

*Preservation: More than Bricks and Mortar*  
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Thank you and good morning. I've never done this before so let's hope that the technology works. I want to play a song by an Australian folk singer, Judy Small. She's telling about her home town, Charlesworth Bay.

About half way through the song she says, "I can't say that it filled my dreams or even held a special memory." She didn't realize that memory was there, but it obviously was as she finally sings:

And you people who tear memories down and call it growth and progress  
 May you never know the grief I felt that day  
 For I have never felt so frightened for the future as that morning  
 When I saw what they had done to Charlesworth Bay

And she feels this incredible sense of loss of what her hometown of Charlesworth Bay meant to her. Your town isn't in Australia and isn't on a bay – this is Kansas after all. But I would suggest to you that your town is also Charlesworth Bay.

The widely admired American author Eudora Welty in her collection of essays entitled *The Eye of the Story* wrote, "

it is our describable outside that defines us, willy-nilly, to others, that may save us, or destroy us, in the world; it may be our shield against chaos, our mask against exposure; but whatever it is, the move we make in the place we live has to signify our intent and meaning."

I begin with the Welty quotation because her last line ought to be our guidepost for how we act toward our own communities – "...the move we make in the place we live has to signify our intent and meaning." So I want to spend just a moment on that word "meaning" and two related words: "significance" and "value". The word "value" comes from the Latin

*valere*, which means, "to be strong, vigorous, in good health; to mean, to signify." Our communities – the places we live – ought to be strong, vigorous, in good health. The places we live ought to be valuable places, places with significance, places with meaning.

Take a moment and think of something significant to you personally. Anything. You may think of your children, or your spouse, or your church, or god, or a favorite piece of art hanging in your living room, or your childhood home, or a personal accomplishment of some type. Now take away your memory. Which of those things are now significant to you? None of them. There can be no significance without memory. Now those same things may still be significant to someone else. But without memory they are not significant to you. And if memory is necessary for significance, it is also necessary for both meaning and value. Without memory nothing has significance, nothing has meaning, nothing has value.

That, I think, is the lesson of that old Zen koan, "If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears, did it make a sound?" Well of course it made a sound; sound comes from the vibration of molecules and a falling tree vibrates molecules. But that sound might as well not have been made, because there is no memory of it.

But memory does not just affect what is significant to ourselves – it also is central with our relationship with others. If we make a promise to a friend, "I forgot" is not deemed an acceptable excuse.

It is not an accident that our spouse is both very angry and very hurt if we forget her birthday or our anniversary. Because "forgetting" is

absence of memory. And we need memory to establish significance, to establish value, to establish importance.

Our “forgetting” wasn’t about another stupid birthday present. It is about saying “you’re not important, you’re not valuable, you’re not significant.” “You’re just my other, not my significant other.”

Well, I want to quickly leave that analogy, since I’m hardly going to win any awards for thoughtful husband of the year, and move this concept of memory back to our community.

We acquire memories from a sound or a picture, or from a conversation, or from words in a book, or from the stories our grandmother told us. But how is the memory of a city conveyed? Here’s what Italo Calvino writes, "The city ... does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls."

The city tells its own past, transfers its own memory, largely through the fabric of the built environment. Historic buildings are the physical expression of memory – and it is memory that makes places significant.

In a great Tom Robbins book, *Skinny Legs and All*, one of the characters is an extremely erudite can of pork and beans. At one point Can o' Beans remarks, "imprecise speech is one of the major causes of

mental illness in human beings. The inability to correctly perceive reality is often responsible for humans' insane behavior. And every time they substitute a...sloppy slang word for the words that would accurately describe a...situation, it lowers their reality orientations, pushes them farther from shore, out onto the foggy waters of alienation and confusion."

Well, I don't want to add to the foggy waters of alienation and confusion so I'd like to spend a moment on some definitions.

If we are to have valuable, meaningful, cities, they must be *places*, not mere *locations*. Welty didn't say "...the location we live" she said, "the place we live..." What is the distinction between a place and a mere location? I've struggled with that over the past few years. I have settled on landscape artist Allan Gussow's definition of place as "a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings." So place is not a synonym for "location." A location is a point on the globe; an intersection of longitude and latitude. Certainly every "place" has to have a location but I do not believe every location meets the test of being a "place."

My second definitional distinction is the vastly overused word "community." Community is not, in my judgment, a synonym for "municipality". I've searched for an appropriate definition of "community" and here is the one I think is most useful. "A community is a place in which people know and care for one another – the kind of place in which people do not merely ask 'How are you?' as a formality but care about the answer."

