

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Preservation as a planning concept in the United States has come of age in accelerating cycles since 1931. In that year, the city council of Charleston, South Carolina, selectively zoned the area known as The Battery, restricting private property rights to a degree previously unknown in America. The council action set the stage for the current planning approach to preservation in this country; that approach was intensified by passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. This law authorized the Secretary of the Interior to develop a comprehensive official list of American cultural resources, the National Register of Historic Places. This was the first federal legislation in the United States to encourage the preservation of districts as well as individual buildings, structures, sites and objects.

The antecedents of the Charleston zoning action lie with the outdoor museum, which resulted from a broadened concern for single buildings preserved and adapted as teaching tools. Such historic house museums were seldom considered in the context of their environments. The outdoor concept, by applying the house museum philosophy of educational aims to a group of buildings, bridged the gap from concern for the single historic building to concern for multiple entities considered in an environmental or neighborhood relationship.

The local council action in Charleston moved preservation concepts further: It introduced the idea of multiple unit restoration for nonmuseum purposes, with the long-range aim of maintaining or recapturing a sense of neighborhood identity. The architectural potential of the existing building stock was recognized and, thus, aesthetics rather than association with history became a prime motivation for preservation in America. However, the traditional criterion of associative values was probably still used in justifying the selective zoning.

The idea of selective zoning spread from Charleston to other cities. Historic districts were established in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1937; the Old Town section of Alexandria, Virginia, in 1946; on Beacon Hill in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1955; and in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1957. Today more than 40 of the 50 states have adopted selective zoning for historic districts or neighborhood conservation areas.

Approximately 25 states have enacted general enabling legislation allowing any municipality within the state jurisdiction to zone parts of its urban concentrations selectively for historic preservation purposes. The remaining districts or conservation areas have been created directly through local zoning authority. It is noteworthy that under either method—selective or regular local zoning—the action begins at the municipal level by a vote of the locally elected governing body.

### SELECTIVE ZONING: HOW IT WORKS

The administrative mechanism employed in selective zoning, introduced in Charleston and now in general use usually creates a review body to which owners must submit changes they intend to make to property within a designated historic area. Criteria for design control may vary greatly from one district to another. Some are loosely drawn, allowing considerable latitude for owner discretion. Others are strict, as in the Santa Fe, New Mexico, ordinance, which dictates the colors that houses may be painted and even the number of openings allowed along a street facade.

Some criteria, such as those for the Georgetown district in Washington, D.C., discourage contemporary design by requiring new construction to conform to a particular historic period or style. In other instances, local citizen action groups have brought about the same result. For example, the city council of Alexandria, Virginia, legislated traditional design for its center city urban renewal project, located within the local historic district. This development occurred after a first-phase contemporary design met strong opposition from the city's preservation leadership.

In contrast to Georgetown and Alexandria, the city of Savannah, Georgia, encourages new construction in its historic district to be of contemporary design but requires that such developments respect the existing rhythm of a street in such matters as proportions, color, massing and relation of window openings to solids. Thus, New buildings harmonize with but do not imitate traditional styles in Savannah.

### DEALING WITH THE PHENOMENON OF CHANGE

Any built environment changes, though at varying rates. The idea that change is inevitable is one that American preservationists have traditionally found hard to accept. Rehabilitation and restoration in a selectively zoned neighborhood in themselves exert change, but in the direction preservationists seek. With the advent of selective zoning for old and historic districts however, the inevitable process of change is accelerated. Thus the transformation of an economically depressed area into a more vital neighborhood usually results in drastic economic and social, as well as visual, changes.

