

Time for Reflection: Where We Thought We Were and We Were Wrong
Arizona Preservation Conference
Flagstaff, Arizona
May 13, 2010

I hope you all know how much I enjoy coming to Arizona and this seems to be my Arizona year. I spent a couple of days with Brooks Jeffrey and Pat O'Brian and their colleagues at the University back in March and I'm coming to Phoenix in November for the state Planning Conference. And I've attended this conference two of the last three years. But this year I'm a bit of an interloper.

As many of you know every year at the National Trust Conference the advocacy group, Preservation Action, holds an auction as their major fundraiser of the year. And some years I offer a day's worth of time to be auctioned off if anyone is inclined to buy it. Well this year Center for Desert Archaeology bought the day and then foisted it on all of you. And that made Preservation Action very happy to get the money and me very happy to get to come to Arizona again. But I'm not sure many of you are all that happy being stuck to listening to me one more time. So if you doze off in your dessert, I'll certainly understand.

At least some of you in the room remember the advertising slogan for Virginia Slims – the cigarette targeted toward women first produced in 1968 – and that slogan was, “You've come a long way baby.” About 10 years later I took the first steps in my historic preservation career, rehabilitating an historic building for the tax credits. And over that time I absolutely, sincerely believed that the preservation movement had “come a long way baby”. But now I'm not so sure. Or, if we have come a long way, we still have a hell of a long way to go.

Let me begin at the national level with Congress. In February 2009 Congress passed the \$787 Billion dollar stimulus plan. 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.

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 last year 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 2009 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.

But that was last year, and that was Congress. So let's move to this year and the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. On January 31st the White House announced that the 2011 budget would eliminate all funding for the Save America's Treasures and the Preserve America programs. The White House blog explained the decision this way:

Cutting Save America's Treasures and Preserve America grant programs at the National Park Service. Save America's Treasures program was started to mark the millennium and was supposed to last for two years. Both programs lack rigorous performance metrics and evaluation efforts so the benefits are unclear.

This announcement certainly riled the historic preservation movement including a series of postings on the National Trust's Forum listserv under the subject line, "It's Time to Declare War."

I don't know if it's time to declare war or not. But I do know that it is time for preservationists to rethink the progress we thought we had made over the last three decades. And I have to say I'm at the head of the line. Naively I sincerely believed that as we have broadened the definition of the roles that historic preservation plays in society, as we have documented the wide range of positive economic impacts of historic preservation, as we have demonstrated the contribution of historic preservation to Smart Growth, sustainable development, affordable housing, downtown revitalization – that after all of this I thought our message had finally gotten through.

I was wrong.

But the most angering, in fact humiliating part of the White House announcement isn't that those programs were cut from the budget. These are times when I think it is perfectly legitimate to review every item in the budget for savings...we'll go bankrupt if we don't do that. And SAT and Preserve America should have to be defended like any other program.

No, I'm angered and humiliated because historic preservation was used as the poster child for programs deemed not to work.

Remember the second biggest bully on the playground in grade school? Well I remember the day he got beat up by the biggest bully. And what did the second biggest bully do the next day? Picked out the weakest, geekiest, most defenseless kid in the school and beat him up. Why? Because he knew he could get away with it.

That's what this White House announcement was...they were getting beat up by the Republicans on the deficit and so they pick out the perceived 98 pound weakling to slap around and that was us.

This announcement had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the federal deficit. The rounding errors in the budgeting process are ten times greater than the annual amount spent on these two programs combined. Here's the analogy. You have a household income of \$80,000 per year, but decide "We need to cut back." So what do you do? Eliminate \$0.04 from your monthly expenditures. That's right...four cents a month of an \$80,000 a year income is the equivalent of these cuts.

But it's not even that. They did not spend an hour pondering the benefits of this program; they picked on the weakest kid on the block to give the illusion they were doing something about the theft from future generations that this deficit represents.

This is absolutely Nixonian in its manipulative hypocrisy. Save America's Treasures supposed to last just two years? Yes, but it was extended because it worked! Too bad the same can't be said for the stimulus package. Oh, no metrics or performance evaluations? One of the recommendations coming out of Laura Bush's Preservation Summit was to devise a standardized set of metrics for preservation's impact. In fact before the end of the last administration, the process of developing those metrics was begun in the Department of Commerce. Where are those metrics? They don't exist. I guess they've been too busy inventing ways to stimulate the economy that have been so measurably successful.

