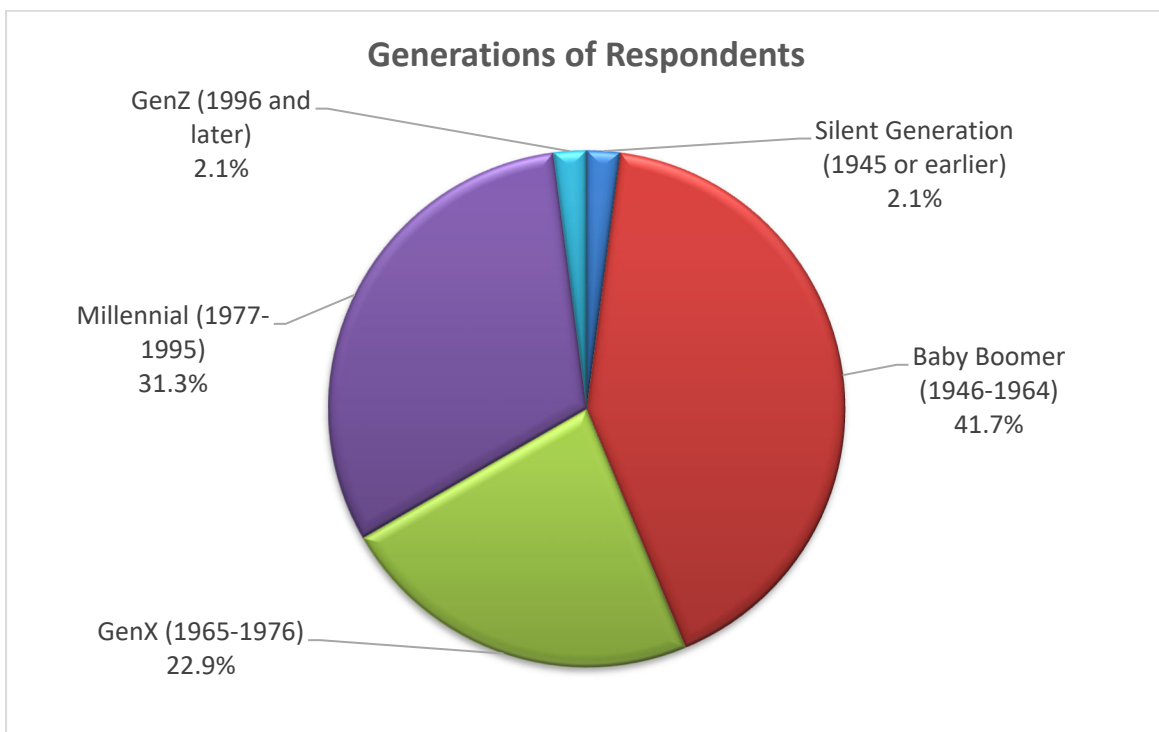
Benefit Ranking	Believers	Sceptics
1	Reduction of materials going to the landfill.	Reduction of materials going to the landfill.
2	Saving embodied energy and other environmental benefits.	Saving significant architectural elements (doors, banisters, mantels, windows, etc.) for reuse in other historic buildings.
3	Saving significant architectural elements (doors, banisters, mantels, windows, etc.) for reuse in other historic buildings.	Saving embodied energy and other environmental benefits.

When looked at by the Implementor and Not a Good Tool respondents the results were similar, although “Saving general building materials” replaced “Saving significant architectural elements” for the Implementors and “Saving general building materials” replaced “Embodied energy” for the Not a Good Tool group.

Benefit Ranking	Implementors	Not a Good Tool
1	Reduction of materials going to the landfill.	Reduction of materials going to the landfill.
2	Saving embodied energy and other environmental benefits.	Saving significant architectural elements (doors, banisters, mantels, windows, etc.) for reuse in other historic buildings.
3	Saving general building materials (flooring, brick, shingles, structural lumber, etc.) for reuse in both new construction and rehabilitation.	Saving general building materials (flooring, brick, shingles, structural lumber, etc.) for reuse in both new construction and rehabilitation.

## Question 5 – In which generation were you born?

The survey respondents probably reflect the generational distribution in the historic preservation field in the United States, but do not exactly parallel the population overall. As compared to the overall population, GenZ is under-represented as most of that group have not yet entered the workforce. Baby Boomers are also overrepresented relative to Millennials among survey respondents, despite the fact that in the general population Millennials have now surpassed Baby Boomers as the largest demographic group. There is no comprehensive list that identifies the percentage of preservation professionals by age group, however, so it is unknown whether the distribution below reflects the actual share of the field by generation.



## Question 6 – In what country do you live?

About 95% of all responses came from individuals living in the United States. Non-US survey participants came from: Algeria, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Mexico, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

## Conclusions

Preservationists argue that when a historic building can be saved it should be saved. The emerging support for deconstruction evidenced by this survey – particularly among younger preservationists – does not change that position. Deconstruction should be a tool used after the tools to stabilize, rehabilitate, reuse, and reoccupy have been exhausted. But when a historic building is not going to otherwise survive, deconstruction can be a viable alternative.

Many individuals have signed donor cards, so that after their death their organs can go to extend the life of another. Deconstruction should be viewed as a historic building's donor card. If the life of the building is at an indisputable end, its building components can give a new life to another structure.



4. How would you rank in importance the possible positive benefits of deconstruction?



Reduction of materials going to the landfill.



Saving embodied energy and other environmental benefits.



Job creation as a result of labor intensity.



Saving significant architectural elements (doors, banisters, mantels, windows, etc.) for reuse in other historic buildings.



Saving general building materials (flooring, brick, shingles, structural lumber, etc.) for reuse in both new construction and rehabilitation.



Income generation for organizations reselling recovered materials.



Aligning the heritage conservation movement with the "green economy".

5. In which generation were you born?

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Silent Generation (1945 or earlier) | <input type="radio"/> Millennial (1977-1995) |
| <input type="radio"/> Baby Boomer (1946-1964)             | <input type="radio"/> GenZ (1996 and later)  |
| <input type="radio"/> GenX (1965-1976)                    |  |

6. In what country to you live?