ReUrbanism: Past Meets Future in American Cities
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Cover: 2nd Street in San Francisco.
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Introduction: The American City in 2017

DAVID DUDLEY

For several years, the fastest-growing metro area in the United States has been a master-planned retirement community in central Florida called the Villages. In almost every way, the Villages is entirely unlike a city. More than 100,000 people live there, all older than 55 (the average age is 70), all planted in single-family homes that snake around golf courses and swimming pools on what was once a humid expanse of farmland an hour north of Orlando. There’s no downtown, no public transportation, no low-income housing, and no diversity—more than 98 percent of the residents are white.

But, as it grows, the Villages takes on certain urban-like dimensions. Its developers have built three “town centers” full of shops and restaurants to serve as main streets and de facto downtowns. Architecturally, the buildings that line the central squares sometimes hint at a civic purpose: There’s a grand-looking city hall–type structure in one of these town centers, though inside you’ll find only sales offices for the development. The buildings are mostly handsome Spanish Colonial–style structures, and several of them feature historic plaques that attest to their 19th-century use as hotels, taverns, and blacksmith shops.

These plaques, authored by local groups such as the Lake Sumter Landing Historical Preservation League, tell elaborate, yet blandly plausible, yarns about various characters from the towns’ founding decades in the 19th century. It’s not easy to
tell, since they’re so boring, that the stories are pure fictions; the league doesn’t exist, the throwback buildings it supposedly protects are new construction, and any history their sites might have once harbored has been wiped free by this substitute heritage. The current residents seem to enjoy this make-believe, just as they are drawn to the downtown-like shapes of the faux-historic town centers. Like the golf courses and swimming pools, a manufactured heritage is a community amenity engineered into the landscape. Even here, in a planned community of new cul-de-sacs inhabited by retirees who have chosen to live in an invented place, there’s a residual appetite for authenticity, density, and human contact. At the end of every day, they point their golf carts toward these town squares, drawn to the oldest-looking, “realest,” and most urban space they can find.

AUTHENTICITY AND IMBALANCE

A somewhat similar version of this story—minus the wholesale fakery—is happening in cities across the country. Even as the forces of suburbanization and sprawl continue apace, underused urban areas thrum with new life. Many older cities hollowed out by a storm of forces in the 1960s and ’70s—from white flight to de-industrialization to “urban renewal”—are seeing once-abandoned downtown business districts refill with converted housing. Resourceful developers have managed to carve new living spaces into derelict banks, churches, libraries, and schools; others have remade the hulking artifacts of the manufacturing age, turning toxin-laced factories and warehouses into high-end condos. There’s a reason why the people who built the Villages went through some effort to conjure fake histories for their city: Authenticity—the elusive realness that the timeworn quarters of American cities display in spades—can be a very valuable asset.

The second coming of such spaces has also exposed some of the challenges and contradictions of the American city in 2017. There’s so much energy and attention devoted to the comeback stories of places such as Pittsburgh and Detroit that it can be easy to forget that, overall, more Americans are still choosing to live in suburbs.
The fastest-growing parts of the country are new communities on the fringes of Sunbelt metros like Phoenix and Denver, not the character-filled residential hearts of older cities. And the economic benefits of surging urban areas are not being distributed equally. Indeed, we’re seeing the opposite. For every former working-class neighborhood that refills with life, energy, and places to go for brunch, there may be a dozen pockets of deepening poverty a few blocks away, where the lack of economic activity and resources are exerting a different kind of pressure. And gentrification itself, whether it occurs in Los Angeles’ Boyle Heights or New York City’s outer boroughs, continues to be a friction point for communities desperate for new investment but wary of destroying the authenticity and character that made their neighborhoods valuable in the first place.

A similar sorting effect is notable on a larger national scale. In his new book, *The New Urban Crisis*, economist and urban scholar Richard Florida (a co-founder and contributing editor at *CityLab*) explains that, while cities like New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle have boomed with talent and affluence, they’ve also grown perilously unbalanced. Housing costs have skyrocketed, political divisions between city dwellers and their suburban or rural neighbors...
have opened wider, and resentments have festered. A handful of winning cities are absorbing most of the benefits of the post-recession economy, with too many others left behind.

