

Commentary

A Planner's Role in Preservation

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When I first started my job in 1978 as Executive Director of the Historic Preservation Foundation of North Carolina, as a recent graduate of the Law and Planning joint degree program at Chapel Hill, I constantly had people respond to me with either, "I was expecting someone *much* older" or, "what's a nice young man like you doing in a field like historic preservation?" What they were really expecting was the proverbial blue-haired little old lady with tennis shoes - or at least a gaunt pale man who looked like he wandered out of the library stacks. A sterling pedigree would be a given. Degrees in city and regional planning and law seemed strange.

More than a decade later, I better understand the comments. I realize that there is marked contrast between being involved in history and in historic preservation. The people are different, the goals are different, and the perspective is decidedly different. And yet, many people don't recognize or understand the distinction - sometimes, even, professionals in the field.

Historic preservation is not primarily a business of looking back. At the professional conferences, the talk is more typically about future generations than ancestors. Although the field certainly had its roots in history, and the little old ladies in tennis shoes made an enormous contribution to the cause, historic preservation now encompasses a much broader "quality of life" concern.

If anything, historic preservation is an ethic. The ranks of preservationists are woven into coalitions drawn from a wide variety of disciplines, interested in disparate specific issues. The training of professionals in the field reflect such diverse backgrounds as planning, landscape architecture, architecture, art history, law, business, history, political science, construction, and volunteerism.

The interests of preservationists are interdisciplinary:

Environmental - recycling resources for the benefit of society;

Neighborhood - protecting homes and their residents from intrusion and deterioration;

Housing - providing affordable housing through sensitive and cost-effective rehabilitation;

The Arts - treating the buildings themselves as the most public form of the arts or adaptively using older buildings as art places;

Architecture - providing richness and variety of design;

Building Science - marveling at the quality of early materials and the craft of early construction;

Downtown Revitalization - using older buildings to attract reinvestment in downtown areas and to define a sense of place for a community;

Economic Development - employing the ambiance of history to attract tourists, businesses, and industry; and, of course,

History - using the buildings as a tangible link to the past, defining who we are and where we came from.

If preservation is an ethic and with so many different reference points, how does a planner deal with historic preservation?

First, a planner needs to know what resources are considered valuable and worthy of special consideration. An inventory of properties and areas which have historic, architectural or cultural significance should be as much a part of the planner's daily toolbox as his or her base map. The inventory should be frequently updated, since what our society values constantly evolves. For example, one of the most heavily attended National Register museum houses in the United States is Graceland, the home of Elvis Presley, in Memphis. A more humble example: ten years from now, people will be clamoring to preserve tobacco barns in North Carolina, an omnipresent structure just a decade ago.

Second, the planner should recognize the validity of differing viewpoints about older buildings and landscapes. Just as a good personnel manager will evaluate and take advantage of different personality types, a good planner will view the public's interest in preservation as a resource to be used to community advantage.

All too often, preservationists are viewed as obstructionists or nuisances. Better that they be thought of as change managers. The preservationist is frequently asking - for whatever reason - whether the buildings and landscapes which are in existence are better than those which are proposed as their replacements.

Perhaps the preservationist sees the buildings through different eyes. Many of the properties with which the Preservation Foundation's revolving fund has worked have truly been dilapidated eyesores, and yet the eye of the preservationist was drawn to a different "beauty," one which the community shared after reinvestment and education.

Preservation is no longer simply the domain of a wealthy white population. Different cultures value their own history and icons. If a low-income neighborhood is interested in directing its own destiny through the improvement of its shotgun shacks, can the planner adapt his or her interest in housing to include their rehabilitation rather than replacement? Those turn-of-the-century shotgun houses are probably built better and with higher quality materials than the new apartments or manufactured homes which would replace them. And the neighborhood stays intact, with its own identity, residents and history.

Asking the practicing planner to develop a preservation ethic may be akin to asking someone to "get religion." When people ask me how I developed my own interest in historic preservation, I frequently say that I "caught the disease and can't seem to shake it." I'm only half joking. Once a person learns about older buildings and what they can tell us about our cities, towns, and countrysides, he or she sees places differently. One sees a richness of detail and a variety of building types and discerns a history which makes each city or town different, unique, memorable.

One of the things which I have enjoyed most about working in the field of historic preservation is the people. By and large, they are people who care intensely about their communities; people who sometimes believe that the bottom line is not the only line. They care about the future and about the environment which will be passed along to future generations.

And isn't that what planning is all about? □