

Urban Treasures or Urban Nightmares?

Would we rather have cities that we treasure as the repositories of our civilization, as engines of economic development, and as the culturally-rich habitat of diverse multitudes of our citizenry, or would we rather have cities that are no less than ongoing nightmares for anyone who would reside there, visit, or even contemplate from afar?

It is our choice. It turns out that preservation programs, initiated at the federal level in 1966 with state and local government following suit, can probably claim more success, per dollar invested, in alleviating urban problems. With average annual funding of under \$60 million for the entire country, National Register designation, Section 106 review, the Main Street program, and the federal rehabilitation tax credit—in partnership with local districting and state programs—have done far more for towns and cities across the nation than multi-billion dollar programs. Yet, they often remain a low priority for officials involved at local, state, and federal levels.

Historic preservation continues to be confined—in the federal budget and in people's minds—to a minute niche reserved for saving old buildings. The many benefits that come from saving old buildings are not acknowledged. Our leaders often choose to cling to other programs and to ignore proposals such as the homebuyer tax credit, which would turn those nightmare vacant properties, and neighborhoods, into treasures for their owners, neighbors, and citizens everywhere.

Where preservation programs have been used, we can point with pride to urban treasures in the form of healthy neighborhoods, thriving Main Streets, and impressive landmarks, as well as to the beautiful countryside, that has not been squandered and destroyed by shopping malls and suburban sprawl. Yet environmental activists continue to ignore preservation for combating unbridled destruction of the natural environment for building materials, highways, and suburban development. Urban leaders, tempted to take the easy way out with demolition, continue to ignore preservation as a tool for countering the resegregation of America, building pride in neighborhoods, and recapturing the essential urban middle class. Concerned citizens continue to look for short-term solutions to major problems such as crime and

ignore preservation as a useful tool in achieving long-term results.

It is our choice. And it is our duty as preservationists to speak out more loudly and clearly, because the other urban programs are not going to work if we continue to destroy our historic built environment and ignore it as an economic, cultural, and sociological resource. A civilization without cities is an oxymoron. Such a civilization cannot be, and it is a disaster if we continue to deceive ourselves that it can.

New Orleans, like many other cities, has benefited greatly from historic preservation in the past three decades. Our Warehouse District, in spite of widespread urban population decline, now has more than 3,000 people living there, as compared with 1984, when there were none. Our tourism industry, verified by surveys to be dependent on historic attractions and ambiance, is one of the strongest in the country—without casino gambling and other cataclysmic and contrived attractions. Many of our historic neighborhoods have repelled urban decline and have never looked better. Vacant office buildings, large and small, usually historic, are purchased and developed for hotel and residential conversion.

Although it was local civic action in the early 1940s that ensured the preservation of the Vieux Carré by creation of the Vieux Carré Commission, it was not until 1975 that additional local historic districts were added. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was, therefore, an important factor in the interim in countering suburban sprawl and urban renewal that was destructively well underway in other cities by that time. Since 1975, local preservation coupled with the national programs has been responsible for most of our city's enduring success stories.

In historic areas where New Orleanians have chosen not to use this formula, we have failure, evidenced by slum and blight, closed schools, violence, unemployment, and hopelessness. Such failure affects the entire city—we should not be satisfied to have success in certain neighborhoods and on portions of historic thoroughfares. Preservation has been good for our city, yet it is a low priority when it comes to planning, policy, and funding.

It is interesting that developers, for better or worse, want to be right in the middle of older

neighborhoods that reflect successful preservation efforts; rarely do developers invest in historic areas where we have chosen not to use historic preservation programs.

Even though a well-maintained historic built environment reflects and stimulates a healthy economy, a sense of community, a rich cultural heritage, and a better quality of life in general, the words “historic preservation” are rarely spoken by elected officials and civic leaders, unless to a preservation group. One reason is the so-called image, or elitist problem, which preservation groups everywhere attempt to counter with better public relations—the facts speak for themselves. Another often discussed reason is the disinterest in history. The “takings” issue and pressure from developers will always present blockades for preservation. There is the failure to understand that preservation is good for the economy. But, today, after several decades of suburbanization and urban decline, there are a host of new reasons that preservation is not embraced, which helps to explain the “image” problem, and that go beyond the failure to understand the importance of our history and pressure from development. For example:

- Many Americans do not care about cities. The generalizations that Americans have never been fond of cities has some basis historically and may be more valid today. Recently, a national columnist said that “Most Americans saw the postwar exodus from cities as social progress.” That thinking seems now to be entrenched. A corollary to this is our tendency to be a throw-away society. If enough Americans do not care about cities, then there will not be support for programs that save them.
- Americans do not realize that preservation programs benefit the urban poor, with on-going, independent positive impact that welfare and low-income housing programs simply do not have. Preservation programs generate economic activity and a tax base desperately needed by the poor, and build strong neighborhoods filled with role models who otherwise would have moved to the suburbs. Yet concern for the urban poor is typically confined to assistance and “bottom up” programs that are not designed to address the real source—primarily population decline—of urban poverty. There is the a “you care about buildings; we care about people” attitude.
- Those who are concerned about American cities in general nevertheless confuse the issue of urban decline with poverty. Certainly they are related, just as all urban issues are related, and all efforts to address urban issues should

be carefully coordinated and fully used in planning. Preservation is usually left out, at best reluctantly, or grudgingly, included. Poverty programs alone simply will not revitalize any city. Yet, involved citizens typically think they will.