We had to have the stimulus, and Republicans are putting party over country to claim we didn't. But what the money was appropriated for had everything do to with reelecting Democrats and almost nothing to do with good public policy. And that's now backfiring.

The most recent report from the White House says that in the last quarter \$205,302,729,233 has been spent under the stimulus plan, and that translates into 682,446 jobs. Well, that sounds great, but make the next calculation – that works out to \$300,834 per job. But you're doing much better here in Arizona. The same report says that the Arizona stimulus expenditure of \$1,301,755,582 has meant 6,916 jobs, or a mere \$188,224 per job. \$300,000? \$188,000? I don't care which. I want one of those jobs!

Australia is also reporting on its stimulus package. Shortly after the first White House report Australia released the results of the heritage portion of their stimulus package – cost per job? \$21,818 – over 13 times the cost effectiveness than whatever the hell we're spending the stimulus money on. In other words, for every million dollars spent through the US stimulus programs, a little more than 3 jobs were created. For every million the Australians spent on the heritage portion of their stimulus program, 46 jobs were created.

In contrast to the success stories in a dozen other countries using heritage as part of the stimulus, we have an administration dumping Preserve America and Save America's Treasures. Or you can look at it this way....in 7 hours and 50 minutes the interest (forget paying back the principal) on the stimulus package is more than the combined annual budgets of Save America's Treasures and the Preserve America program.

They said that there were no metrics for Save America's Treasures. But I made some quick calculations. Here in Arizona Save America's Treasures projects have received \$2,190,186 which was then matched by \$2,827,418 from other sources. This meant a total of 105 jobs and a per job cost to the Federal government of \$20,944. And cutting that program is an example of new found fiscal responsibility?

But beyond that, the people in the White House are way too smart for this to be accidental. This was a very public, very classless slap in the face to Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush, the two first ladies whose programs they were. Hillary is one thing. But when Michelle Obama was getting heat from everywhere about her performance as First Lady, it was Laura Bush who stepped up and defended her.

So how does the White House reciprocate? “Here’s the finger, Laura...you and your program as well.”

I blamed the Democrats on the Hill rather than Obama for the idiotic allocations in the Stimulus Bill. I happily crossed party lines to vote for him. But as for this new budget I can no longer give Obama a pass. This was the crassest of political demagoguery but also demonstrates how impotent the preservation movement is seen as being.

And if the White House action were the only bad news we could attribute it to some idiot in OMB who deserves a trip to the woodshed. But here in Arizona a Republican State Senator Linda Gray introduced SB 1166 that would eliminate the State Property Tax Reclassification program. Although it died this year in committee, I’ll wager you’ll see it again. In Indiana a Republican state legislator is angry because CVS was denied permission to demolish a historic church in her district so she is proposing to emasculate the Indianapolis Preservation Commission. In Missouri, Iowa and elsewhere reducing the effectiveness of state historic tax credits is high on legislative agendas. In Washington the state Main Street program was proposed to be zeroed out. A new city council in Poughkeepsie, New York repealed the historic preservation ordinance just passed by the previous council.

How does the preservation movement react without just being seen as one more group crying, “Yeah, cut the other guys but not us”? I don’t know. But that’s the least of our problems. I don’t think I’m the only one who so significantly misjudged the progress we have made.

We either need to change the mission, change the message or change the messenger.

When I was in grade school I was neither the bully nor the kid that always got picked on. But at least now I know how the second one felt.

But lest you think it's only those on the left who we thought were allies that are now dumping on historic preservation, think again. Preservation has often been attacked by the right, particularly the so called property rights movement. Here's a little collection I've assembled of critique from the right about historic preservation.

Historic preservation laws are bad. When government aids historic preservation with tax dollars, regulations, or in any way, the government becomes the violator of property rights.

The purpose of government is to protect individuals and their property from interference by others. That is why Libertarians, Objectivists, and freedom-loving people oppose government assistance in historic preservation.

Historic preservation laws result from histrionic whining by hysterical perversionists. When the government is involved, a truthful sign would state: "Historic Preservation: Your tax dollars become history."

Today's historic preservationists impede greater histories of the future. Historic preservationists block future historic structures. They prevent historic homes from

being replaced by new homes that would also become historical. Newer structures become more historical than the old ones, thanks to capitalism.