**CLOSING THE GAP**

Closing that gap promises to be the great urban challenge of this century, and the role of historic preservation is the focus of this issue. The articles that follow outline the ReUrbanism initiative, an effort by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to marshal the formidable powers of the preservation community in the battle against inequity. The aim is to help older American cities activate their historic fabric without displacing existing residents, deepening structural racism, raising socioeconomic barriers, or limiting opportunities for future city dwellers.

To do that, it’s important to know what demographic trends are currently shaping America’s metropolitan areas—including understanding where populations are growing and why. All American cities are facing an affordable housing crisis of various degrees, and it’s particularly critical in surging places like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle, where the need to build more—and more dense—housing has created a controversial political issue. The debate over land use, zoning, and density has divided neighborhoods and sometimes pitted affordable housing advocates against historic preservationists. It’s an issue with curious battle-lines and bedfellows, and one that should give even the most rock-ribbed of preservationists cause for reflection.

The question of what, exactly, cities and neighborhoods are determined to preserve when they throw up barriers to new development in historic areas is equally fraught. Many of the most treasured residential neighborhoods in older American cities were shaped by baldly racist real-estate practices. So-called redlining policies determined where investments were made and who had the opportunity to benefit from them; those lines have proved to be durable determinants of today’s residential segregation patterns. Meanwhile, the communities of color that absorbed the brunt of the 20th century’s most destructive renewal schemes, from urban
highway construction to “blight removal,” are still struggling to overcome the legacy of those policies. Confronting the deep-seated racial injustice embedded in the historic built environment is a core principle of ReUrbanism—and one that may prove the most challenging to achieve.

This issue doesn’t have all the answers, but it represents the National Trust’s commitment to talking frankly about these problems and to its own role in solving them. The final article proposes policies and strategies that can create solutions for cities and communities determined not to repeat the last century’s planning mistakes.

There are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for success on that front. New technologies, especially transit options, may be offering American cities a huge opportunity—a do-over for all those urban places that once chose to accommodate automobiles instead of humans. The rise of self-driving, shared vehicles, transportation experts hope, could dramatically reduce the amount of real estate currently devoted to parking lots, highways, and other auto infrastructure. It’s hard to overstate how transformative that would be, especially for older cities with roots in the pre-automotive era, where the construction of that infrastructure has done the most grievous damage to communities and public spaces in general. Remove the cars—and liberate the massive private and public investments they require—and the human scale of these places will snap back into focus.

**NAVIGATING REAL HISTORY**

I live in Baltimore. From my front porch, one can observe the principles of ReUrbanism play out, messily, in real life. The sturdy old 18th-century bones of the city have been tested in the decades since de-industrialization, white flight, car-centric planning, and a confluence of other factors stripped the city of jobs, population, and resources. Some 30,000 vacant structures are left behind, acres of handsome red-brick row homes in neighborhoods that were systematically starved of resources, even as waterfront development rose a few miles away. Derelict industrial areas are now coming back to life—mills to apartments, a brewery-turned-
office-space, a magnificent concrete grain silo cleverly reconfigured into a high-rise condominium. Like many cities of its vintage, Baltimore is a lively laboratory of adaptive reuse. But those pockets of rebirth can’t disguise an inconvenient truth: Too often, the economic benefits from this activity are concentrating in the hands of a relative few residents and businesses. And there’s a stark color line between the winners and those left behind.

Preservation needs to be a tool for chipping away at these inequities, not a weapon that the affluent wield against the less powerful. “Every community has stories and places that matter,” one of the principles of ReUrbanism declares.

It should go without saying that these stories need to be true. In our fever to celebrate heritage and bring life back to long-dead places, some developers can fall prey to the same enthusiasms that the builders of the Villages displayed. Famously, a Virginia golf club owned by President Donald Trump features a historical marker recalling a non-existent Civil War battle. Less famously, a developer recently attempted to bestow a new name upon a Philadelphia neighborhood (that already has a name) by affixing bandit signs to light posts proclaiming it a “modern historical district.” A similar recent example in my own city reveals a more subtle manipulation of facts. One of Baltimore’s most heartening adaptive reuse stories of the last year involves the Fells Point Recreation Pier, an ornate brick structure built by the city in 1914 as a community center and warehouse in the heart of a waterfront district that has grown increasingly spiffy over the past decade. The rec pier’s last legitimate usage was as the pretend police station for the 1990s TV series Homicide: Life on the Street; after the show ended in 1999, the hulking building stood vacant. This March, after a $60 million restoration, it began a new life as a smart-looking boutique hotel.
In general, this is a happy story. Local tycoon Kevin Plank, founder and CEO of the Under Armour sportswear firm, is one of the developers of the new hotel, which has already proven to be a major neighborhood amenity. But the hotel is also hosting a minor controversy. In their accounts of the building’s history, the owners have claimed that it was once a **landing and processing point for waves of early-20th-century immigrants**—and that Fells Point was “**the country’s second largest point of entry, surpassed only by New York’s Ellis Island.**” This, a local historian or two have noted, **isn’t true**. Plenty of immigrants did come through Baltimore, but across the harbor, on another pier, in another neighborhood entirely.