A case in point is Society Hill in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The rediscovery of this original section of the 18th-century city of the Society of Free Tradesmen was stimulated in the mid-1950s by a nearby government-

assisted renewal project that involved total clearance. A forgotten area of the city until then, Society Hill had been economically depressed, with most of its housing stock deteriorated, adapted to uses unsympathetic to the quality of the buildings and occupied by blacks and whites on the lower levels of the socioeconomic ladder. Society Hill houses could be acquired at that time for approximately \$2-8,000, depending on their size. However, they required, in 1950s dollar terms, \$10-40,000 in rehabilitation investment to bring them up to 20th-century standards of comfort. A small, unimproved house that might be acquired for \$8-10,000 would be assessed at a very low rate and might be taxed \$70-100 a year for both land and dwelling. A deterrent to private rehabilitation was (and frequently still is) the lending institutions' practice of red-lining or classifying the neighborhood as a bad investment, an action that makes mortgage money impossible to obtain.

Once private money began to be spent for rehabilitation in Society Hill, the economic picture changed in two ways. First, reassessment of improved buildings produced sharp increases in taxes. Second, real estate dealers, seeing investment results through restoration, moved into the market and began buying for speculative purposes. This increase in the real value of the property, coupled with reassessed value resulting in tax increases, moved the wheels of economic change with ever increasing acceleration. As a result, in 1976 the dwelling just described carries an assessment far in excess of its 1959 value; its taxes are nearer \$1,000 than \$100, and its marketable sale value is \$75-100,000. These figures can easily be doubled for larger dwellings. Of course, some of this change can be attributed to the inflationary spiral of recent years, but a comparison with increased values in suburbia indicates a far steeper curve in value appreciation, dollar for dollar, in rehabilitated urban neighborhoods.

It is worth mentioning that under our existing tax system, the people who willingly move into deteriorated areas

and invest their own cash personally bear the burden of the increased tax assessment. They are, in effect, penalized for recognizing the cultural value of property and converting it from a negative element in the environment to a visually positive one.

Under the present tax system, the private owner is asked to underwrite part of the public benefit the city derives in increased revenues from a restored neighborhood. Whether or not the underwriting rate through increased tax appears excessive to the owner's suburban neighbor is immaterial. The price the American tax system extracts for the convenience of in-town living in a restored house, where the value of the land approaches or exceeds the value of the building that sits on it, is excessive and discriminatory. Taxing on the basis of highest and best use, which ultimately encourages demolition and new construction because of excessive land value, is a constant threat to the existence of in-town neighborhoods. The negative impact of such local tax policies is reinforced by a federal internal revenue system that allows advantageous accelerated depreciation rates for demolition rather than retention and restoration.

On Church Street, Charleston, South Carolina, this row of single houses (1760-1810) typifies an architectural style distinctive to the city. An attempt to maintain a sense of neighborhood identity through recognition of its architectural character and potential led to the use of selective zoning and the development of a historic district. (N. Jane Iseley for Historic Charleston Foundation)

Dans la rue de l'Eglise à Charleston, en Caroline du Sud, cette rangée de maisons individuelles (1760-1810) illustre un type de style architectural particulier à la ville. Une tentative de maintenir un sens d'identité à ce quartier par le moyen de l'identification de son caractère architectural a conduit à recourir à un procédé de sélection de zones et au développement d'un quartier historique.





St. Louis Cathedral overlooks Jackson Square in the Vieux Carré historic district, New Orleans, Louisiana. The park, established c. 1850, takes its name from Andrew Jackson, whose statue is shown here. (Frank Lotz Miller Photography, Inc.)

La Cathédrale Saint Louis donne sur la Place Jackson dans le Quartier Historique du Vieux Carré à la Nouvelle Orléans, en Louisiane. Le parc, fondé en 1850 porte le nom d'Andrew Jackson dont la statue apparaît ici.

## IMPACT OF NEIGHBORHOOD RENEWAL ON RESIDENTS

To the writer's knowledge, no national study has been made on either an ethnic or other sociological basis of people displaced by privately led and supported historic renewal. It is known that the more surgical form of government-directed and funded neighborhood renewal has in the past uprooted thousands of Americans of minority groups and lower economic levels. Private enterprise has contributed to this process by providing a ready market for large land parcels assembled under the government-assisted programs through eminent domain, then offered to independent developers on highly favorable terms. In these projects, the administrative agency involved in the process is not regularly required to provide low-cost alternative housing, nor do the residents displaced often choose to accept such housing when it is available. Instead, lower income and ethnic or racial groups have tended to move into other areas, at times already showing signs of decline. Ultimately they create the same overcrowded, substandard conditions from which they were forcibly removed.