- Even though most people realize that urban decline began with the exodus of the middle class to the suburbs, there is little interest in attracting the middle class back to the city. Examples, most using preservation in one way or another, prove that it can be done. Yet in spite of success stories, there is insistence that it cannot be done, and there is often opposition on the basis that rebuilding the urban middle class is contrary to the needs of the poor, helping people who do not need help. There is no such thing as a thriving city without a strong middle class.
- Seldom do leaders acknowledge the impact of preservation programs. Even though the Main Street and rehabilitation tax credits programs have had incredible success, leaders turn to other programs with billion dollar budgets, refusing to increase preservation budgets or to support new programs. While there are many co-sponsors for the federal rehabilitation tax credit for homeowners, there are not enough, even though it would have a major impact in inner-city neighborhoods suffering from population decline and abandoned houses.
- Citizens remaining in declining neighborhoods have been told to fear historic preservation efforts (such as local designation and marketing efforts to attract buyers for vacant historic buildings in their neighborhood), as if they were more dangerous than drug dealers or casino gambling, because they might “gentrify” the neighborhood. Buildings are demolished one by one for fear of displacement. Fear of change seems to be greater than the fear of violence.
- Often vested interest groups in American cities are opposed to true revitalization which preservation programs would initiate. They feel threatened, fearing that the catalytic, independent private sector investment that preservation programs generate would cause less need for their service or patronage.
- Many large cities have a majority black population. The re-segregation of America, though actually an economic phenomenon as the poor are left behind in the inner cities, has strengthened opposition to preservation because of the mistaken belief that preservation is of interest only to white people and that it would benefit only white people. It is unfortunate to assume that an interest in

preservation is related to race. This belief is a major factor in the failure to implement more preservation programs in urban areas.

- Political correctness prevents us from discussing issues openly, from using successful preservation programs more fully. We are reluctant to abandon typical rhetoric about urban issues.

It would be a simple cost-efficient matter to strengthen historic preservation programs at all levels and include them in strategies to reverse decline in cities. In spite of the urban nightmares that so many American inner cities are today, there is still hope. We do not have the problems that developing nations have in their cities. Our country still has a strong middle class providing social and economic mobility, even though this effect is very much diminished with the geographical separation of suburb and inner city. We have

preservation programs that are among the best in the world.

Americans seem to be in denial about what has happened to their cities and about the fact that the situation is getting worse. We seem to have accepted a city, or many of its parts, as places of poverty and violence. Yet it need not be. We have not done our best; we have not used all that is available. If we acknowledge the need for thriving cities inhabited by people of all income levels and if we recognize the resource of our historic built environment and embrace proven preservation programs, many of our urban problems will diminish, and we can then focus on others. It is our choice. We can choose to turn our urban nightmares into treasures for all.

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New technologies such as the military's Global Positioning System (GPS) are now being used to more effectively monitor and document cultural resources. The Cultural Resources Geographic Information Systems Lab (CRGIS) of Heritage Preservation Services, National Park Service, recently conducted training for members of the U.S. International Council on Monuments and Sites (US/ICOMOS) at two World Heritage sites, Monticello and the University of Virginia. Prior to the survey, hand-held GPS units are checked and programmed (left photograph). A team member is shown taking satellite readings at the perimeter of the south colonnade of Monticello using the GPS unit (right photograph). GPS can be used to establish absolute geographic points for both manmade and natural features.

After performing an extensive review of Monticello's features, GPS data is downloaded from remote units onto computer workstations. The data is then compared and corrected with data recorded at a remote base station. This map data is now the basis for a comprehensive Geographic Information System (GIS) for the Charlottesville, VA regional area. There are many possible uses for GIS, such as the monitoring of remote cultural properties, as a tool for enhanced interpretation of our cultural heritage, and as an aid for land-use management. The NPS CRGIS lab has used GPS/GIS to facilitate cooperative planning between national parks and state and local governments, as well as the documentation of cultural resources within Civil War battlefields, national parks, national recreation areas, and state historic sites. Photos by Matthew Nowakowski and Khaki Rodway.

