HISTORIC PRESERVATION: AN INTEGRAL INGREDIENT IN SOLVING THE CONTEMPORARY URBAN PLIGHT

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It is a compulsion that has pervaded practically every facet of the manmade world: the impulse to protect the past from the inevitably approaching future. Ever since humans collected enough years to feel the tingling of a sentiment we now know to be nostalgia, we've done just about everything in our power to prevent the past from dissolving: we've saved heirlooms, repaired works of art, held onto bygone eras unrelentingly...

The fact of the matter is, the world has made a sweeping effort to grip tenaciously onto the pillars of the past, operating under the assumption that if not for the glow made possible by salvaged artifacts, earlier centuries will recede into darkness.

Within this endeavor sits historic preservation, a camp of remembrance perhaps most relevant to the modern human, as it, unlike other fields, involves the physical settings we habitually inhabit; the buildings, towns, and regions in which we conduct our daily lives, organize our communities.

There are a number of concerns regarding the practicalities of historic preservation; is it necessary? beneficial? if so, to whom? But there is also a great deal of evidence that supports this sector of urban planning often considered trivial and irrelevant. These findings that affirm preservation's benefits, lend themselves to suggest preservation's large scale impact, thusly proposing its critical participation in solving the contemporary urban plight.

The Fischer Building, Chicago, IL. Photo by Gabrielle M. Peterson

I. Why Preserve?

Perhaps it would be most logical to begin at the core of it all: why preserve? It would seem humans are innate antiquers, the yearning to cradle the significant within us "[ever] since there were first things worthy of preservation."[1] With this desire to preserve objects came some imperative stipulations, one begging the question of what, specifically, we are trying to preserve, the other, asking us...why?

Victor Hugo, 19th century poet and novelist, claimed that architecture represented the essence of that very era, the genius of the age.[2]

1. Debora de Moraes Rodrigues, "The Impulse to Preserve: A Theory of Historic Preservation," University of Pennsylvania (1998).

2. Ibid.

The Monadonock Building, Chicago, IL. Photo by Kevin B. Clark

But a developed discourse wondered if that meant we are only to preserve the "genius" buildings, and if so, how are we to know what constitutes genius, and is this standard not inordinately subjective? It was then asked what would come with the absence of standards, and the attempt to preserve everything despite its quality or historical merit. Cities would undoubtedly be full of old, decrepit buildings, some rehabilitated into new and relevant spaces, others carrying on their original and increasingly impractical features, no matter the obsolescence. It was understood that the built city would continue to grow, and couldn't manage the maintenance of an ever-expanding stock of buildings. These questions therefore became particularly pressing, as it was acknowledged that each individual building could not be indefinitely preserved, for there would always be many that were structurally unstable, or spatially nonsensical, or just plain outdated. The National Register of Historic Places, for the most part, aptly determines when a building is of historical significance or architectural novelty (or magnitude). However, even once the motivation for preservation is established, what exactly is being preserved? Is it the role and function that the building initially served? If the building under consideration was built to be a button factory, is it dishonorable to use it as anything else? Or is it the mere edifice we are preserving, and if so, can we call that true preservation?

Nick Kalogeresis, Vice President of Chicago-based urban planning firm, The Lakota Group, and esteemed historic preservationist seems to think so, and disputes the notion that preserving a building through adaptation is historically disloyal. "No building is going to have the same use for all of its existence. All buildings, whether you construct them new or old, are at some point going to change. Even big boxes. Walmart could be around in a hundred years, or it could not be. At some point, what are you going to do with these buildings? If you ultimately end up saving something, you're going to need to use it in a new way eventually."

Historic preservation, as Nick puts it, is the management of important places, whether commended for their historical significance, their reputable architecture, or their representation of a venerated era. Despite concerns prompted by the ubiquitously uninformed belief that preservation is a field separate from urban planning, historic preservation is very much an integral piece in the larger organization of a city, and bears an impact that goes beyond its aesthetic captivation.

For one, preservation goes hand in hand with education, supporters taking the firm stance that history cannot be taught without historical objects. Commonly believed by many, it is an advantage limited to the fragments of historical residue that have persisted to learn about

an era or a historical figure, and to have some piece of physical context in which their lifespan occurred. Yes, photographs can document, archives can catalog, but when it comes to historical education, there are few things as impactful as a firsthand encounter with an object that indeed bared direct witness to the period of study.[3]

II. Preservation and Community Building

Architecture as Iconography

Buildings are perhaps the most prominent urban objects as they populate spaces with an unequivocal presence. They are manmade mountains, defining the environment and expanse of their respective regions. Historic buildings are integral to this definition, as they are primary apostles of city character and charm, individuality and context. They insert the space into a historical dialogue, forcing the observer to acknowledge a time outside him or herself, to recognize the obvious aesthetic differences, and to envision what could have prompted those stylistic values. Such is the spiraling condition of history — the many insights a single structure can reveal.

