

## Historic Preservation Is Smart Growth

*On March 3, 1999, at the National Audubon Society of New York's Conference on Smart Growth, Mr. Donovan Rypkema gave the following speech on the economical benefits of historic preservation.*

I suspect for many of you "historic preservation" is the local group of retired librarians writing letters to the editor and struggling to raise funds to save the mansions 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 guys, because the properties that have been saved are an important component of understanding ourselves as people and constitute an irreplaceable collection of the art of 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 activists today. In fact, in the last two decades, 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 broader and, frankly, more important ends. Here in New York State that has meant historic preservation as a means for downtown revitalization, neighborhood stabilization, attraction for tourism, job creation, film industry production, small town revitalization, affordable housing, luxury housing, education, transportation, and others. Saturday at the annual meeting of the Preservation League of New York State we are releasing the results of a study conducted over the past year identifying the multitude of ways that historic preservation contributes to the economy of the state of New York.

But I'm not here today to talk about mansions or about economic development. I'm here to suggest that historic preservation, in and of itself, is one of the most important tools in the entire Smart Growth movement. I'll title my remarks, "Twenty Reasons in Twelve Minutes why Historic Preservation IS Smart Growth." And here, in on particular order, are those reasons:

Reason One: Public Infrastructure. Almost without exception **historic buildings are where public infrastructure already exists**. No new water lines, sewer lines, streets, curbs, gutters required. That's Smart Growth.

Reason Two: Municipalities need financial resources if they are going to grow smart. Vacant, unused, and underused historic buildings brought back, to life are also brought back as **tax generating assets for a community**. That's Smart Growth.

Reason Three: New activities-residential, retail, office, manufacturing-in historic buildings inherently **reinforce the viability of public transportation**. That's Smart Growth.

Reason Four: If we are to expect citizens to use their cars less, and use their feet more, then the physical environment within which they live, work, shop and play needs to have a **pedestrian rather than vehicular orientation**. That's Smart Growth.

Reason Five: Another element in the drive to encourage human movement by means other than the automobile is the interconnection of uses. Based on the foolishness of post World War II planning and development patterns, uses have been sharply separated. Historic neighborhoods were built from the beginning with a mix of uses in close proximity. Cities with the foresight to **readjust their zoning ordinances to encourage integration of uses** are seeing that interconnectivity reemerging in historic areas. That's Smart Growth.

Reason Six: As a strong proponent of economic development, I am certainly glad the phrase is Smart Growth as opposed to no growth. Smart Growth suggests that growth has positive benefits and I would agree that is true. At the same time we cannot say we are having Smart Growth regardless of how well it is physically planned-if at the same time we are abandoning existing assets. **The encouraged reinvestment in historic areas in and of itself revitalizes and revalues the nearby existing investment of both the public and private sectors**. That's Smart Growth.

Reason Seven: We see periodic headlines about some real or imagined "Back to the City" movement. Certainly people moving back to the core of a town or city of any size have a positive impact on a whole range of environmental goals. Well, across America, and in many places here in New York State, people are indeed moving "back to the city." But almost nowhere is it back to the city in general. In nearly every instance it is back to the historic neighborhoods and historic buildings within the city. We need to **pay attention to market patterns**, and if it is back to historic neighborhoods to which people are moving, we need to **keep those neighborhoods viable** for that to happen. That's Smart Growth.

Reason Eight: Smart Growth ought to imply not just physical growth but economic growth. And economic growth means new jobs. But who is creating the new jobs in America? Not General Motors, or IBM, or Kodak. **Eighty-five percent of all new jobs in America are created by small businesses.** And for most small businesses there are few costs that are controllable, but there is one: occupancy. Barring massive public subsidies, you cannot build new and rent cheap. **Older and historic buildings often provide the affordable rent that allows small businesses to get started.** That's Smart Growth.

Reason Nine: **Business districts are sustainably successful where there is a diversity of businesses.** And that diverse business mix requires a diverse range of rental rates. Only in downtowns and older commercial neighborhoods is there such diversity. Try finding any rental-rate diversity in the regional shopping center or the so-called office park. There ain't none. Older business districts with their diverse rents are Smart Growth.