In either system, whether government-assisted renewal or privately financed restoration and rehabilitation, sociological turmoil has resulted. Thus the problem of displacement as a result of neighborhood renewal and conservation is an issue of great concern in the United States. This renewal usually consists of the upper and middle classes replacing the existing ethnic group. In many parts of the country the latter group is black, but it can also be Hispanic, Indian, Italian, Polish or other immigrant groups whose imprint on the neighborhood gives it a strong local flavor and sense of identity. It should be noted, however, that the socioeconomic group displaced in this process frequently has as few original ties with the neighborhood as do members of the higher economic group who replaced them.



Because American society has always been highly mobile, a strong sense of identity with the land has never developed in this country to the same degree as in other countries. Further, Americans' identification with their birthplace has become increasingly limited, especially in the highly mobile society of the 20th century. Consequently, Americans have become detached from neighborhood identity and the landscape just as they are detached in their air-conditioned automobiles, whizzing down the freeway at 55 miles per hour, or viewing life on the television tube, from which they can extricate themselves by the flick of a switch. Thus pride of place and attachment to place are minimized. In the process, Americans have also become detached from the structures that illustrate their past.

The debasement of American aesthetic and artistic consciousness also seems to be brought about, at least in part, by the divorce of artists from their market. This development has perhaps resulted from both the artists' tendencies to inner personal vision in their work and the market's increased ability to confine the exercise of aesthetic judgments to symbols of mobility and communication—automobile design, television sets and commercial advertising and so on. The average American is a better judge of these elements of society than of housing, furnishings and clothing, and certainly of the architecture of neighborhoods and how they are planned.

It follows, therefore, that dislodging people in the United States is probably less of a jolt than in most countries because of the high mobility quotient of our society and the superficial attachment most Americans have for the land.

Given these conditions, socioeconomic groups have tended to flow in and out of American neighborhoods with relative ease. Thus, as white Americans moved to the suburbs in recent years, black, yellow and brown Americans with a lower economic ability to maintain the housing stock crowded into the vacated areas. The results were increased density, property devalued both

Adjacent to the cathedral is the Cabildo, built 1795–99 to house the Spanish governing body of that name; the building is now part of the Louisiana State Museum. (Frank Lotz Miller Photography, Inc.)

Près de la cathédrale se trouve le Cabildo, construit en 1795–1799 pour abriter les membres du gouvernement espagnol de ce nom. Le bâtiment appartient maintenant au Musée de l'Etat de la Louisiane.