One such insight is the architectural sensibility of the time, when different construction methods were utilized, different aesthetics praised, different motivations for development nurtured, and different standards held. Hugo, in his "A Note on the Destruction of Monuments in France" denounces the senseless disposal of architecturally significant buildings, emphasizing the impossibility of replicating "such works of art. Hugo called for legislation to "protect and preserve [the] medieval buildings," explaining that if France did not take any measures to save its stock of medieval architecture, the country's remaining architectural inventory would be comprised of expendable and structurally feeble buildings; the question of whether or not to preserve becoming irrelevant, as "there would be nothing left worth preserving."[4]

A phenomenon known as "neighborhood creation myths" takes one step further to promote this idea of architectural icons, "provide[ing] legibility in a built environment and an origins story for the people who live in it."[5] Places indeed speak to people in different ways, the impressions they impart, varying from person to person based on the

3. Sarah N. Conde, "Striking A Match in the Historic District: Opposition to Historic Preservation and Responsive Community Building," Georgetown University (2007).

4. Debora de Moraes Rodrigues, "The Impulse to Preserve: A Theory of Historic Preservation," University of Pennsylvania (1998).

5. Sarah N. Conde, "Striking A Match in the Historic District: Opposition to Historic Preservation and Responsive Community Building," Georgetown University (2007).

Kohl's Mega Store, Will County, IL. Photo taken by The Lakota Group.

biases we individually carry. However, these "myths" help to break through the differences between residents as the commonalities of shared spaces, towns, and neighborhoods are emphasized through an almost folklore-style anecdote. Often combining fact with fiction, creation myths expand upon a town's natural nascence and administer a dosage of enchantment into the locally accepted perception of how a town or community came to be. In essence, through the use of old buildings, communities can create an "iconography" that reinforces a conceptive infrastructure in the city's narrative landscape.

Robert E. Stipe, Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture Design at North Carolina State University, was fervent in his belief that preservation be more than an act of simply saving pretty buildings. He knew there needed to be a substantial nucleus that would not only resonate with all walks of society, but would also function as a way for communities to better themselves. Preservation, according to Stipe, would need to "look beyond [the] traditional preoccupation with architecture [and] aesthetics, [and] direct its energies to a broader and more constructive social purpose."[6] This purpose would translate to community-building, a function manifested through a variety of operative tactics, one being the emotional, as seen through the utilization of creation myths.

Economic Development

Extending beyond the emotional, however, when preservation widens its perimeters, it becomes "more process than goal,"[7] focusing less on an ultimate endpoint and more on the significance of each stride. This approach, placing value on every step of the process rather than just the objective, highlights the tangible benefits of preservation, which include investment opportunities, increased property values, and neighborhood stability, to name a few. It's no secret that towns and regions that place a solid emphasis on historic preservation are likely to have a steadily growing economic sector what with the new industries, jobs, and resource conservation that preservation promotes. Judith Kremen, Executive Director of the Baltimore County Historical Trust vouches for this economic boom:

> "Historic preservation increases the demand for labor and increases business for local supplies; is an effective economic development strategy for attracting and retaining small businesses; stabilizes neighborhoods and creates viable business districts; [and] effectively targets areas appropriate for public attention. It has also been connected to saving tax money by reusing buildings and infrastructure, conserving resources, preventing urban sprawl, revitalizing community centers, and can impact and encourage private investment in an area by demonstrating public commitment to an area." [8]

Gentrification

This is the point at which anti-preservationists take the stand. Yes, all of these economic opportunities are arising from preservation, but are they necessarily good for the community, and if so, which community? It is ignorant to presume we are one body of people living in one town, with identical aspirations and circumstances, but somehow, this is what we infer when we both uncritically attribute the wealth of a community to the sole effort of historic preservation, and also assume that a community's affluence is reflected in all incomes of that community. Not only are there a number of people NOT affected by this economic development, but there are people whose histories are not even represented by the strategies used to achieve said development. Lawyer Sarah Conde speaks on the issue of "selecting a history," and disputes the common false notion among historians that their field is a "fluid" practice. "Neighborhood history rarely develops in a single trajectory, usually resembling more of what author and history professor at SUNY Plattsburgh, James M. Lindgren, calls the "dendrochronology" of a neighborhood."[9] She supports fellow lawyer Carol M. Rose's assertion that although every piece of historical perception is elastic, transforming alongside social interests, "the physically weighted field of preservation risks telling an uninformed, abridged version of a neighborhood's true history."[10]