Perhaps the symmetry of playing up a chic hotel’s hardscrabble immigrant-welcoming roots is apparently irresistible, especially in this era. And maybe the broad outlines of the story appear realistic enough to be true. But those immigrants are not props in the colorful backstory of a newly redeveloped building, but rather a real and vital part of Baltimore’s history. ReUrbanism holds us to a higher standard of authenticity—both in recounting our shared American story and in taking on our contemporary challenges. FJ

DAVID DUDLEY is the executive editor of CityLab.
ReUrbanism: Learning from the Past to Create Better Cities for All

JIM LINDBERG

The largest single demolition of a National Register of Historic Places–listed district occurred in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1989. An area known as Jobber’s Canyon—four square blocks containing 24 massive brick warehouses—came down to make way for the ConAgra corporation’s new suburban-style headquarters. Preservation advocates, including the National Trust for Historic Preservation, fought the plan, but ConAgra’s chief executive Mike Harper got his way. He didn’t want to look at what he called “ugly red brick buildings.”

Fast forward to last year, when a different ConAgra chief executive was deciding on a new headquarters. This time the Fortune 500 company opted for reuse rather than demolition, choosing 160,000 square feet of rehabilitated space in the Merchandise Mart, a 1930 landmark in downtown Chicago. “What the physical space does is help facilitate the culture you’re looking for,” CEO Sean Connolly told the Chicago Tribune, citing an open floor plan, neighboring startup companies, and plentiful urban amenities. Nearly 30 years after the loss of Jobber’s Canyon, Omaha preservationists could only shake their heads and try to appreciate the irony of ConAgra’s move.

THE CHALLENGES OF SUCCESS

Demographic and market shifts have brought significant changes to cities since 1989. Today ConAgra is one of many companies seeking to shrink their overall office footprint while attracting and retaining talented employees. A new generation of workers often cares less about the free parking, subsidized cafeterias, or corner offices offered on sprawling suburban campuses. More important are good public transit, local restaurants, and corner stores in diverse urban centers. What better way for companies to recruit young workers than by rehabilitating an older building in a historic city center?
After decades working to save historic neighborhoods and stem the tide of development rushing out to the suburbs, preservationists now find the market returning to city centers. Increasingly, older urban neighborhoods attract new residents and entrepreneurs. Creative adaptive reuse projects garner attention from designers and the media. Historic commercial streets buzz with activity. Planners speak our language. Mayors ask us how to preserve, not why.

Can we rise to the challenge of this success? Can we take advantage of this moment in our history to shift preservation from a movement operating outside “the system” to a value embedded within it? Can we retool preservation practice to help address the new and urgent challenges facing cities today, from displacement and gentrification to human health and climate change? Can we make the reuse of older buildings the default choice in our cities and demolition an option of last resort?

IMPROVING CITIES THROUGH REURBANISM

With these questions and challenges in mind, the National Trust recently launched a new initiative called ReUrbanism. Inspired by past examples of great urban development, ReUrbanism seeks to position historic preservation as an essential contributor to diverse, equitable, and vibrant cities of the future.
Guided by the **10 principles of ReUrbanism**, this movement reminds us how buildings and blocks of varying ages can create lively, nourishing places where people, not cars, come first. ReUrbanism brings forward stories of communities whose culture and history are hidden or unrecognized. It highlights the capacity of older buildings to provide adaptable, flexible space for new enterprises. ReUrbanism seeks to expand housing diversity and retain affordability. It makes room for residents of all incomes and ethnicities. It celebrates the mix of old and new and recognizes that change is essential for healthy cities.