There are today, throughout America hundreds of groups advocating for “community” and hundreds more advocating for “place.” What virtually none of them has recognized is that the two concepts - community and place - are inseparable.” Place” is the vessel within which the "spirit" of community is stored; "Community" is the catalyst that imbues a location with a "sense" of place. The two are not divisible. You cannot have community without place; and a place without community is only a location.

I would further argue that the built environment in general, and historic preservation in particular is the nexus at which the concept of community and the concept of place intersect.

So there are hundreds of place advocacy groups, hundreds of community advocacy groups, but also hundreds of “rights” movements: animal rights, abortion rights, right to life, right to die, states rights, gun rights, gay rights, property rights, women’s’ rights, and on and on and on. And I’m for all of those things – rights are good. But I would suggest to you that any claim for rights that is not balanced with responsibilities removes the civility from civilization, and gives us an entitlement mentality as a nation of mere consumers of public services rather than a nation of citizens. A consumer has rights; a citizen has responsibilities that accompany those rights. Historic preservation is a responsibility movement rather than a rights movement. It is a movement that urges us toward the responsibility of stewardship, not merely the right of ownership. Stewardship of our historic built environment, certainly; but

stewardship of the meaning and memory manifested in those buildings as well.

Does it matter if we live in a place rather than just a location? If we live in a community, not just a municipality? I think it does. Location and municipality are quantitative measurements – we have an incorporated body of local government that includes  $x$  square miles, and  $y$  population. But place and community are qualitative measurements. And as human beings the quantifiable ought not be enough. I would suggest to you that if only the quantifiable were important, there would be no such thing as churches, synagogues or mosques. If only the quantifiable were important why would we need art, or music or the humanities? What is the square root of beauty or the mathematical formula for patriotism? Those things at their core are about qualitative contributions to our lives.

What does Sense of Place mean, exactly? I don't know for sure, but I don't think Sense of Place is only a function of buildings.

We've all been to Disneyland. We've enjoyed walking down Disneyland's Main Street. We might describe it as fun or cute or entertaining. But I'm not sure our first description of the Disney Main Street would be as having a Sense of Place.

Sense of Place isn't just a function of buildings – I think there has to be a human component as well.

Many of you took that Introduction to Philosophy course when you were freshman in college. And in that intro course there would have been a segment on Rene Descartes, and Cartesian Dualism. Well, Descartes' premise was that humans are made up of two interrelated but independent components – mind and body (or, in some interpretations soul and body). Mind and body are different things, but to be human means to possess both.

Well 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers have mostly discredited Descartes. And I don't know enough about philosophy to have an opinion.

But over the last few years I've come to believe that that concept does apply to neighborhoods, towns, and cities – that the good ones, the real ones – have two elements. Elements that are separate but intimately related – place and community – or perhaps better, a Sense of Place and a Spirit of Community.

The advertising brochure will tell us the developer is building a “new town center community.” I don't think so. Community isn't built from bricks; community grows, organically, from people. And it grows over time.

You know science is wonderful. There are wonderful advances and amazing discoveries. Today scientists can build artificial hearts, artificial limbs, artificial lungs, artificial hips.

But even if they perfect making artificial everything, and assemble all the pieces, will they have built a human being? I don't think so. They will only have built the body of a human. Maybe Descartes was right.

The cohesion of Spirit of Community and Sense of Place requires, I believe, another sense – the Sense of Evolution – a movement of people and events through time.

Let me tell you about the small town of Rushville, Illinois. There is a school there built in 1919 with an addition built in 1925. The addition was the gymnasium on the lower level and an auditorium space on the upper level. The school board decided the structure no longer worked and so built new schools, added to others, and finally the junior high kids who were the most recent users of the school were moved out. But the school board decided that not only didn't the building work as a school – it was unusable for anything and intended to demolish it. When I toured the building I went into one of those little dressing rooms that are usually found behind the stage in high school auditoriums. There written in graffiti on the wall – clearly by a 14 or 15 year old was this: “Those who want to tear this building down have never seen this place as Wonderland.” That kid clearly understood what the school superintendent did not – that the evolution of the community was represented in that building and it was a far too precious commodity to be lost. The School Board didn't understand that and the building was torn down.

But if the Rushville, Illinois School Board didn't understand that, others do. In his book *The Good Society* sociologist Robert Bellah observes, "Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history--in an important sense they are constituted by their past--and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory', one that does not forget its past."