This isn't so hard to understand, as unflattering stories of

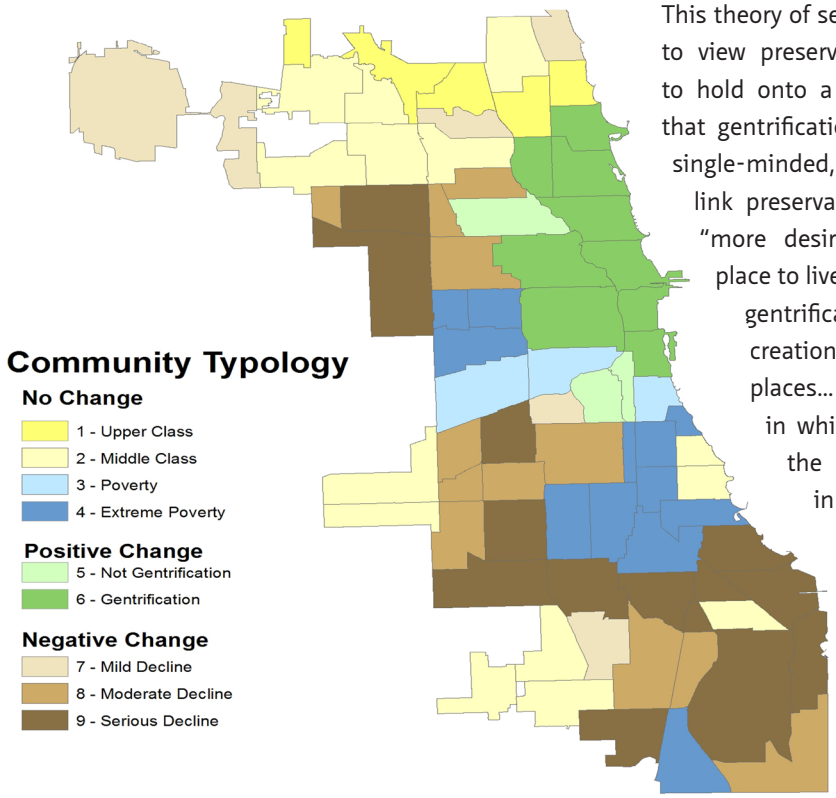
6. Sarah N. Conde, "Striking A Match in the Historic District: Opposition to Historic Preservation and Responsive Community Building," Georgetown University (2007).

7. Ibid.

8. Denise Lapenas & Bob Turner, "Historic Preservation: Gentrification or Economic Development," Skidmore College, December 2002.

9. Sarah N. Conde, "Striking A Match in the Historic District: Opposition to Historic Preservation and Responsive Community Building," Georgetown University (2007).

10. Ibid.



A socio-economic map of the city of Chicago in 2014.
The University of Illinois at Chicago News Center.

discrimination, corruption, or poverty aren't particularly endorsing for towns. However, the faults, along with the attributes, are what comprise a complete and real human place, and though it isn't very sparkly, the bad deserves just as much acknowledgement as the good.

The wealthy and white are historically the ones whose pasts have been highlighted; whose events, victories, and prosperous (as well as despondent) eras have been elevated and sustained. This selective history, however, "perpetuate[s] limited notions of American identity,"[11] and promotes a false representation of what America was then, and how it continues to be today.

9. Sarah N. Conde, "Striking A Match in the Historic District: Opposition to Historic Preservation and Responsive Community Building," Georgetown University (2007).

This theory of selective histories, although valid, is failing to view preservation as anything other than a desire to hold onto a collection of ideologies. The argument that gentrification is fueled by preservation is similarly single-minded, as its basis is rooted in notions that link preservation efforts to a consequently "better," "more desirable," and therefore "more exclusive" place to live... It is true, there is much to oppose with gentrification: its displacing of entire populaces, its creation of more and more financially unilateral places... However, we have to think of the direction in which preservation is moving, and consider the possibility that preservation does not inherently perpetuate gentrification, rather, it is how we employ preservation, the areas we seek to initiate it in, and the functions we give to the buildings we save. Of course, if we are only instituting preservation in upper-middle class communities, the community's demographics will remain status quo, if not grow even more disproportionate.

