

# Why Preserve History?

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The world around us is advancing at mind-boggling speeds. No sooner have we developed cutting-edge technology or equipment, than they are rendered obsolete by the next generation of improvements. Even my kids will tell you that if you have an iPhone4, you're old news because the iPhone5 has been out for seven months already, with the iPhone6 rumored to be out in June of next year. The same rapid pace of change can be seen in engineering, science, medicine, architecture, construction, and many other disciplines that impact our daily lives. The message that is being delivered is that we either change with the times, or be left behind. So then, why should we concern ourselves with the past and the concept of historic preservation?

Perhaps we can find an answer to that question by taking a moment to identify one thing that had the greatest influence on shaping our world, shaping us as a society, and us as individuals. I think that most of our answers, in some form or another, would point toward history. History can be as parochial as one's family lineage, or as global as planetary evolution. Between these two extremes reside most of the events that have made us who we are and will influence who we are to become. These are things that are worthy of preservation.

Historic preservation is generally regarded as the practice of protecting or preserving sites, buildings, structures, objects or districts which reflect elements of cultural, social, economic, political, archaeological, or architectural history. This history is important because it connects us to specific times, places, and events that were significant milestones in our collective past. The ability to revisit these preserved elements from time to time provides us with a sense of place, and maintains continuity between our past and our pres-

ent by preserving a trail of how we arrived at where, and who, we are today.

The benefits of historic preservation are diverse. At the most basic level, it serves to maintain and celebrate civic beauty and pride, and foster an appreciation of local and national history and heritage. Boston's Faneuil Hall is a great example. Built in 1742 from a design by John Smibert and later expanded in 1805 under the direction of Charles Bulfinch, this Georgian Neoclassical structure was dubbed the "Cradle of Liberty" by John Adams and is still used today for important political orations. It is an iconic landmark that we associate with American freedom and liberty.

At a time when urban sprawl and cookie-cutter developments

are prolific, and result in neighborhoods in which everything looks the same, it becomes even more important for communities to hold on to their identities through historic preservation efforts. Sometimes one or two historic buildings can serve to define a community. This is not to say that development and historic preservation have opposing agendas. On the contrary, historic preservation can attract investment and change in deteriorating neighborhoods through revitalization efforts which provide opportunities for creative adaptive re-use of existing buildings. (A good example is the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams.) This represents an

extremely efficient use of resources.

For example, repairing and rebuilding portions of an existing structure such as windows, doors and moldings, rather than replacing entire components or assemblies, would be an option to consider. Having the structural frame or the "skin" of a building in place that can be upgraded or repaired to meet current codes often constitutes a substantial savings when compared with the cost of demolition, transportation of debris to landfills, mining raw materials for manufacture into new building components, transportation to the jobsite, and installation. This type of adaptive re-use is not only cost effective, but sustainable on various levels. It is sustainable from

an environmental perspective as previously illustrated, but it is also sustainable economically by spending money locally on repair and reconstruction rather than on new materials manufactured at distant facilities. By retaining much of the original architectural fabric and historical character of the building, these adaptive re-use projects support cultural sustainability as well. When considered in this light, historic preservation can be a powerful tool used to strengthen local economies and stabilize property values.

There are many instances in which the value of historic preservation should be seriously considered. As communities, towns, and cities develop com-



Falmouth's Highfield Hall (opposite page) and the main building at the Waquoit Bay Estuarine Research Reserve (above) are two examples of historic homes that have been successfully preserved.

prehensive plans for growth and development, districts and specific buildings or areas with historical significance can be identified as elements that should be protected. As affordable housing needs are considered in areas where historic buildings exist, a historic preservation plan should be developed. To prevent the destruction of historic properties by demolition (such as Carnegie Hall in 1960), by neglect, or by inappropriate renovation that destroys the historical character of the property, historic preservation guidelines should be in place. Historic preservation projects are also encouraged on the state and federal levels through grants as well as tax incentives in the form of credits, deductions, and abatements. In addition, permit and fee waivers may be available for such projects at the local level.

During our discussions of historic preservation, we often arrive at that gray area between what defines those elements that have substantial historical significance and should be protected, and those that are not historically significant and therefore may be altered or removed entirely. It is within this foggy haze that heated debates have raged on ad infinitum. In fact, I have found myself on both sides of that argument, though not because of any change in opinion or principle, but rather because every project brings with it a unique set of conditions and circumstances that must be weighed and evaluated on their own merits and challenges. An excellent example of this was illustrated in the keynote address by Blair Kaman, architecture critic of the Chicago Tribune to the Michigan Historic Preservation Network's 29th Annual Statewide Preservation Conference in May of 2009.

Mr. Kaman spoke about the Seth Peterson Cottage, which is Frank Lloyd Wright's smallest residential commission and that was taken over by the State of Wisconsin in 1966, fell into disrepair by the 1980s due to a lack of funding, and was subsequently purchased by a nonprofit group that intended to restore the building and rent it out to people who wanted to spend the night in a Wright-designed home. When the mechanical engineer became involved in the project, he determined that if the renovation were to remain true to the original design, with

60 percent of the façade comprising single-pane glass, the home would be impossible to heat, so double-glazed windows were proposed as a replacement. This solution was rejected by the Wisconsin state historic preservation officer citing a "loss of integrity and a possible dangerous precedent." Political wheeling and dealing ensued and, in the end, the double-glazed windows were approved, along with radiant floor heating and electronic roller shades to reduce heat loss at nighttime.

The result of this "compromise" is that the design of Wright's house was preserved and the home is now affordable for the nonprofit to operate and make available to the general public—a task that the state had been unable to accomplish for nearly two decades. This solution encompassed environmental sustainability by reducing the energy load for heating and cooling; economic sustainability by enabling the owner to put the savings toward operating costs to provide long-term maintenance on the building; cultural and historical sustainability by being able to open the building up to the public in a way never before possible; and architectural sustainability by preparing the building for the future.

To paraphrase Mr. Kaman, in order for historic preservation to remain relevant and sustainable, it must not only reinstate the past, it must prepare for the future. This is particularly true in today's environment in which highly energy-efficient buildings that are durable and sustainable are becoming increasingly desirable or even required in some jurisdictions. Historic preservation guidelines should be reviewed to ensure that they are not self-defeating, as was almost the case with the Seth Peterson Cottage. For the most part, preservationists are truly passionate about safeguarding our history and heritage, and have done a remarkable job despite many challenges. In order for that mission to witness continued or greater success, the preservationist perspective may need to broaden to include, and embrace, long-term sustainability with equal passion. ✽

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