But this relationship keeps compounding itself. I'd like you to ponder another word for a moment. It is a curious word in the English language in that it has several different meanings. Think of the word *integrity*. In one definition it means the quality of being honest, upright, truthful. But in another context *integrity* means soundness, completeness, strength, as in the structural integrity of a bridge. I would suggest to you that if we want a livable community strategy that is sound, lasting, sustainable, strong – that is a strategy that has structural integrity, our representation of our resources must be done with integrity – tell and reflect our own community's unique heritage in an honest, truthful way – both in the story itself and in the buildings that contain those stories.

And then I began to realize what I have often noted about those involved on the boards and committees of Main Street programs. The vast majority get involved because they have a memory of a downtown from their childhood. I can't tell you the number of times that I've heard the identical story – "When I was a kid the downtown sidewalks were packed on Saturday night. We'd go downtown, park the car, sit on the hood, and watch people go by."

Now the best of today's downtown advocates are not trying to recreate the downtown of 1956. After all, there were lots of things that weren't so great about the 1956 downtown. But that childhood memory says downtown was significant, was important, was valuable. And it is reestablishing that value that Main Street is ultimately about.

I may have an individual memory about some event in my life that makes it important to me. But that event is not important to you.

For our towns to be important there must be not just memory but shared memory. A Spirit of Community requires a shared memory.. A book I've recently read is entitled *The Ethics of Memory* written by the philosopher Avishai Margalit and he writes that shared memory is the "cement" for the community.

But shared memory requires both communication and differentiation. What is the role of historic buildings in our downtowns? Communication and differentiation. Communication of our city's history and differentiation from anywhere else.

We need memory to care – to care about anything – to care about our town.

But an essential component of caring is protectiveness. How could we possibly say we cared about our child if we were unwilling to protect her? How can we possibly care about our town if we are unwilling to protect it?

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* Marco Polo is describing to Kublai Khan the various cities of the Khan's vast empire. In depicting the city of Trude, here is what he tells the Khan.

*If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off. The suburbs they drove me through were no different from the others, with the same little greenish and yellowish houses. Following the same signs we swung around the same flower beds in the same squares. The downtown streets displayed goods, packages, signs that had not changed at all. This was the first time I had come to Trude, but I already knew the hotel where I happened to be lodged; I had already heard and spoken my dialogues with the buyers and sellers of hardware; I had ended other days identically, looking through the same goblets at the same swaying navels.*

*Why come to Trude? I asked myself. And I already wanted to leave. "You can resume your flight whenever you like," they said to me, "but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end. Only the name of the airport changes."*

It seems to me that the most powerful argument for historic preservation is to avoid having the "world covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end." In economics it is the differentiated product that commands a monetary premium. If in the long run we want to attract capital, to attract investment to our communities, we must

differentiate them from anywhere else. It is our built environment that expresses, perhaps better than anything else, our diversity, our identity, our individuality, or differentiation.

There is a principal in physics that says if a thing cannot be distinguished from any other thing it does not exist. If your town cannot be distinguished from any other town, sooner or later it will cease to exist. Some of you will remember Robert Pirsig as the author some thirty years ago of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Well Pirsig reemerged a decade ago with a book entitled *Lila* in which he hypothesizes a concept called the Metaphysics of Quality. He adds a second principal of physics and states: "if a thing has no value it isn't distinguished from anything else." My only modification to that premise would be to turn it around and say: if a thing isn't distinguished from anything else it has no value. For our communities to have value they must be distinguished. And their physical distinction – particularly the historic built environment – is a crucial element in that search for value.

I mentioned earlier the Sense of Community. Lest you misinterpret what I mean, "community" does not imply everybody holding hands and singing *Cumbaya*. In fact as art critic Lucy Lippard writes in her book, *The Lure of the Local*, "Community doesn't mean understanding everything about everybody and resolving all the differences; it means knowing how to work within differences as they change and evolve...A healthy community in a mixed society can take these risks because it is permeable; it includes all ages, races, preferences, like and unlike, and

derives its richness from explicit disagreement as much from implicit agreement.”

Now for some “historic preservation” is still the local group of retired librarians writing letters to the editor and struggling to raise funds to save the mansion of the local rich, dead white guy. Well thank god for those activists, those letters to the editor, those fund raising events, and even for those rich, dead, white guys, because the properties that have been saved are an important component of understanding ourselves as a people and constitute an irreplaceable collection of the art of architecture and landscape architecture that has been created in our country’s relatively short history.

But that part of historic preservation – saving old mansions – represents an insignificant percentage of preservation activities today. In the last twenty five years, historic preservation has moved from an activity whose goal was an end in itself – save old buildings in order to save old buildings – to a broad based, multifaceted group of activities that uses our built heritage not as an end in itself but as a means to a broader and, frankly, more important ends. Around the country that has meant historic preservation as a means for downtown revitalization, neighborhood stabilization, attraction for tourism, job creation, small town revitalization, affordable housing, luxury housing, education, transportation, and others. And historic preservation is the irreplaceable variable in any effective Smart Growth strategy.