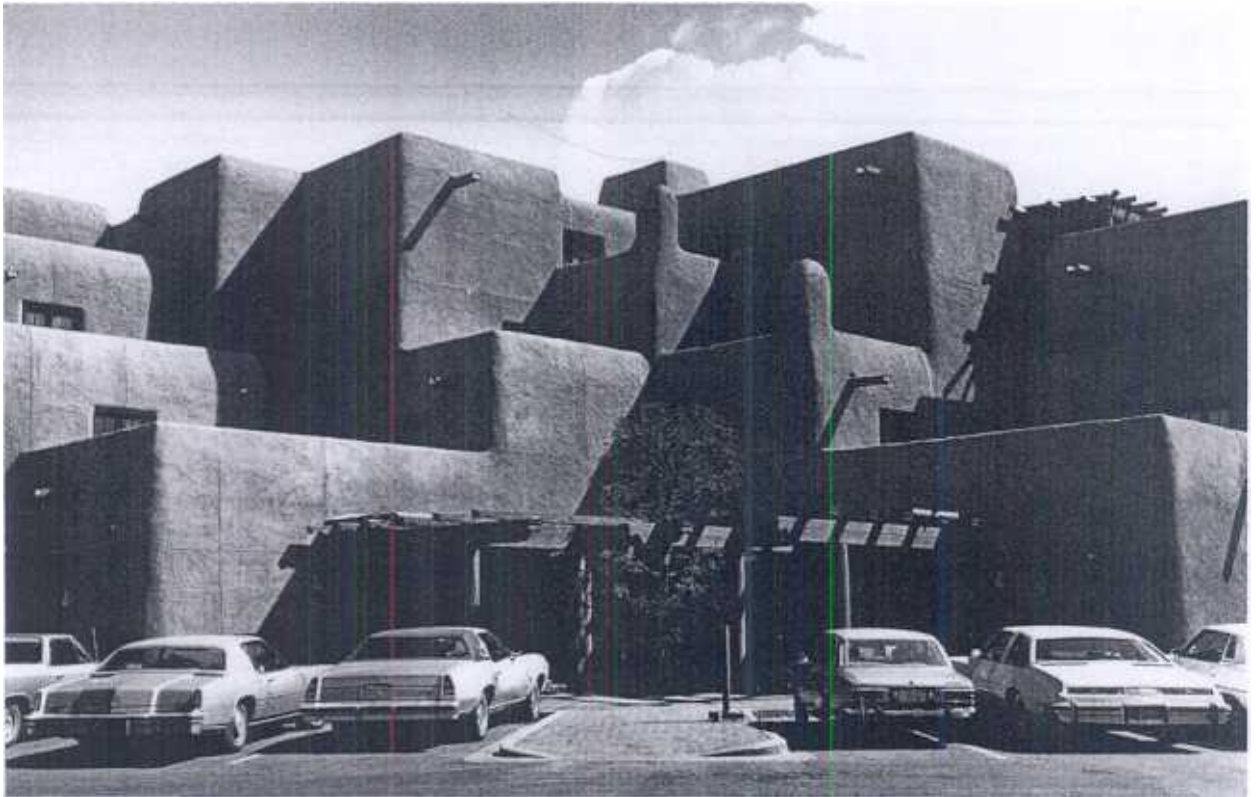


Central Square, which faces the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, New Mexico, derives its charm from the traditional style and scale of the buildings that surround it. (Michael Tincher)

La Place Centrale, qui fait face au Palais des Gouverneurs à Santa Fé, au Nouveau Mexique, reçoit son cachet de la conservation du style traditionnel et de l'échelle des bâtiments environnants.

The inn at Loratto, Santa Fe, exemplifies contemporary architecture derived from the pueblo style. (John Conron)

L'Auberge à Loratto, Santa Fé illustre l'architecture contemporaine dérivée du style Pueblo.



visually and economically and the resulting reduced assessments and lower city tax base.

In contrast, taxing at highest and best use has forced reassessment of open land at the cities' edges, as suburbia creeps into the surrounding agrarian areas. The resulting ever-widening concentric circles of development have left the dead and decaying urban centers so increasingly common in American cities.

## PRESERVATION EFFECTS

Preservation leadership in this country has played a major role in attempting to change the pattern just described. Preservation as a philosophical concept has indeed come of age in America. No longer is it solely the pursuit of the rich and the professional responsibility only of the historian and curator concerned for the single



Tavern Square, Alexandria, Virginia, a center city urban renewal project in the historic district, respects the scale and materials of City Hall across the street. Gadsby's Tavern on the same block is an 18th-century inn restored to its original use. (Jack E. Boucher for HABS)

Le Place de la Taverne à Alexandria, en Virginie, projet de rénovation au centre de la cité urbaine dans le quartier historique, respecte l'échelle et les matériaux de l'Hôtel de Ville de l'autre côté de la rue. La Taverne de Gadsby sur le même pâté est une auberge du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle renouée pour reprendre sa fonction première.



landmark. Preservation has become everyone's concern. While association with history continues to play a role, aesthetics and the appearance of the environment are increasingly the premises on which the preservation case can be argued. Concern for the quality of the natural surroundings and the environmental issue in general have spilled into concern for the built environment as well. Some Americans are awakening to the necessity of

taxation for the amenities that give a neighborhood its distinctive character as well as for the services that make it safe and clean. In short, the concept of cultural ecology is dawning in the American mind.

