

Livable Communities

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In his keynote speech at the 47th National Preservation Conference in St. Louis in September 1993, director of HUD's special-actions office George Latimer described a community as a "set of connections between people." In his view, historic preservation was a "connecting tissue" that tied people with one another and with their place of residence and business. Historic places form a common ground of understanding and association between people.

The framers of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 clearly envisioned a national list of historic and archeological properties as an integral part of community revitalization. Section (b)(6) of the Act states that "the increased knowledge of our historic resources, the establishment of better means of identifying and administering them, and the encouragement of their preservation will improve the planning and execution of federally-assisted projects and will assist economic growth and development."

The National Register can be viewed as a list that is maintained and expanded within the National Park Service. However, the program is more than a list. Official recognition provides access to a large and expanding set or "web" of incentives, grants, and protective measures for historic places at all levels of government. These governmental programs stimulate pri-

vate sector investment in historic properties because they often are tied to National Register listing. Using the National Register and the related governmental programs can enhance strong communities, transform declining ones, and provide a strong sense of identity essential to the long-term health of communities.

Listing in the National Register constitutes an early step in developing programs aimed at protecting the character of older communities. The process of identifying historic and archeological properties involves defining that historic character and communicating this information to community residents and governmental leaders. The accumulated and evaluated information included in National Register nomination forms and registration documentation frequently leads to the development of historic preservation components in municipal master and comprehensive plans, guides for future planning sympathetic to the community's character, local preservation ordinances, design guidelines for rehabilitation, housing programs, neighborhood protection programs, rehabilitated building stock, and educational and interpretive programs for the public.

Beyond official processes and tangible documents, National Register listing turns around communities because of myriad individual decisions made by community leaders, residents, and property owners. National Register listing provides official recognition that can convince people that older properties can be assets. Listing confirms a community's cultural authenticity. It also forms the touchstone for future actions based on this authenticity because it makes listed properties eligible for programs designed to assist with community livability.

Many communities wish to frame their future in terms of their past. For example, the community of Steilacoom on the southeastern shore of Puget Sound nominated its historic district to the National Register and gained listing for this property in 1975. This recognition was bolstered by local planning activities that cited the community's origins in 1854 as the center of a booming lumber industry. Its character was defined by basic wood-frame structures that persisted beyond the collapse of the lumber industry, waning of the town's summer resort phase, and spread of suburban development from Seattle and Tacoma.

Following listing of the historic district in the National Register, Steilacoom established a preservation review board and land management commission and involved them in the review of building permits. The recently published design standards increased public awareness and established minimum standards for making design decisions and promoting consistency in the decision-making process.

Located a short distance from the downtown, the Stuart Neighborhood in Kalamazoo, MI, used the



These historic row houses at Memorial and Viola Streets, are part of the Parkside Historic District in Philadelphia. Photo by George E. Thomas.



This elegant built-in armoire graces the second floor bedroom of a Parkside Avenue residence, Parkside Historic District, Philadelphia. Photo by Charles Metzger.

National Register process to define its origins and character. The Stuart Neighborhood Historic District was designated a local historic district in 1977 and listed in the National Register in 1983. The registration documentation describes the development of the neighborhood from the 1860s to the 1920s, when it was home to prosperous businessmen and self-employed craftsmen. Most of the building stock is made up of detached frame houses, many of which are large in size and handsomely detailed and sit back from tree-lined streets.

Following listing in the National Register, the Stuart Neighborhood Historic District embarked on an ambitious housing rehabilitation program generated through private investment. A local non-profit organization offers low-interest loans for low- and moderate-income residents and many residences have been converted into affordable apartments. According to the director of the Stuart Area Restoration Association: "Listing in the local, state, and national registers has made an immeasurable difference in the growth, development, and condition of the neighborhood through community participation in preservation activities and utilizing funds available for historic districts. Other neighborhoods have seen the positive effects of listing exemplified in the Stuart Neighborhood and have pursued listing as well."¹

Listing in the National Register often attracts public incentives and private sector capital investment for older neighborhoods when few other options are available. When Jim Brown formed the Parkside Historic

Preservation Corporation in the Parkside neighborhood in Philadelphia in the 1970s, the area had become distressed because of the flight of the middle-class in the post-World War II years. The Corporation undertook rehabilitation projects and hired an architectural historian to prepare a nomination of the area to the National Register in 1983. Today, the Parkside Historic District is experiencing a revival through the creative use of "layered funding," which includes Community Development Block Grants, city funding, support from foundations and local institutions, the federal investment tax credit, and below-market rate mortgage loans for affordable housing. The projects also boast community management of rental properties.

These examples and numerous others across the country demonstrate that listing in the National Register plays an important role not only in attracting economic investment and benefits, but also in fostering community awareness and pride in one's heritage. The results of National Register listing allow for a community to experience this pride as a group and to work together to protect and interpret this heritage.

Notes

¹ Leslie Decker, director, Stuart Area Restoration Association, to Jennifer Meisner, telephone conversation, n.d.

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This essay was based largely on the paper the author presented at the National Preservation Conference session on "Using the National Register in Promoting Livable Communities." She appreciates the assistance of Jennifer A. Meisner, National Council for Preservation Education intern from the University of Washington, who compiled the research information on case study communities. She also thanks Tanya Velt, National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers employee, whose M.A. thesis for Cornell University, "The Influence of National Register of Historic Places Listing of Historic Districts on Local Preservation Planning," was helpful in defining the role of the National Register in local planning.