# Preservation for the People

by Levi Powell

Historic downtowns—they are the pride and joy of cities across the States. Millions of Americans can fondly picture the Southern small-town main street: the wide, friendly road lined with stately lampposts, waving flags, green-boughed trees, glass-and-wrought-iron storefronts or brick façades rising above—timelessly designed with rectangular windows perched above balustrades, ornate and expertly sculpted stonework reliefs, the top edges crowned by regal cornices. Perhaps there is even a public square down the road, the grand old county courthouse resting at its center, towers or cupola rising skyward, its magnificent architecture a perennial symbol of American history, prosperity, and culture. Similar specimens across the country need attention, appreciation, and most importantly, care. While many argue that historic buildings are poor investments for local governments, requiring extensive and expensive rehabilitation to meet modern standards and codes and contributing to a process called gentrification, the preservation of historic architecture is economically, environmentally, and culturally beneficial, a multifaceted investment that outweighs the alternatives and makes rehabilitation well worth the price.

America has long recognized the importance of preservation. In the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)—legislation signed into law in 1966 that created the National Register of Historic Places, the list of National Historic Landmarks, and the State Historic Preservation Office—the government asserts, “The Congress finds and declares that . . . the preservation of this irreplaceable heritage is in the public interest so that its vital legacy of cultural, educational,

aesthetic, inspirational, economic, and energy benefits will be maintained and enriched for future generations of Americans . . . .” Congress’ declaration drives home the importance of historic preservation and its many invaluable and indispensable elements that make the country great.

From an economic standpoint, the preservation of historic buildings is usually more cost effective than demolishing the structure and constructing a new building, even if the original is in poor condition. With simple remodels and updates, it is possible to both extend longevity and make buildings functional for modern requirements. From the get-go, historic buildings were built to last. They incorporated materials such as heart pine—an extremely durable and valuable hardwood harvested from the non-living centers of ancient pine trees—marble, brick, copper linings, and other metalwork. Resources and workmanship such as those used in historic buildings are not found today, and it shows. According to the United States General Services Administration (GSA)—which oversees the construction and management of government buildings and commercial real estate—modern buildings constructed in the 1970s and on, including those built by the GSA itself, have “an anticipated life span of 20-30 years, which is the typical lifecycle of modern mechanical systems and also the standard period used for calculating return on investment.” The GSA admits that “unlike their predecessors, these buildings were not constructed to last centuries” (United States, General Services Administration). The GSA also reports that it actively evaluates buildings for eligibility in the National Register of Historic Places as they approach the threshold of a mere fifty years in age, which is apparently an impressive lifetime for modern construction—as opposed to the architectural feats of America’s forefathers, whose works their descendants can use and enjoy hundreds of years later. Clearly, historic buildings have the upper hand when it comes to longevity.

However, the cost of updating these aged buildings to meet modern standards and codes, including expensive remodeling operations to add necessities like HVAC, electric, and water systems and repair any damage or weaknesses in the structure, must be taken into consideration. Despite these aspects, though, rehabilitating historic buildings may be more economically efficient than it first seems. Across America, the economic impact of historic preservation generally is measured by variables such as employment opportunities created, real estate values, effects on tourism in the area, environmental and energy measures, and the revitalization of a town or city's downtown area. A document from the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources (NHDHR) addressing the economic impact of historic preservation unveils staggering statistics regarding the state's preservation feats. Between 2005 and 2016, over $125 million was invested in the rehabilitation of historic buildings through the federal Preservation Tax incentive, and the funded projects went on to generate a revenue of over $160 million in tax dollars for the state—paying for itself and even turning a profit. Additionally, the New Hampshire Land and Community Heritage Investment Program—again between 2005 and 2016—invested just $5 million and leveraged investments of over $25 million for historic preservation and rehabilitation for communities statewide, saving over two hundred buildings by 2016 (New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources). That is a *five-fold* increase in funds. If that does not constitute a worthwhile investment, what does? Halfway across the country, in Texas, an initiative called the Texas Main Street Program has been aiding historic commercial districts with renewal and rehabilitation since 1981. A publication from the University of Texas at Austin and Rutgers University titled "Economic Impact of Historic Preservation in Texas" describes how the Texas Main Street Program uses a four-point approach to accomplish this, focusing on organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring (27). From New Hampshire to Texas, in every

state, preservation is blooming and enriching America's economy. Still, financial incentives are not the end of historic preservation's benefits.

For decades, countries around the globe have been making conscious efforts to reduce humanity's carbon footprint by leaning towards a greener future, and historic preservation has the potential to be a significant contributing factor to that goal. A by-the-numbers section from the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources' document reveals that about 159 million MBTUs of energy are wasted when a historic building is demolished rather than rehabilitated (New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources), which, converted to gallons of gasoline, is nearly 1.4 *million* gallons—over two thousand times the amount the average American burns in an entire year. It is clear that incredible amounts of energy go to waste when historic buildings are not used to their full potential. To put into perspective just how environmentally beneficial historic preservation is—even in comparison to "environmentally friendly" constructions, such as those built using recycled materials and alternate energy sources—look to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which reports on energy efficiency:

Rehabilitating historic properties can be a critical part of promoting energy efficiency by preserving the energy already represented by existing buildings . . . rather than expending additional energy for new construction. A new, green, energy-efficient office building that includes as much as 40 percent recycled materials would nevertheless take approximately 65 years to recover the energy lost in demolishing a comparable existing building.

