Photograph: Getty Images

Historic PRESERVATION meets community development

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While taking a cruise down the Potomac River in 1853, Louise Cunningham was aghast to see that Mt. Vernon, George Washington's stately home, was nearly in ruins. The owner, one of Washington's great-great-nephews, could not maintain it, and neither the federal nor state governments were willing. When Louise wrote her daughter about it, Ann Pamela Cunningham organized the Mt. Vernon Ladies' Association, inviting women from each of the then-30 states to be board members, and raising enough money to buy and rehabilitate the estate.

The Mt. Vernon Ladies' Association (still the owner and operator) was the first U.S. historic preservation organization, and for more than 100 years the national preservation movement followed its example, focusing exclusively on preserving landmark properties through local nonprofit organizations staffed largely by volunteers. Today's approach involves more stakeholders and aims to preserve history while achieving other community goals simultaneously.

Suburbanization

Although the federal government enacted some legislation to protect historic places over the years (notably the Antiquities Act of 1906, protecting prehistoric Native American sites and artifacts on federal lands), it remained largely absent from the historic preservation movement until the 1960s. After a committee report on preservation practices throughout the world, *With Heritage So Rich,* generated momentum, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, creating the National Register of Historic Places, a network of state historic preservation offices, the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and a historic preservation fund.

At the time, communities were undergoing a profound transformation. The GI Bill (1944) had fueled construction of suburban housing subdivisions, and the Interstate Highway Act (1956) had spawned a sprawling network—now almost 50,000 miles.[1] Although originally intended to separate homes and schools from noxious industries, Euclidean zoning (named after Euclid, Ohio) made it difficult to integrate the mix of uses—housing, shopping, offices, entertainment—that cities once enjoyed and that provide economic balance. Also, the accelerated depreciation tax benefit (1954) was attracting millions of dollars to the development of shopping malls.

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These events shifted economic lifeblood from cities to suburbs. The percentage of Americans living in suburbs grew from 23 percent in 1950 to 50 percent in 2000.[2] Fifty-five percent of the nation's housing units are now suburban.[3] And between 1960 and 2003, the amount of U.S. retail space grew from four to 39 square feet *per capita*, as new shopping centers, malls, and discount stores sprouted up in the suburbs, surpassing the amount of retail space Americans' buying power can support.[4] As businesses moved to the suburbs, downtown vacancies triggered a downward spiral of decay and disinvestment. When civic leaders stopped believing their downtowns could recapture economic viability, they started demolishing buildings. No exact count exists of historic buildings torn down between 1960 and 2000 (many using federal urban renewal funds), but hundreds of thousands were probably lost, including scores of New England mills and thousands of houses and commercial buildings in the downtowns of cities like Hartford, Providence, and Springfield.

Preservation and Community Development

The preservation movement responded by, for example, lending support to two laws that have been instrumental in broadening the scope from individual buildings to entire neighborhoods and commercial centers. In 1976 Congress created a program offering tax credits to developers and property owners who rehabilitate historic income-producing buildings. And in 1977 the nonprofit National Trust for Historic Preservation launched the National Main Street Center to help revitalize historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial corridors.

Meanwhile, those concerned about affordable housing were responding to parallel challenges and, like preservationists, were advocating for programs and resources to help solve problems caused or exacerbated by the same forces threatening historic neighborhoods and commercial centers. Three major housing finance intermediaries all appeared around the same time—Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation in 1978, Local Initiatives Support Corporation in 1979, and the Enterprise Foundation in 1982. The low-income housing tax credit was created by the Tax Reform Act of 1986.[5] And the handful of community development corporations (CDCs) seen in the 1960s had grown to almost 2,000 by 1991.[6]

Despite all that community development groups have in common with local Main Street programs, the two movements have had few points of interaction. But the potential is enormous. Consider the following:

- Historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial corridors offer compact development, walkability, jobs, public services, and community gathering places.
- The older houses in inner cities are closer to work, schools, public transportation, and shopping than comparable new houses in suburbs.
- Older and historic houses offer a tangible solution to some affordable housing needs. According to real estate expert Donovan Rypkema, Americans demolish an average of 577 houses over 50 years old every day—more than 6.3 million houses over the past 30 years. Yet, 28 million American households are struggling to find quality affordable housing. One-third of the nation's poorest households already live in older and historic homes, and half of all tenant-occupied older and historic homes rent for less than $500 per month, less than most newly constructed "affordable" units.[7]
- Downtowns and older neighborhoods are already served by fire and police protection, ambulance service, and utilities, and represent public and private investment that, if fully utilized, would not need to be replicated for new shopping centers and neighborhoods.

- The preservation-based national Main Street program generates jobs. Using a common-sense framework for organizing revitalization activities, participating communities have cumulatively experienced more than $31.5 billion in new investment and have generated net gains of more than 72,000 new businesses and 331,000 new jobs.[8]

- Existing buildings use energy resources already spent for construction.

- And from the point of view of preservationists, the budget for construction of new affordable housing surpasses the incentives available for rehabilitating historic buildings for affordable housing.

Time for Collaboration

After 30 years of parallel development, it's time for these movements to join forces. The preservation movement's expertise in reusing existing buildings and the community development movement's capital and real estate experience offer synergies. Already the Providence Preservation Society Revolving Fund partners with local CDCs, and East Carson Main Street in Pittsburgh collaborates with South Side Local Development Corporation, suggesting that a new model might be possible—one that melds skills and resources into a single, cohesive entity with a preservation-based focus on community development.

Groups working to create new housing or to bring supermarkets to inner-city neighborhoods, for example, could increase their use of existing buildings. Preservation groups could increasingly consider the issues that drive community development and seek ways to make historic neighborhoods and commercial corridors easy places for development to occur.

Historic preservation should not be an afterthought but the central value guiding community development practice. Historic places exist because, in every generation, someone has made a decision to keep them in good repair and pass them along. The buildings speak volumes about the people who built them and about their values, dreams, and skills.

America's municipalities can become more environmentally sensitive, culturally rich, economically sound, and reflective of diverse histories if community development helps preserve historic places, augmenting them with new buildings and public spaces representing the best urban design practices of the era in which they are created.

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Endnotes

1 See Federal Highway Administration, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/programadmin/interstate.html.

2 U.S. Census Bureau, "Demographic Trends in the 20th Century," *Census 2000 Special Reports* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2002).

3 U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *American Housing Survey for the United States: 2005* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006).

4 Reported widely by the International Council of Shopping Centers and Bear Stearns. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration's 2003 survey of commercial buildings in the United States, there were 11,192 million square feet of retail space in the nation in 2003. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the country had 287,985,000 residents that year—38.9 square feet of retail space per capita in 2003. Of this, roughly half was in shopping centers and shopping malls. See also http://www.deadmalls.com.

5 The same legislation trimmed the historic rehabilitation tax credit from 25 percent to 20 percent and imposed passive-activity restrictions that made the credit difficult to use.

6 Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, editors, *Urban Problems and Community Development* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1999).

7 Donovan Rypkema, *Historic Preservation and Affordable Housing: The Missed Connection* (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2002), http://www.nationaltrust.org/issues/housing/Missed_Connection.pdf.

8 National Main Street Center, http://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=7966&section=16. See also Mamie Marcuss, "Reviving Main Street: Two New England Case Studies," *Communities & Banking* (winter 2005).