One of the less measurable benefits of reusing historic buildings lies in the philosophical examination of the relative significance of space versus the importance of place. Not long ago with the creation of the internet, the growth of telecommunications, and the ability to work around the globe from one's house, there were predictions that the significance of one's physical place would diminish in importance. In fact the opposite has been true. The ability to work anywhere, the ability to electronically be everywhere, has increased our need to be somewhere, somewhere in particular, somewhere differentiated.

The Greeks had a phrase – *horror vacui* – the intolerability of no-place-at-all. Many places in America have approached that *horror vacui*. On a trip to California I picked up a copy of the Sacramento Bee one morning and read a local columnist – Steve Weigand – and here's what he wrote. "And from the Brave New World of the Internet comes the following new term. "Generica: fast food joints, strip malls and subdivisions, as in 'we were so lost in Generica, I didn't know what city it was.'"

Generica isn't just a California phenomenon or just a city or suburban phenomena. Generica is happening everywhere and I would suggest it is at the heart of the challenge of economic development, Smart Growth, and quality communities.

When I was preparing these remarks I went back to one of the books that has greatly affected my thinking about places over the last 25 years. I don't know how many of you have read *The Great Good Place*, but

you should. It was originally published in 1989 but I checked on Amazon.com and it is still in print. So go to your local downtown bookstore and have them order a copy for you. I will tell you that of probably 300 non-fiction books I've read in the last 20 years *The Great Good Place* is among the most influential in my thinking.

So I went back to my well used copy and looked through the book to find what Oldenburg said characterized Third Places. And here are some of the things he lists:

- They are filled with people
- Prominent public space is not exclusively reserved for the “well-dressed crowd”
- There are abundant places to sit
- Third places thrive best in locales where community life is casual
- Third places are most likely to be old structures
- They are frequently located along the older streets of American cities
- In a Third Place one is more likely than anywhere else to encounter any given resident of the community
- The streets are not only safe, they invite human connection.
- Third Places cater to the greatest variety of local residents
- It is centrally located
- It is equally accessible to all
- Important functions are located in or near it
- It allows people to do nothing

Now Oldenburg was specifically defining Third Places, but you know what? If you as downtown managers and advocates are doing your job, if your downtown is or is evolving to be a great downtown, it has all of those characteristics. A good downtown IS a Third Place and at its heart downtown revitalization is creating, or perhaps more accurately recreating the most important Third Place in your community.

It has now been over nine years since the attacks on the World Trade Center. It is already a cliché, of course, but the world really did change forever on September 11th. In that decade we've had three wars, spent billions of dollars, lost hundreds of American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqi and Afghan civilians. I'll be long dead before we really understand if those wars were worth the human and financial cost.

But there are two important lessons we have learned from the events of September 11; or perhaps more accurately that we have relearned. First, buildings can have meanings. Important buildings are symbols. Buildings can reflect values. Now let's put aside for the moment what the World Trade Center and the Pentagon symbolize for us and think what they must have represented to the terrorists – American global capitalism and American military power. They attacked the buildings they saw as symbols of those meanings. If their only aim had been to kill people those four planes would have been hijacked on a Sunday and crashed into football stadiums, but that wasn't done. But look at what else they didn't target – a shopping center, often seen as

the representation of so called American consumer decadence. Why didn't they strike a shopping center? Because the buildings themselves have no meaning. They are pieces of crap. They are exactly what the sociologist E.V. Walter meant when he wrote, "For the first time in human history people are systematically building meaningless places." So lesson one from September 11th – buildings can be powerful symbols, but most buildings are not.

Lesson two is this: there is something incredibly important about public spaces. Here was this horrendous event. One might have speculated that everyone would want to go home, bolt the doors, and curl up in bed in the prenatal position. Instead what did we do, all over America? We gathered together in public spaces. We wanted, we needed to be with other people. And importantly other people not exactly like us. We didn't gather inside the private space of department stores or hotel lobbies. We gathered on the street, we gathered in parks, we gathered in public squares.

What does this have to do with downtown? Everything! Where are the buildings with meaning in your community – the buildings that were built to reflect symbolic values? The vast majority of them are downtown. Where are the public spaces in your community – the places where people gather to celebrate or mourn or protest? The vast majority of them are downtown. So I don't think it is overreaching to suggest that if downtown is to be valuable it must maintain those two roles – the concentration of buildings with symbolic meanings and the locus of public gatherings. What we in this country call "downtown"

most of the world calls the “city center”. I think that is a better phrase, actually, because the downtown ought to be the center of the city in a multitude of ways.