Preservation as a tool for urban planning is at last beginning to be appreciated and understood, and preservationists have played a major role in creating public sensitivity to the many small-scale human relationships that exist in our cities. The success of restoration projects over almost a half century of effort has also increased city concern for neighborhoods, using preservation as a tool to draw attention to the individual and the need for better municipal services.

As housing built for single-family use has been reconverted from the multifamily use often associated with its decline, density has been reduced and assessments have gone up. Thus, in coming of age, preservation has had to recognize and use tools of which it traditionally took small cognizance—e.g., property tax, design controls, height limitations, selective zoning and easements. Further, new resource people—the lawyer, the assessor have become part of the chorus. All have joined the traditional role players: the historian, the curator, the civic leader.

In this process of change, Americans have accepted the enclaves created through historic preservation—the Charlestons, the Beacon Hills, the Vieux Carrés. They have done so on the basis of a better looking neighborhood, with little question about the issues of displacement, sociological change or the increased economic pressures on the area.

Americans have also accepted without question the penalty of paying steadily increasing taxes for the privilege of living in a restored or rehabilitated urban neighborhood. And they have given little thought to what local government asks its citizens to underwrite in return for any personal investment they make toward improving the municipality's environment. Citizens have accepted the fact that the reassessed value of a restored house in an old and historic district is a fact of life because they will personally benefit from increased profits if the property is sold. They forget that the house is being assessed on the premise of highest and best use instead of the use to which it is being put.



In Society Hill, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, selective zoning of the historic district stimulated restoration and rehabilitation which transformed the economically and socially depressed area into a vital neighborhood. (Boucher for HABS)

Society Hill, à Philadelphie, en Pennsylvanie. La sélection de zones dans le quartier historique a stimulé la restauration et la réhabilitation qui ont transformé cette localité économiquement faible en un quartier important.

Fells Point, Baltimore, Maryland, has Italian and Polish immigrant neighborhoods that provide a strong local flavor and a sense of identity. Restoration proposals include Thames Street (1760-1800), the oldest in Baltimore. (Duane Suter for the Society for the Preservation of Fells Point, Inc.)

Fells Point, à Baltimore dans le Maryland, a des quartiers d'émigrants italiens et polonais qui confèrent un grand charme local et un sens d'identité à la ville. Les projets de restauration comprennent la Rue Thames (1760-1800), la plus vieille de la ville.



The fact that persons forced out of restored or rehabilitated neighborhoods are usually minority groups further complicates the social enigma. Most of the methods, mechanisms and tools developed by preservationists for application in old and historic districts are now being applied to neighborhood conservation in its broadest sense, cutting across the spectrum of architectural quality and historical dimension. This development augurs for a reevaluation of what has been achieved economically and socially, a reexamination of what preservation tools are available, and a reassessment of what else needs to be done.

### AN AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

Preservation as a valid study option should be established at the university level. This step can produce future groups of resource people who will believe that preserving and rehabilitating the best of the existing built environment is an acceptable planning approach, rather than a luxury.

Given the premise that the quality of building stock and home-ownership are keys to a stable environment (to which can be added public institutions such as churches, library and schools, as well as language and ethnic identity), the attraction of a stable population should develop a stable neighborhood. It follows, therefore, that the success of neighborhood conservation stands in direct relationship to the need to inspire pride of self whether on ethnic or other basis. Absentee landlords,

renters and other transients must be a minority percent of the neighborhood sociological mix.

Primary among the tools needed are better land use planning, including realistic zoning related to existing rather than potential use. Reevaluation of the American tax structure, which currently works at all levels against conservation of the built environment, is another important need. Federal income tax laws allowing accelerated depreciation for demolition and new construction must be reevaluated to afford equal encouragement for retention and rehabilitation of the existing building stock.

