

An Introduction to Historic Preservation Planning

by Amy Facca

Across the country there are signs of a renewed interest in our communities' historic resources. Abandoned, vacant, and underutilized historic buildings are being creatively put to new use. Neglected, but once spectacular, theaters are being restored as new performance spaces. Historic residential districts and neighborhoods are being reinvigorated. As these transformations take place, historic preservation is being seen as providing tangible benefits to communities large and small.

Many of us have taken time to visit places noted for their historic character, whether larger cities like Savannah, Georgia; San Antonio, Texas; or New Orleans, Louisiana, or smaller communities like Natchez, Mississippi; Virginia City, Nevada; Port Townsend, Washington; and Quincy, Illinois. Virtually every one of us has undoubtedly spent time pleasantly walking through historic Main Street and residential districts. The appeal of these areas is universal. Reflecting this, a growing number of communities have been incorporating historic preservation into their comprehensive plans, downtown revitalization strategies, neighborhood improvement plans,

and zoning ordinances.

This article is intended to provide a brief introduction to historic preservation planning. You will read about some of the benefits of preservation, and find information on how communities are implementing local preservation policies. Resources are also listed for those of you who want to learn more about preservation planning.



Elaborate iron gates are common in Charleston, South Carolina's, historic districts.



View of President Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello.

PRESERVATION IN AMERICA

The first interest in preserving historic structures can be found in the mid-19th Century efforts to acquire and restore the homes of famous Americans like George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. Beginning in 1927, the scope of historic preservation expanded dramatically with the start of John D. Rockefeller's restoration of Williamsburg, colonial Virginia's capital city. The next, and perhaps most important, step in the preservation movement was taken in 1931 when



Vacant for many years, the Rice Building in downtown Troy, was redeveloped by a partnership of the Troy Savings Bank, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and the Troy Architectural Program, Inc. The building is now fully occupied and used as a high-tech "incubator."

Charleston, South Carolina, established the nation's first local historic district. Preservation no longer concerned itself just with individual structures, but also took into account the historic value of groups of buildings, districts, and even whole communities.



The main waiting room in New York's Pennsylvania Station, demolished in 1965.

But major losses also acted to energize the preservation movement. As planning historian Larry Gerckens has noted, "The demolition of New York City's Pennsylvania Station in 1965, one of the nation's most magnificent railroad stations, shocked many New Yorkers, as well as citizens across the country. Outraged by the fact that there was no legal recourse to stop the demolition (the building was privately owned by the nearly bankrupt Pennsylvania Railroad), New Yorkers responded by enacting later that year a comprehensive landmarks preservation law." See "H is for Historic Preservation," in PCJ #46, Spring 2002.

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The National Historic Preservation Act

Congress, in 1966, enacted the National Historic Preservation Act in response to the widespread demolition of historic structures. Among the findings set out in the Act:

- the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage;
- the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people;
- historic properties significant to the Nation's heritage are being lost or substantially altered, often inadvertently,

with increasing frequency;

- the preservation of this irreplaceable heritage is in the public interest so that its vital legacy of cultural, educational, aesthetic, inspirational, economic, and energy benefits will be maintained and enriched for future generations of Americans.

One of Act's key provisions – Section 106 – established a process for addressing the adverse impact of federally funded, licensed, permitted, or regulated activities on historic resources. Along with an even stronger provision applicable to federally funded highway projects (Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966), local preservationists, for the first time, had a real say in the design and location of many projects affecting historic structures and districts.

“Preservation does not mean merely the setting aside of thousands of buildings as museum pieces. It means retaining the culturally valuable structures as useful objects: A home in which human beings live, a building in the service of some commercial or community purpose. Such preservation insures structural integrity, relates the preserved object to the life of the people around it, and not least, it makes preservation a source of positive financial gain rather than another expense.”

– Lady Bird Johnson, from *Foreword to With Heritage So Rich* (1966).

because they help to distinguish what is historic from what is merely old.

 *Identifying Historic Resources.*

In recent years, historic preservation has continued to expand its focus, with new interest in preserving and enhancing the distinctive character of communities, and even regions.

BENEFITS OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Since the 1970s, mounting evidence has shown that historic preservation can be a powerful community and economic development strategy. Evidence includes

architecture, archaeology, and culture of the United States. These are buildings, districts, sites, objects, and structures that possess “integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association,” and that:

- Are associated with historic events;
- Are associated with “the lives of persons significant in our past,”
- Embody distinctive architectural or artistic characteristics;
- Have yielded or are likely to yield information important in history or prehistory.

Ordinarily properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years are not considered eligible for the National Register. Representatives of state historic preservation offices and organizations can help with determinations regarding whether a building is historic.

Historic Preservation Planning

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Historic preservation became federal policy with the adoption of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966. This law was enacted following completion of *With Heritage So Rich*, a comprehensive report undertaken by the U.S. Conference of Mayor's Special Committee on Historic Preservation in response to the substantial loss of historic and cultural resources brought about by urban renewal and construction of the interstate highway system.¹

Among other things, the NHPA authorized creation of a National Register of Historic Places, directing the U.S. Secretary of Interior to maintain a list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture. Indeed, within twenty-five years of its passage there were over 8,000 historic districts listed in the National Register.

