

Making Historic Preservation Relevant for the Next 50 Years

Forum Luncheon

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Thank you.

I am particularly pleased to have been invited to make this presentation. As you all know this will be the last National Trust conference where Peter Brink is in command. There are probably some people who care as much about historic preservation as Peter, including my long time friends Myrick Howard, David Brown, Randy Shepard and Amy MacDonell and many of you in this room. But I don't think anyone cares more about preservationists – personally and professionally – than does Peter.

Many of you have individually benefited from Peter's leadership, his guidance, and most importantly his friendship. I certainly have, and I want to thank you for that, Peter.

More than any other individual, Peter has given me numerous opportunities over the last two decades to broaden how I think about historic preservation, and has given me the forum – no pun intended – to think out loud about this movement. It was Peter's idea for me to write *The Economics of Historic Preservation*. It was Peter who got me engaged in the debate about preserving the recent past. It was Peter who a few years ago who gave me the platform of this luncheon to give what I've come to think of as my "historic preservation as foreign policy" speech...and my having been given the opportunity to think about those issues lead directly to the expansion of my professional practice to an international level.

And it was Peter who called me 7 or 8 months ago and asked if I would think about what the historic preservation movement is going to have to do to be relevant fifty years from now, and then deliver those thoughts here today.

The good news is that I'll certainly be dead 50 years from now so won't be around to be held accountable for whatever I might spout off about today.

But I have been thinking, and scribbling notes, and talking to others about this presentation for months now. And I would hope that at least a few pieces of it are worthy of discussion, debate and particularly dissent both here today and perhaps in the months ahead. But, candidly, I've tried to be particularly careful with the ideas I'm going to present, and the words I use to present them. And this is the reason: *Forum Journal* – which, as you know, is by far the best publication for the practicing professional in preservation today – typically prints the texts of the major presentations at the Trust Conference and may do that with my comments today.

Therefore I have a very important caveat for anyone who listens to or later reads these remarks – nothing whatsoever that I say should be interpreted as a criticism of today's preservation commissions, the National Park Service, Preservation Action, ICOMOS or

my fellow preservationists. I want to make that clear, because the last thing I want is for my comments to be taken out of context and used by opponents of historic preservation as an argument against what we are all trying to do by saying, “See, even this guy who spoke at the National Trust conference thinks that.....whatever.” I repeat – nothing I say from here on out is a critique of today’s historic preservation.

And I want to make doubly clear that this is not a critique of the National Trust. When someone writes the history of the Trust under Dick Moe, a central theme will be how he spent his time making the National Trust specifically, but by extension, the preservation movement more relevant – Smart Growth, the Trust’s collection of properties, the sustainable development program, the support for state and local preservation organizations – every one of those initiatives was about the relevancy.

So I certainly do not believe that in the last fifty years preservation has not been relevant – it certainly has. But I have taken seriously Peter’s charge to think about what the preservation movement is going to have to do to be relevant fifty years from now, and everything I say is in that context.

I often tell clients that one of the few ways I’m useful to them is that I’m always candid...sometimes with the car running to get me out of town. And I’ll be candid today. If most of you aren’t mad at me for something or other I say I probably haven’t done the job Peter asked me to do. And I’ll move among the theoretical, the linguistic, the political and the practical.

One last caveat – if there is anything I’ve learned from working with Main Street communities for the last 25 years, it is the importance of incrementalism. So even if some of the perspectives I offer today have merit, should they be implemented tomorrow? No. Peter’s time frame was 50 years, not 15 minutes...change should happen incrementally over time, not be instantly imposed.

But here is why the discussion of relevancy is relevant today – the passage of the \$787 Billion dollar stimulus plan last February. This was a statement of Congressional priorities affecting two generations. I say two generations, because no one in this room will still be in the workforce when this bill is finally paid off. And every single thing that was included in that bill was deemed by Congress to be more relevant than historic preservation.

Don’t get me wrong, this was not a failure on the part of the National Trust or Preservation Action to effectively lobby to be included. The haste, the complexity, and the secrecy with which this bill was put together meant that unless you were a Democratic member of an appropriations committee, the chance of influencing the final package was virtually non-existent.

Instead it represents how much we as a preservation movement need to do in the next 50 years to be as relevant as we ought to be. And it is not that preservation doesn’t have

friends in Congress. The introduction and bipartisan support for The Community Restoration and Revitalization Act is evidence of that.

But the stimulus bill was about jobs, about economic development, about sustainable development – three things that historic preservation does better than almost any other activity and should have been an obvious priority. And yet we didn't make the short list; we didn't make the long list; we didn't even make the footnotes.

I'm mistaken there. In the first draft there was \$55 million for historic preservation, but that was one of the few things that got cut. Even had it been left in, it was a statistically meaningless amount. The interest accrued on the stimulus spending between when you went to bed last night and right now is more than the \$55 million that was designated for preservation.