Mortgage lenders will have to cease favoring new construction over rehabilitation if the neighborhood conservation aims of our society are to achieve success. Potent forces currently at work to affect this are recession, inflation and the high cost of new construction. However, these factors cannot be relied on to produce permanent change in the American thinking process.

In the final analysis, the economic viability of real estate is the ultimate determinant of the success or failure of cultural resource conservation, whether that resource is a single landmark, a neighborhood, or the more traditional old and historic district.

Successful resolution of the social problems of retaining property ownership and ethnic character in this country's neighborhood conservation areas will depend on renewed ethnic and neighborhood pride, coupled with legal and tax incentives that will make it economically and socially unattractive to follow the American myth of upward mobility at the expense of personal and place identity.

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In Louisburg Square, Beacon Hill Historic District, Boston, Massachusetts, the red brick houses (1875-1900) exhibit an architectural harmony that helps to establish a viable neighborhood. (Boston Redevelopment Authority)

Sur la Place Louisburg, dans le District Historique de Beacon Hill, à Boston au Massachusetts, ces maisons de briques rouges offrent une harmonie architecturale qui aide à établir un quartier viable.



## RÉSUMÉ

*La conservation en tant que concept de planification est aux Etats-Unis un phénomène du vingtième siècle qui a vu ses débuts dans les mesures locales prises pour la répartition en zones de la ville de Charleston en Caroline du Sud en 1931. L'Acte de Conservation Historique Nationale de 1966 a fourni un élan supplémentaire au développement de ce concept, ce qui a abouti à l'enregistrement de plus de mille quartiers en tant que vieux districts historiques dans le Registre National de Lieux Historiques.*

*Le mécanisme ordinaire des procédés de conservation consiste en la répartition sélective des zones, administrée par un corps de révision architecturale qui s'occupe de la surveillance des changements de dessins d'ornement à l'intérieur du quartier désigné. La répartition sélective des zones a pour but de reconnaître et de maintenir la qualité historique du quartier en question et d'augmenter le bénéfice public résultant de la restauration et de la réhabilitation des bâtiments particuliers.*

*Ce procédé, accompagné de l'ajustement des valeurs de la propriété immobilière et de l'augmentation de l'assiette des impôts fondée sur la réévaluation, accélère les cycles naturels de mutation à l'intérieur de la communauté. Bien que l'on ait considéré de très près l'impact d'une telle action sur l'aspect visuel de l'environnement, ses implications sociologiques n'ont reçu que très peu ou pas d'attention. Il en résulte que les révolutions économiques*

*et sociologiques qui ont lieu dans les zones sélectionnées remplacent un niveau socio-économique de la société par un autre de statut socio-économique plus élevé. C'est le système d'imposition américain, qui se fonde sur la notion de la meilleure et la plus profitable forme d'utilisation, qui a aidé et encouragé cette forme lente et quelquefois subtile de déplacement sociologique. Ainsi l'identité des quartiers tend à être détruite par la stimulation de l'impôt de démolition et de reconstruction à une échelle plus grande et/ou par le système de répartition en zones qui ne place, dans ces communautés, la propriété immobilière qu'à la portée des propriétaires appartenant à une tranche économique assez élevée.*

*Les Américains ne réussiront jamais tout à fait dans leurs efforts de protéger les vieux districts historiques dans les communautés urbaines avant de pouvoir assurer des outils de planification pour l'utilisation des terres et une répartition réaliste des zones en fonction de leur utilité actuelle plutôt que virtuelle. Qui plus est, il est nécessaire de réévaluer le système d'imposition aux Etats-Unis afin d'alléger la pression qui pèse sur les terres sur lesquelles se trouvent les structures en question, et ainsi les rendre moins susceptibles d'être exploitées; il faut aussi instiller chez le propriétaire actuel un sens de responsabilité et de stabilité qui se manifesterait par l'entretien approprié de sa propriété.*