However, what if we expel those energies in lower-income areas? What if we use those old buildings for low-income housing? Public housing, as it predominantly stands right now, is made up of new developments constructed from low quality, temporary materials. In the short term, buildings made of inexpensive elements make for an endeavor more economically feasible than the erection of structurally sound buildings. But what if we take an old, well-constructed building and make it new? What if we convert an old section of a middle-class neighborhood, rehabilitate it, and dedicate it to community apartments? Or public spaces? Over the past few years, there have been tremendous leaps to direct the eye of preservation towards diversifying as opposed to its traditional and indirect preoccupation of further contributing to segregation. Preservation critics must acknowledge that although there

Heartland Alliance Affordable Housing Units, Chicago, IL. Photos are taken by Heartland Alliance, and can be found at www.heartlandalliance.com

have been past projects that have not necessarily catered to an all-inclusive social betterment, things are changing, and just as the world is not as it was ten years ago, preservation isn't either. "Historic preservation now celebrates and champions the neighborhoods, downtowns, and rural areas that are less grand architecturally, but perhaps even more significant in the building of America."[12]

III. Decentralization

Urban Sprawl

But could historic preservation be aiming to preserve something other than architecture? Could it have a goal independent of the community-building it seems to foster; the increasingly diverse neighborhoods it has a hand in? It seems we've heard endlessly about urban sprawl and its eventual lead up to the degradation of the American town. "Infilling," or the process of filling empty lots or vacant spaces in pre-existing, settled regions (typically urban) is one way to counter sprawl, which is perhaps too infrequently not connected to preservation. In actuality, preservation was what began the wave of thought that accentuated the utility of pre-existing infrastructure. This means that to restore, to rehabilitate, to infill, and repurpose are all commandments pioneered by preservation, representing its large-scale objective in preserving perhaps the most basic urban concept that exists — the centralized space.

Do you recall hearing, at one point or another, the comments of elderly people, renouncing the way cities have evolved and wistfully recounting the days when the butcher was located next to the grocery store, and the doctor right across the street from the church? Typically, we dismiss comments like these and nod our heads politely, chalking it up to the changes that so naturally accompany the passing of time. Yes, most towns grow, necessitating an expansion that inevitably destabilizes the centralized node that communities are built around from their inception, however, urban sprawl does not stem from this organic growth.

On the contrary, it begins with developers seeking a cheap and profitable method of building. Interested in

12. Donovan D. Rypkema, "Historic Preservation and Affordable Housing: The Missed Connection," the National Trust for Historic Preservation, August, 2002.

maximizing their gains, they use inexpensive and ill-lasting materials, in addition to unsettled and remote land. Sprawl is a haven for unilateral, single-use developments, adding to the artificial nature of its existence. Still, with cheaper and usually larger homes with more backyard space and updated amenities, homes in these developments often sell fast, creating a demand. Slowly, the development grows, warranting an expansion of infrastructure, ultimately funded by taxpayers. Economically, this doesn't make much sense, as the entire community is essentially paying for these private developers to turn over a profit, but from an environmental standpoint, this is a similarly irrational way of settling. With more infrastructure comes more roads, more traffic, more pollution... F. Kain Benfield, a prominent urban planner, argues that even if these developments are high-quality, well-built facilities that boast the approval of both planners and architects alike, they will never foster sustainability by nature of their "leapfrog" distance from the other inhabitable areas of the region.[13] The larger the development gets? The greater the incentive is for big box stores and strip malls to line the growing number of placeless, arterial roadways containing gas stations, fast-food restaurants, and vast parking lots.

Will County, IL. An example of a sprawl-perpetuating development. Photo taken by The Lakota Group.

Sustainability, quality of life, infrastructure, community health, and economic development are all components that are greatly affected by urban sprawl, a detriment potentially avoidable if a community is to grow organically outwards as opposed to being stretched thin like a piece of old chewing gum. This natural development would most certainly require the use of preexisting structures, meaning rehabbing and repurposing already constructed buildings, while also taking the space between said buildings and infilling. Of course, this would be a more initially expensive process than it would be to construct disposable residences, but would ultimately create a system for natural and precipitous urban expansion, and in turn, grant historic preservation the capacity to save the U.S. from abandoning its original impulse to nurture a community centered around none other than itself, and its prime hubs of livelihood.

Historic preservation is often misunderstood. Whether seen as instrumental in the gentrification of an area, or deemed trivial for the common takeaway that its only objective is to save and showcase pretty buildings, preservation is not typically celebrated or even recognized for its multi-pronged approach to improving communities. It is commonly viewed as an incidental hobby for bored housewives and retired businessmen, and as a mere, soft effort to fulfill the yearning we humans have to pocket the past, save it for posterity or an afternoon snack. Historic preservation may or may not contain any combination of these convictions, but it certainly is buttressed with a larger and more resonant goal: to bring together humans and communities through a multifocal and indiscriminate philosophy that places equal emphasis on all facets of time, all kinds of places, and all types of people.

13. F. Kaid Benfield, "The Environmental Impacts of Land Development Depend Largely on Where We Put It," www.huffingtonpost.com, August 11th, 2015.