After the preservation allocation was cut, here's what I found posted on the website of a financial institution: *Previously, the bill contained an item that would give a big payday to historic preservation. A \$55 million payday to be exact. I can't say that I know what the money was going to fund, exactly. Much historic preservation mostly involves leaving things alone. But I can say that there isn't a correlation between historic preservation and improving the economy.*

If we know something and someone else doesn't know it – that's not their fault, that's our fault. And obviously we have not made our case.

But it's not like nobody gets it. The European Heads of Heritage Forum spent their spring meeting talking about heritage stimulus during an economic recession. Norway, France, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong – every one of them had specific funding for historic preservation in their own stimulus plans. Why? Heritage conservation creates jobs. It creates jobs in the sector most seriously impacted by this recession. It creates jobs where there is a significant shortage of skills. It has extraordinary impact on local economies. And it invests in assets that are both sustainable and long term.

Here was part of the EHHF statement: *All the evidence demonstrates that investment in heritage is an inherently sustainable, long term, and measurably successful solution to economic recession.*

The European Parliament even held a hearing in March about the role of heritage conservation in economic downturns. The equivalent hearing in the US Congress? Well, I guess I missed that notice in the Congressional Record.

So it is certainly relevant that we talk about relevancy.

If historic preservation is going to be relevant in fifty years, we need to revisit the basic question – what do we want to preserve and why? Now I know this debate takes place in

graduate school classrooms and rather arcane academic conferences, but we need to engage the discussion to help define our roles as practicing preservationists.

Think about the beginnings of historic preservation in America. It began with saving Mount Vernon, which was not only the home of our first president, but also a mansion of a wealthy landowner. And then preservation moved to landmarks, monuments, and the gems of architecture as art. We saved buildings that were most important in our national history and we saved buildings of great beauty. And I would argue that was the appropriate starting point. Even when the National Historic Preservation Act was passed the primary focus was on architecture as art and on the associative importance of buildings to our history.

As a consequence our framework for the treatment of buildings we decided were worthy of historic designation – local design guidelines, the Secretary’s Standards, preservation ordinances – responded to that thinking about what was historic. And in the minds of many, historic preservation was simply a subset of architecture.

But how is historic preservation different today? Here is my test – look at what made the list of the National Trust’s “This Place Matters” program. Virtually none of the finalists met the test of either being an architectural masterpiece or of particular significance to our national history. Those places were nominated because they mattered to the local community and in many cases not on architectural grounds. I for one think that is a wonderful way for historic preservation to have evolved.

These are places that matter to the local community, therefore, by definition, they are places that are relevant to the local community. But our regulatory environment, our preservation philosophy, and our preservation education is still largely stuck in the past.

We need to reestablish the relationship between why something is deemed worthy of historic designation, and the rules we have in place to maintain its significance. If, for example, materials were in no way part of what creates the significance of the building, why are we being rabid about what materials are used in rehabilitation? English Heritage is currently revisiting their listing documents, not to make things more demanding, but to add flexibility for the treatment of building elements that weren’t part of why a building was listed in the first place

On the philosophical side, we have these endless debates about authenticity. In the case of Montpelier, for example, that was a very important debate to have – whether to go back to the Madison building or also preserve the later DuPont additions. But Montpelier is the type of monument – a mansion with architectural and associative importance – for which the philosophy of authenticity was developed. But is that still germane for the types of places identified today as places that matter? If we are honest with ourselves, the sheer act of designation and placing significant constraints on what can happen to a property in the future does far more to remove the authenticity of the building than does some minor materials substitution. Except for grand monuments, almost all buildings

were built to be able to evolve over time. And in most cases we are either precluding or severely restricting the ability for the building to do that in the name of authenticity.

Does that mean I think we should remove the restrictions on what can happen to historically designated buildings? Absolutely not. What I think we should remove is our more than hypocritical concept of authenticity for the majority of properties we deem worthy of protection.

Today we are designating properties, not for their architectural grandeur or associative significance, but for their importance to the local community and, in many cases, as a tool to help a neighborhood have a say in how it changes over time. But our understanding of those issues is far more reliant on sociology, political science, psychology, urban planning, economics, and anthropology than it is on architectural history, materials conservation, or knowing the difference between Queen Anne and High Victorian.

So if the nature of what kinds of places matter is naturally evolving to become more relevant, then our regulatory structure, our philosophy and our education need to evolve as well.

Which brings up a related issue – the role of the preservation elites. Those of us with technical training and education in historic preservation believe we should have more say in what is historic and what should be preserved and how, than the guy on the street. So the Park Service doesn't have auto mechanics reviewing tax credit projects, they have architectural historians. And chances are your local preservation ordinance spells out the qualifications for serving on the commission, and that will be people with particular expertise in historic preservation.

But, again as the This Place Matters program amply demonstrates, we are rapidly democratizing what constitutes those places worthy of preservation – moving that decision beyond those with specific preservation expertise. If that's the right thing to do to make historic preservation relevant, it has important implications for the role of the expert.