¹ This was no ordinary Committee. It was chaired by Alabama's Albert Rains (who had been an influential member of Congress until retiring in 1965), and included then U.S. Senator Edmund Muskie; Vermont Governor Philip Hoff, and Gordon Gray, Chairman of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, among others. A number of distinguished historians and planners also contributed to the Committee's report.

The NHPA also authorized the establishment of historic preservation offices in each state, and mandated the creation of standards and guidelines for various preservation activities, such as how to identify historic resources. The survey process and criteria for evaluating potential historic resources are important components of preservation planning



Identifying Historic Resources

Historic buildings and neighborhoods often evoke passionate feelings. The threat of demolition can spark heated community debates about whether a building is historic or not. As these discussions take place, some community members may conclude that others think “everything is historic” and must be “saved.” In fact, however, preservation professionals and commissions make determinations about what is or is not historic based on the National Register of Historic Places criteria which have been tested, used, and periodically revised since their initial development in 1966.

The National Register is the official list of properties significant in the history,

statistics compiled from annual surveys conducted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and statewide Main Street programs, state-level tourism and economic impact studies, and studies that have analyzed the impact of specific actions such as historic designation, tax credits, and revolving loan funds. Among the findings:

- Creation of local historic districts stabilizes, and often increases residential and commercial property values.
- Increases in property values in historic districts are typically greater than increases in the community at large.
- Historic building rehabilitation, which is more labor intensive and requires greater specialization and higher skills levels, creates more jobs and results in more local business than does new construction.

- Heritage tourism provides substantial economic benefits. Tourists drawn by a community's (or region's) historic character typically stay longer and spend more during their visit than other tourists.
- Historic rehabilitation encourages additional neighborhood investment and produces a high return for municipal dollars spent.
- Use of a city or town's existing, historic building stock can support growth management policies by increasing the supply of centrally located housing.

PLANNING FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Elected and appointed officials often face difficult and controversial decisions that affect the character of their communities. Many of these decisions relate to

older and historic buildings, neighborhoods, and commercial districts. Examples include:

- Demolishing an old building or group of buildings to make way for new development such as a chain drugstore or "big box" retailer.
- Constructing a new addition on an existing building.
- Constructing a new building in an older neighborhood.
- Replacing historic building elements such as windows, doors, porches, roofs, or original siding materials.

When making these decisions, elected and appointed officials look to their community's long-range plan, zoning ordinances, and related land use regulations. In many communities, these documents provide little guidance in terms of historic preservation. While plans or ordinances may reference (often in an appendix) those buildings or neighborhoods listed in National and State Registers of Historic Places, this information, in and of itself, is of minimal value to decision makers. Without more, simply being listed in the National or State Registers only provides limited protection from federal or state actions that may adversely affect historic resources.²

Preservation planning is key to establishing public policies and strategies that can help prevent the loss of historic resources. It provides a forum for discussion and education about issues related to historic resources and development. This includes important questions such as when and where it may be appropriate

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² This is not to say that protection from adverse federal or state actions is unimportant. For example, when projects involving federal funds (e.g., highway construction) affect structures or historic districts listed in the National Register, the federal government must consider these impacts and, at least, try to address them (e.g., by considering alternative approaches which might have less harmful impacts). This can be of great value in ensuring the protection of a community's historic resources.

Listing in the National Register also provides access to public and private sector financial incentives. Many communities use the survey and listing process as a first step in downtown or neighborhood revitalization. Historic districts are also popular destinations for tourism activities, and can serve as catalysts for commercial development.



JEFFERSONVILLE, INDIANA:

A "Main Street" City

Jeffersonville, Indiana (pop. 27,000), like more than 1,600 other cities and towns across the country, has benefited from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street approach to downtown revitalization. According to Jay Ellis, Executive Director of Jeffersonville Main Street, Inc., "Main Street programs are about community building with a historic preservation ethic."

As Ellis describes, "downtown Jeffersonville has seen dozens of properties saved by utilizing historic preservation as an economic development tool. Our Main Street program has been involved with the transformation of several dilapidated buildings into strong contributors to the local economy. We've been able to recapture dollars that were leaking out of downtown."

Ellis points out that in Jeffersonville, the rehabilitation of historic structures has been accompanied by sensitively designed infill projects on vacant lots. The results have paid off for the city in terms of significantly increased property valuations. "With infill projects we've seen some properties increase in value

from \$10,000 to \$500,000 in just 10 years," he said. As Jeffersonville's Main Street director succinctly puts it, "reusing land and buildings makes sound financial sense."

For more information, contact Jay Ellis at: 812-283-0301; Coresea@aol.com. Information about the National Trust's Main Street Center can be found at: <www.mainstreet.org>.



Old and new blend together in downtown Jeffersonville, Indiana. Schimpff's Confectionery in downtown Jeffersonville has (left) been owned and operated by the

Schimpff family for 112 years. The owners live above the shop. Nearby is a new infill project housing a florist shop on the ground floor, and two large apartments above it.