Reason Ten: Smart Growth ought to be about jobs. Let me distinguish new construction from rehabilitation in terms of creating jobs. As a general rule new construction is 50 percent labor and 50 percent materials. Rehabilitation, on the other hand, is 60 to 70 percent labor. While we buy an HVAC system from Ohio, sheetrock from Texas and timber from Oregon, we buy services of the carpenter and plumber, painter and electrician from across the street. They subsequently spend that paycheck for a hair cut, membership in the local Y and a new car, resulting in a **significantly greater local economic impact dollar for dollar than new construction.** The rehabilitation of older structures is Smart Growth.

Reason Eleven: Solid waste landfill is expensive in both dollars and environmental quality. Sixty to 65 percent of most landfill sites are made up of construction debris. And much of that waste comes from the razing of existing structures. **Preserving instead of demolishing our inventory of historic buildings reduces that construction waste.** Preserving instead of demolishing our inventory of historic buildings is Smart Growth.

Reason Twelve: Its critics have pointed out that so-called New Urbanism is neither new nor urban. But I don't think anyone here could dispute that in most instances, at least. New Urbanist development is fully compatible with the goals of Smart Growth. I would argue that New **Urbanism reflects good urban design principles. But those principles have already been at work for a century or more in our historic neighborhoods.** The sensitive renewal of those neighborhoods is Smart Growth. So are you starting to get the picture? Let me be briefer with the rest of the list.

Reason Thirteen: Smart Growth advocates a density of use. **Historic residential and commercial neighborhoods are built to be dense.**

Reason Fourteen: Historic buildings themselves are not liabilities as often seen by public and private sector demolition advocates, but **are assets not yet returned to productive use.**

Reason Fifteen: The rehabilitation of older and historic neighborhoods is **putting jobs where the workers already are.**

Reason Sixteen: Around the country **historic preservation is the one form of economic development that is simultaneously community development.**

Reason Seventeen: Reinvigorating historic neighborhoods **reinforces existing schools and allows them to recapture their important educational, social and cultural role on a neighborhood level.**

Reason Eighteen: **No new land is consumed when rehabilitating a historic building.**

Reason Nineteen: The diversity of housing sites, qualities, styles and characteristics of historic neighborhoods stands in sharp contrast to the monolithic character of current subdivisions. **The diversity of housing options means a diversity of human beings who can live in historic neighborhoods.**

Reason Twenty: Historic preservation constitutes a demand-side approach to Smart Growth. I'm not at all opposed to acquiring greenbelts around cities or development rights on agricultural properties. Those are certainly important and valuable tools in a comprehensive Smart Growth strategy. But they only reduce the supply of land to be developed; they do not address the demand for the new use of that land. The conversion of a historic warehouse into 40 residential units reduces the demand for ten acres of farmland. The economic revitalization of Main Street reduces the demand for another strip center. The restoration of an empty 1920s skyscraper reduces the demand for another glass and chrome building at the office park. Again, **I don't mean to be remotely critical of supply side strategies, but without demand side responses their successes will be limited at best.**

Finally, I think most of you would acknowledge that Maryland is among the states leading the way in creating comprehensive Smart Growth policies. Many of you are probably familiar with the publication, *Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation: A Legacy for Our Children*, which enumerates 47 specific policy initiatives to encourage Smart Growth. I went through the entire list, and here's what I found: of the 47 initiatives, historic preservation was a key component in 32 of them. But even more importantly, if communities had a strong historic preservation strategy, the goals of 44 of the 47 initiatives are automatically met. Historic Preservation IS Smart Growth. For years activists in the historic preservation movement have said, "We need to get closer to the environmentalists. They've been successful in raising public consciousness about the issues, and getting legislation put into place to advance those aims." I have no quarrel with that strategy. But I would suggest to you, environmentalists, that your strong support for historic preservation in your communities would, in and of itself, significantly advance your environmental goals. Further, I would suggest that **a Smart Growth approach that does not include historic preservation high on the agenda is not only missing a valuable strategy, but, like the historic buildings themselves, an irreplaceable one.**

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