

## INFORMATIONAL

### TOPIC

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# Why Do Old Places Matter?

By Tom Mayes

Why do old places matter? What difference does it make to people if we save and reuse old places? Do old places make people's lives better and, if so, how? When a historic preservation commission takes the community heat – or (hopefully) praise – to deny a property owner's application to demolish an old building, how much does it really matter?

To many of us the reasons to save old places seem natural – almost innate – like a belief. As someone recently posted on Facebook, “kinda crazy that the question of why do old places matter even has to be asked.” Yet the reasons aren't easy to put into words, much less to explain. Historic preservation commission members are front and center in public discussions of what people care about. We hear people talk about how much an old school, an old church, an old store building, or an old house means to them. They share the memories of first dates, weddings, funerals, and the thousands of memorable life events in between. They ground those stories and memories in place. But they don't necessarily have objective language to say why old places matter.

Over the past two years, thanks to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the American Academy in Rome, I've been exploring why old places matter to people, and writing a series of



Old places inspire creativity and entrepreneurship.

Credit: Tom Mayes

essays as posts for the Preservation Forum Leadership blog. Here's the good news: after interviewing hundreds of people about why old places matter to them, and reading scores of studies, I'm convinced that old places are even more important to people than I had thought that they were. The work that historic preservation commissions and commissioners do – often thankless, challenging and un-paid work – helps give people in our communities the places they need to lead more balanced and meaningful lives.

There are many reasons old places matter to people – I don't think there's a limited list. Read the full essays with that idea in mind. That being said, here are quick one-line summaries:

- Continuity: Old places create a sense of continuity that helps people feel more balanced, stable and healthy.
- Memory: Old places help us remember.
- Individual Identity: Old places embody our identity.
- Civic Identity: Old places embody our civic, state, national and universal identity.
- Beauty: Old places are beautiful, and beauty is profoundly beneficial.
- History: Old places give us an understanding of history no other evidence possibly can.
- Architecture: Old buildings are part of the history of civilization and they place us on the continuum of time.
- Learning: Old places teach us about the past and give us perspective on the present in a way nothing else can do.
- Sacredness: Sacred old places provide deep spiritual and psychological benefits of peace, serenity and inspiration.
- Creativity: Old places inspire creativity and entrepreneurship.
- Ancestry: Old places connect us to our ancestors, giving us a sense of identity and belonging.
- Sustainability: Old places—through their embedded energy, the avoided impacts of



Credit: Tom Mayes

**Old places foster a sustainable and equitable economy.**

demolition and new construction, use of traditional design features compatible with local climates, and locations close to existing infrastructure—are inherently “green.”

- Community: Old places give people a sense of shared community.
- Economics: Old places foster a sustainable and equitable economy.

These reasons cover a lot of ground. I think that's been one reason it's so hard to articulate the reasons that old places matter to people. Although these were the words I heard most often, there are others I haven't covered, like belonging and security. The reasons may be present in some old places and not in others. They overlap. They resonate differently with different people and different places.

Now what does this mean for historic preservation commissions and their work? Historic preservation ordinances typically recite purposes such as

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fostering civic pride, supporting property values, promoting the tourism economy, or safeguarding our historic, aesthetic or cultural heritage. Historic preservation commissions are constrained by the authority stated in their ordinances. They must apply objective criteria to determine which places to designate under the language of their specific ordinance. But ultimately, the idea is that the work of preservation commissions fulfills these important societal needs.

In investigating the reasons that old places matter to people, I began to look at how well the tools that we have – like historic preservation ordinances – match up with the reasons that seem to be most fundamentally important to people. How well do we capture the ideas of continuity, memory and identity? How often do we designate a place because it is widely perceived to be beautiful? The question I'd like to raise is whether historic preservation commissions have the tools they need to fully

capture the primary reasons that old places matter to people, or if we are fully using the tools that we already have. How can we more completely fulfill deep-seated human needs through preservation?

Although our ordinances often include the possibility of designating a place because of culture or aesthetics, we most often designate landmarks and districts because of architectural or historical significance. These reasons are important, and I would not suggest in any way that we stop designating places for these reasons. However, history and architecture only seem to fulfill many of the other fundamental purposes, such as continuity, memory and identity, as a secondary effect. That's one reason we have people testifying before preservation commissions about how much a place means to them by telling stories, reciting memories, and talking about how the place embodies the identity of a community. Yet those ideas may not be relevant to the formal criteria for historical or architectural significance. I would encourage us to continue to explore how we might capture more of the reasons that old places matter to people by further developing our capacity to designate buildings and places that are meaningful for people but that might not meet the criteria for history or architecture alone. As Adele Chatfield-Taylor, former president of the American Academy in Rome said to me, one of the ideas that we simply didn't fully develop after the first rush of ordinances were enacted in the 1960's, was about culture. Perhaps it's time we continued to develop these concepts.

One of the key ways we might be able to begin to tackle this is to open our capacity to listen to people and what they care about. I have been struck in this project by how much larger the preservation world is than I had thought. Many people care about old places in their lives, even though they may not think of themselves as preservationists. Because of new technology and social media, we're now able to involve a broader number of people in surveys and other activities. At the same time, our traditional technique of having experts in architectural history and history determine what is sig-



Credit: Tom Mayes

Layers of history and architecture in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

nificant doesn't necessarily match the burgeoning interest of people in the places that matter to them. It may be worth considering whether the required professions represented on preservation commissions could be expanded. I'd like to think that our field of preservation could become larger, more diverse, more influential and more responsive to the human needs that can be served by old places if we listened to more voices. We may discover that people value more old places than we imagined, and for more reasons, but it may also challenge our current preservation practices.

One of the most surprising discoveries for me is that places can become "old" in only one generation. I was shocked to discover that a community preservation group had pushed for the preservation of the mall I grew up with and that was built when I was a teenager. It made me realize that people develop relationships with places—place attachment and place identity—in only a generation. That realization made me question whether we should re-visit the idea of a "period of significance" and "contributing" vs. "non-contributing" buildings. If one of the main reasons old places matter to people is that it gives them a sense of continuity in their lives, then maybe we should be more thoughtful about the buildings of all ages – right up to the present – and perhaps we can provide a sense of continuity in some communities with less detailed levels of review.

Which brings me to the last point. One of the reasons old places matter is because keeping and reusing them is good for the environment. I don't think we've come close to recognizing fully the sustainable benefits of simply keeping and reusing our existing buildings. But the sustainability argument applies to buildings that were built in the last 20 years as well as the ones built more than 50 years ago. If people increasingly recognize the environmentally devastating impacts of demolition and re-building, and the benefits of re-use, then perhaps we'll move to a different paradigm where more of the existing built environment is kept and reused, but perhaps not required to obtain approv-



Credit: Tom Moyes

Once an IOOF Hall, now a public library.

al from a preservation commission before an alteration is made. This could fundamentally change preservation practice.

Historic preservation ordinances currently are the primary tool we use to ensure protection for the places that matter to people, providing a deeply meaningful sense of stability, continuity, belonging, memory and identity. Preservation of old places is not just something "nice" to do; it provides profound psychological, sociological and spiritual benefits for people. The challenge for our field is how we can continue to shape our tools to fulfill these purposes more completely. I hope that each of you will think about why old places matter to you and your community, and continue our work to save old places.

[Please note that the current issue of the *Preservation Leadership Forum Journal* is dedicated to Why Old Places Matter.]

<http://blog.preservationleadershipforum.org/why-do-old-places-matter/> ■