Some preservationists say that they are trying to "teach history." What lesson is to be learned? Judging from the regulatory slant of preservationists, old structures are grotesque reminders of how bad things were before government grew so big and preservationists grew so powerful.

Modern preservationists shirk responsibility. Preservationists do not plan ahead, but wait until new construction nears and then cry for government to intervene. It never matters how preservation impacts dreary people who need jobs, food, clothing, and shelter. Preservationists who enlist government are cavalier people with a love for old structures no deeper than their neighbors' pockets.

"Preservationists have 'progressed' from targeting specific buildings to targeting neighborhoods and even entire valleys and states for strict, government-enforced controls ... The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the premier preservationist organization, has gone from seeking to educate Americans about historic treasures to clamoring for maximum restrictions on private land use across the nation."

Well, some of those statements emerge from ideological nonsense. But we'd better pay attention to the latest attack.

In a recent essay that has now appeared in various forms in a number of places, including the *New York Times*, Harvard economist Edward Glaeser has begun a

full scale attack on historic preservation laws. Now you might not think that a Harvard economist would be on the right, but this one is. In addition to his Harvard professorship he is also a senior fellow at the libertarian Manhattan Institute. And while this op ed piece specifically focuses on New York City, it is laying the ground work for similar attacks wherever historic preservation has been successful.

Twenty five years ago when I began addressing the economic side of historic preservation on a national level, historic preservation, particularly local historic districts, were often opposed by the real estate community and many property owners. Why? “Because if we have more regulation that means, prima facie, that my property values will be adversely affected.

And in recent years a number of states have adopted measures like Arizona’s Proposition 207 that require the payment of compensation whenever the regulatory actions of government diminish the value of a property. And this has had a chilling effect in many places on the creation of new historic districts.

But the evidence, virtually everywhere it has been looked at, is the opposite – properties within local historic districts tend to have rates of appreciation greater than the local market as a whole and greater than similar non-designated neighborhoods.

Now that that has been firmly established Professor Glaeser is attacking preservation because of it. Here’s what he writes: “Over the entire 1980 to 2002 period, prices each year rose \$6000 more in historic districts than outside them.” One might say, “That’s what preservationists have been telling you – historic districts increase, don’t diminish the value of the properties within them.”

But that's not Professor Glaeser's argument. He says that this is now a bad thing. He further cites that "historic districts have also seen their share of residents with college degrees increase significantly faster than that of tracts outside historic districts." One might suggest it's more than a bit preposterous for a Harvard Professor to say historic districts are bad because more educated people choose to live in them, but I certainly wouldn't suggest that.

He also notes that in spite of the real estate crash these properties haven't gotten cheaper.

So properties that hold their value better in economic downturns is a bad thing? Professor Glaeser thinks so.

The core of his argument is that: a) historic districts reduce the opportunity to demolish existing buildings and erect taller ones; b) by restricting additions to supply the prices go up; c) therefore Manhattan is getting way too expensive. His premise is that there needs to be new construction to add to supply to reduce prices so that Manhattan is more affordable. And as proof he notes that in the last 30 years 234 residential buildings were erected in Manhattan and only 14 of them in historic districts. And that, of course, is causing the affordability crisis. But only 16% of Manhattan is within historic districts...where the Landmarks Commission doesn't have a damn thing to say about how many buildings can be torn down and how high the replacement buildings can be. And virtually none of the 220 high rise residential buildings built since 1981 are exactly in the affordable housing category.

I don't know exactly what course one takes in business school to become an expert in architectural quality, but Professor Glaeser says that New York's historic districts "include thousands of utterly undistinguished structures." Why then, are all those smart, well educated, well paid people paying a premium for them?

But the logical failings of his arguments aren't the point. With a Harvard economics professor says that historic districts economic success is creating a social and economic evil preservation's opponents will have a whole raft of new citations. Right wing lunatics who wouldn't set foot on the Harvard campus because it's infested with Commies, will now quote Professor Glaeser as their new hero.

My friend Tony Wood who has written the history of the preservation movement in New York sent me this observation, "these folks have concluded that preservation regulations are the weakest link in the chain of land use controls and are testing to see what type of traction they can get." The exact same assumptions that the White House has made.

If we are seen as politically powerless, the extension is that we are seen as irrelevant. And we certainly need to change that.

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 last year. 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 diversity 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 couple of years on the phrase *historic urban landscape*. Sometime in this 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*.

One final recommendation 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.

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.