In the mid 1960s, when today's framework for preservation policy was being established, there was a conscious decision that we shouldn't have a graded system of historic resources. There was the fear that if we had, for example, Class A, Class B and Class C buildings, that would be handing demolition permits to developers and local governments who would argue, "It can't be that important. It's a Class C building." I both understand and concur with the reasoning at that time. When even the best of our built heritage was being lost through rampant urban renewal and misguided development decisions, it was necessary to yell "STOP".

But in half a century we have matured as a country and as a movement. We lack credibility, and therefore relevance, when we claim every historically designated building is equally important. A few years ago a good friend and well regarded preservationist said to me, "To young people today, the first McDonalds is more important than Mount

Vernon.” I don’t know if young people believe that. But if they do, they are wrong! They are not equally important. I’m not against designating the first McDonalds. But if an upcoming generation of preservationists thinks there is equivalence between Mount Vernon and McDonalds, I’m burning my National Trust membership card.

And the trouble of not identifying relative importance means we are terrible about setting priorities. Historic resources, like natural resources, need to be managed over time. It is impossible to have good management if you’re unable or unwilling to establish priorities.

Priorities are also necessary when we decide which battles to fight. We will never have enough financial, human, or political resources to fight and win every preservation battle. So we need to have some process to decide which battles we are going to be fully engaged in. And we cannot do that if we are unwilling to establish priorities.

One of the lessons of relevance that the preservation movement has learned in recent years is that all preservation, like all politics, is local. And there is much positive about that – it is consistent with historic American land use policy, and it is local people who are best able to identify what is important locally. But there is a drawback. If we are going to have valuable, high quality, livable, sustainable cities fifty years from now, our vision cannot be bound by municipal boundaries. We need to think on a regional basis, often crossing state lines. This is going to be a herculean effort that is going to require advocacy and expertise from many disciplines, but historic preservation needs to be at the forefront.

Another area where preservationists need to use our creativity and to join with others is the invention of new land use tools. In American planning and zoning law there are very few tools available to allow citizens to influence the character and quality of their neighborhoods. Historic designation is one of the few that exist. And when there is only one tool, that tool is used whether or not it is appropriate. Preservationists are the ones with more experience than anyone in using local legislation to protect and enhance the quality and character of neighborhoods. We need to use that experience to help develop additional tools beyond historic designation.

If preservation is going to be relevant we cannot ignore the demographics of this country. The young preservation activists of fifty years from now aren’t even born yet, and won’t be born for another twenty or twenty-five years. And when they are born, less than half of them will be non-Hispanic white. So the ongoing efforts to racially and ethnically diversify the preservation movement need not only to be continued, but to be stepped up, not out of some drive for political correctness, but as an imperative if preservation is to be relevant fifty years from now.

The issue of sustainability is not one more fad that will fade in a year or two. Sustainable development is central to environmental, cultural, and economic survival. And there is no element of society that more broadly adds to all three of the components of sustainability than does historic preservation. And if we get bogged down in arguing for a couple of more points on some LEED scoring system we will have lost the battle. Green buildings

are not a synonym for sustainable development. The Trust's sustainability initiative was begun as "Beyond Green Buildings" If we are to be relevant in fifty years, now is the time to move beyond green buildings.

Some of you may have been involved in the rather esoteric discussions over the last year on the phrase *historic urban landscape*. Sometime in the next year UNESCO is going to adopt a protocol on historic urban landscapes. What are historic urban landscapes? Historic cities. Why don't they just say, "historic cities"? There's some obtuse reason dealing with the fact that the phrase "historic cities" is not found in the World Heritage Convention. But there is a more subtle concept here. Think about the natural landscape – it inherently changes over time. The conservation of the natural landscape means to manage its evolution over time, not its preservation at a fixed point in time.

To be relevant that's how we should approach our cities – to manage their change over time, not fix them at a point in time. I chose two definitions from my *American Heritage Dictionary*: preserve: to keep in perfect or unaltered condition; and conserve: to protect from loss or depletion. For our relative handful of national monuments, to preserve is probably what we should strive for. But for the vast majority of the historic buildings in America, for the Places that Matter, I think we want to conserve them.

That's why to be relevant, I think our movement should join most of the rest of the world and be about *heritage conservation*, rather than *historic preservation*.

Two final recommendations for relevancy in the coming years. First, historic preservation is too important on too many levels to be buried in the bureaucratic basement of the Department of the Interior. It should become a key element of a new cabinet level Department of Sustainable Development.

Second, I hope there is no doubt about my admiration for Dick Moe. He is by far the best president the National Trust has ever had and I hope he stays in that position for years to come. But when he does decide to retire, I think it's time that we acknowledge a reality in the American preservation movement – that it overwhelmingly owes its existence and success to the efforts of women. The next National Trust president should be a woman.

Those of us you've heard from here today – Dick and Peter, Myrick, Valecia and I have all done our best to make historic preservation relevant, and will continue to do so for years into the future. Years into the future, but not fifty years into the future.

The opportunity exists for heritage conservation not just to become more relevant, but to increase its relevance a hundred fold. That's the challenge that will be left to others in this room. It won't happen without you. But America will be not just a more sustainable country, but a better country because of what you will do.

Thank you for that, and thank you for having me here today.

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