So I would ask you to think about the buildings in your downtown for a moment. Hopefully some – whether new or old – do have symbolic importance, do reflect values, do have meaning. But if your city is like most places, many of your buildings, particularly more recent ones, have no meaning. We have un-valued our built environment and by doing so we have devalued our buildings. All of us are somewhat to blame, but much of the responsibility falls on our institutions – national, state and local government; churches; fraternal organizations; banks and newspapers and leaders of commerce and industry. It is to those intuitions that we, individually and collectively, look for the establishment of our values, and to help us determine what is valuable. Once, not so long ago, those institutions understood the importance of expressing our common values in their buildings, and in doing so valuable buildings were created. Government buildings celebrated democracy and freedom, the empowerment of the people, justice. Most public buildings being built today look like we are striving for government by Wal-Mart.

The church or synagogue used to be a temple to god, inspire reverence, facilitate meditation, engender hope for a better tomorrow. Few religious structures being built today do that, nor even understand the importance of doing so. Some congregations have confused mere

size with quality, like the mega-church outside of Oklahoma City known locally as Six Flags over Jesus.

Think about Masonic Temples. The buildings themselves said “strength”, “stability”, “brotherhood”, “sanctity”, “mystery”. Now the Shriners are satisfied with a Butler Building and a Z-brick façade.

Then there are the buildings erected by leaders of commerce and captains of industry. Bank buildings are perhaps the best example. The message of the bank building was “trust”, “dependability”, “security”, “reliability”, “longevity”, even “prosperity”. In whatever architectural style, bank buildings were buildings with class. Now it’s often difficult to tell a bank building from one housing telemarketing firms or advertising agencies or, worse yet, photomat stands.

All too often we have lost the intellectual and emotional connection between the building and the activities within. And we are all losers. It is not just terrorists who are tearing down our buildings with meaning – we are doing it downtown ourselves with bulldozers every day. This affects both historic preservation and new construction. The buildings that were built in a day when the building was the message ought to be kept because the message – our common set of values – is, or ought to be, as valid as ever. And we ought to demand that the building built today reincorporate those values in their design, materials, scale, and detail.

I know that individually we have a wide range of political, religious, sociological, and economic points of view – and that is as it should be. But there is also a commonality of beliefs – of values – that we widely share: mutual respect; the importance of striving for excellence; regard for tradition; providing quality; frugal use of finite resources; understanding and appreciating our place in history; working in harmony but retaining individuality; having aspirations beyond our own self-interest. These are all values we try to teach our children, encourage in our employees, expect from our employers, and demand from those who want to do business with us. In our downtown, if in the 21st century we want it to have a future, if in the 21st century we want it to remain our city center, in all meanings of the phrase, then we need to be demanding valuable buildings, buildings with values.

I am going to give you an analogy and I will apologize in advance for it; I just haven't come up with a better one. When I was growing up my Dad was in the cattle business. In that business when you buy a new bull for the herd, or a registered cow, you make sure that it is better than the average quality of the whole herd. Every new bull doesn't have to be the best one you own, but if you add one of a quality less than the average, it is inevitable that the quality of the entire herd will eventually decline. Conversely, if you are going to get rid of an animal, you get rid of one of lower quality, not of better quality, or the long run effect is the same.

Now translate that to the buildings in your downtown. Every new building that we add doesn't have to be the best building downtown; but if it is one more concrete block, Drivit covered structure, less than the average quality of the whole, the overall physical quality of downtown can do nothing but decline. Likewise when we are pondering tearing a building down. If it is of a quality greater than the average – and frankly most historic buildings still standing will meet that test – tearing it down reduces, does not enhance, the overall quality of downtown.

I want to conclude with the comments of two very different people, each of whom views the world through a different lens, but each understands the importance of place -- the underlying foundation of preservation, of heritage tourism, of surviving communities.

First from the former mayor of Missoula, Montana, Daniel Kemmis. He writes, "Almost without exception, any serious move...by a local economic development organization goes hand in hand with an effort to identify and describe the characteristics of that locality which set it apart and give it a distinct identity...What this means is that the market within which a vital entrepreneurship operates is not simply an abstract market; it is, in a deep sense, a *marketplace*."

Finally, nearly 150 years ago John Ruskin was referring to buildings but I think what he wrote applies to our entire communities if they are to become and continue to be valuable places. "When we build let us think that we build for ever. Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank

us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, "See! this our fathers did for us."

What many of you are doing for your towns in Kansas your descendants will thank you for, and I think you for allowing me to be here with you tonight.

Thank you very much.

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