As the EPA plainly puts it, the greenest building is the one already built. Even if a new construction incorporates impressively high percentages of recycled materials, it still cannot match the energy efficiency of rehabilitating a historic building. However, the EPA also acknowledges that redeveloping and revitalizing historic buildings can pose challenges,

especially with the goal of achieving environmentally sustainable outcomes. When dealing with green building standards, obstacles are often faced because the standards frequently lack clear or definitive actions that specify how to achieve the desired goals. According to the EPA, though, "The value in overcoming these obstacles is clear—not only for the energy benefits they offer, [*sic*] but also for broader economic, cultural, and land use preservation advantages." The EPA highlights the multifaceted benefits of historic preservation, recognizing that it offers significant energy advantages including sustainability and collaboration, taking a holistic approach to the subject in seeing how the elements work together in a way that can build a more equitable and ecological future for all. The benefits that historic preservation supply are superior to those offered by demolition and new construction, including when it comes to the environment.

Architecture has been a cornerstone of cultural identity throughout human history, and it remains so today. That is why preserving the architecture of America's forefathers is a vital piece of the country's heritage, whether it be in across a city, state or region. However, a publication by Phil Rabinowitz from the University of Kansas acknowledges that while many historically significant buildings are architecturally important as well, they do not have to be. That importance can come from their historical and cultural consequentiality alone—and that makes them no less of a priority to be preserved. The KU publication uses George Washington's Revolutionary War headquarters as an example. While it is only a simple stone farmhouse in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, similar in age and construction to hundreds of other surviving historic houses in that area, it is important because of its history and the cultural significance it represents (Rabinowitz). Despite this, though, some argue that historic preservation can actually *negatively* impact culture, specifically by means of an urban redevelopment process called gentrification, which is defined generally as the upgrading of real estate and housing in an area—

including by way of historic rehabilitation—that raises property values and attracts higher-income residents and businesses. Gentrification is not an objectively bad concept; in fact, it has many benefits. The only problem is that it often results in the displacement of the area's original occupants, and some argue, can contribute to problems with socioeconomic and racial ostracization. In an article rather bluntly titled "Bogus 'Historic' Districts: The New Exclusionary Zoning?" *Sightline Institute* journalist Michael Andersen compares gentrification to the explicit racial zoning of pre-1960s America, where some races were not allowed to live in certain areas. Andersen asserts that the creation of historic districts, specifically in Portland, Oregon, is "the easiest way for a wealthier, whiter subset of the population to legally block change, diversity, and growth." His reasoning is that when a neighborhood is classified as a historic district, there are higher real estate values and costs of living. He presents the argument that many upper-class communities, with already high median real estate values, use the classification of a National Register neighborhood to essentially block any change or development in the area—such as the construction of duplexes or apartments that would create more affordable housing and allow for an influx of lower-class or ethnically dissimilar residents (Andersen). However, this claim can be refuted in a variety of ways. To begin with, the form of "historic preservation" discussed in the article is a very fringe example of the movement. It involves residents getting their neighborhoods registered as Historic Places on technicalities purely for socioeconomic status or personal gain; this does not represent most historic preservation or its supporters. In the *Sightline* article, even Andersen acknowledges this by calling those responsible "Faux Preservationists." While what Andersen discusses certainly can and has happened, it is not reason enough to disregard preservation as a whole.

Furthermore, the racial aspects Andersen flung into the fray are hardly grounded.

Immediately equating a "lower income" population to minority ethnic groups is a flawed way of reasoning. Economic classes will always exist, but every day, that is further and further differentiated from race. Gentrification, including that by way of historic preservation, is not a racist scheme created by wealthy white people to plunge America back into the segregated pre-1960s. One significant example is New York City. While far from a role model in many ways, it *is* one of the most diverse cities—culturally, ethnically, religiously—in the entire country. The Preservation Leadership Forum from the National Trust for Historic Preservation discusses the impact of historic preservation in NYC, reporting that "historic districts with historically high minority populations maintained their racial makeup [after gentrification]," and according to the New York Landmark Conservancy (NYLC), "historic districts" show "small changes in socioeconomic status, but little evidence of changes in racial composition." How *does* historic preservation affect lower-income individuals, though? Again, contrary to the claims of anti-gentrification theorists and journalists, historic preservation may actually be *beneficial* to those with lower income. This is because of an aspect of preservation called adaptive reuse. Adaptive reuse is when a historic structure is rehabilitated and renovated to become functional for a purpose different from that for which it was originally built, such as turning empty and aging historic buildings into schools, offices, or residential spaces. The EPA acknowledges this, too, in its article "Smart Growth and Preservation of Existing and Historic Buildings." The article elaborates on the benefits of adaptive reuse, saying, "Repurposing old buildings—particularly those that are vacant—reduces the need for construction of new buildings and the consumption of land, energy, materials, and financial resources that they require." That is exactly how historic preservation benefits those with lower incomes; when, for example, an apartment complex takes vastly fewer resources to construct by way of repurposing, rent can be significantly cheaper,

compared to that of a newly-constructed building. This makes housing accessible and affordable to those with fewer financial resources, while simultaneously preserving a little piece of America's history and culture, one building at a time.

Not only are preservation efforts a means of safeguarding America's architectural heritage, but they also help to promote economic growth and environmentally sustainable development. With proper planning, coordination, and support, historic rehabilitation is a successful and rewarding endeavor for communities worldwide. In a modern culture that values efficiency over depth and instantaneity over contemplation, vanity over authenticity and division over union, the preservation of history is more necessary than it has ever been before—and it is up to the people to ensure that it remains a priority moving forward, toward a green future rich in resources and heritage.

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