ReUrbanism complements another movement that looks to our urban past for inspiration: **New Urbanism**. Launched in the 1980s as an alternative to auto-oriented suburban sprawl, New Urbanism emulates historic examples of great city-building found in places like New Orleans; Charleston, South Carolina; and Savannah, Georgia. It increased the market for traditional design in architecture through well-publicized developments such as **Seaside in Florida**. New Urbanists seek to change planning practices as well, making it easier to build in ways that reinforce valued historic patterns. New Urbanists and “ReUrbanists” are well positioned to join forces to conserve our urban heritage and foster new development that knits city neighborhoods back together.

At the National Trust, the ReUrbanism initiative includes conducting research, organizing on-the-ground demonstration projects, developing new policies and incentives, and sharing best practices. This work leverages recent **Preservation Green Lab** reports such as **The Greenest Building** and **Older, Smaller, Better**. ReUrbanism is also central to a growing number of National Treasure advocacy campaigns, where the National Trust is working closely with local partners to address urban preservation challenges in places like Detroit; Louisville, Kentucky; Miami; and Philadelphia. The Trust’s subsidiaries, **Main Street America** and the **National Trust Community Investment Corporation**, are providing their expertise and financial resources to strengthen urban neighborhoods as well. As we expand these efforts, we hope that residents, business owners, developers, advocates, and leaders in communities of all sizes will take up the cause of ReUrbanism and work alongside us to make cities better for all.
EXPANDING PRESERVATION’S REACH IN CITIES

Fifty years ago, historic preservation offered an alternative to the scrape-and-fill schemes of urban renewal. In the decades that followed, preservationists built a set of designation, protection, and incentive programs that changed the way American cities look. Architectural historian Vincent Scully said that preservation is “the most important mass movement … in modern history to affect architecture.”

Yet in many ways, preservation remains an outsider movement, affecting a relatively small percentage of buildings. The recently launched Atlas of ReUrbanism quantifies the extent of our reach. Developed by the Preservation Green Lab, the Atlas locates every building and block in 50 major municipalities across the country. Interactive maps highlight local and national historic districts along with historic rehabilitation tax credit (HTC) projects. Data from those 50 cities show that, on average, just 4 percent of existing buildings are protected through local landmark preservation programs, leaving development across the remaining urban landscape unaffected by this basic preservation tool. Yet many of those areas feature architecturally diverse, human-scale buildings and walkable blocks. Analysis conducted for the Atlas quantifies the value of neighborhoods made up of older, smaller buildings of mixed age. They contain greater residential density; more affordable housing units; and more small, local, and women- and minority-owned businesses compared to areas with newer, larger buildings.
How can we encourage the conservation and reuse of valuable buildings and blocks like these without trying to expand local historic districts beyond what is practical or politically viable? As experts on existing buildings, we can contribute to a range of citywide policies and initiatives, including zoning ordinances and development standards, parking requirements, energy efficiency incentives, housing programs, resilience plans, and more. We can also work with new partners, sharing our perspective and learning from groups that are engaged in issues such as affordable housing, green building, and public health.

For preservation to provide even greater value in cities, its practitioners need to show city leaders how our work helps address larger concerns. Earlier this year, the U.S. Conference of Mayors gathered in Miami Beach, Florida, for its annual conference. Speakers from across the country emphasized the urgency of dealing with issues like climate change, economic inequality, immigration, public health, and infrastructure. At a time when our federal and state governments are gridlocked over partisan issues, city leaders are seeking solutions. Preservation has much to offer.

REURBANISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE

No issue is more important to cities, or more challenging, than mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change. Rising sea levels, more frequent storms and flooding, and hotter summers are becoming the new normal in many cities, affecting urban infrastructure, economies, and health. Absent leadership at the federal level, more than 350 U.S. mayors have pledged to uphold the carbon emission reduction goals set out in the Paris climate accord. What are the most effective strategies to meet these targets, and where does preservation fit into the equation?

Building operations are responsible for as much as 70 percent of the carbon emissions produced in our cities. Sparkling, high-tech green buildings capture a lot of attention, but new construction overall accounts for only 1 percent of our building inventory each year. Decisions about the other 99 percent—the existing structures—are far more important when it comes to reducing carbon
emissions quickly, which is essential if we are to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. Preservation Green Lab research has shown that it takes up to 80 years for a new green building to overcome, through efficient operations, the environmental impacts of demolition and new construction. With average global temperatures rising even faster than predicted, we don’t have that kind of time. Building reuse and retrofitting should be a top priority for all cities seeking to mitigate climate change through reduced carbon emissions. Implementing new policies and tools can help—from better energy efficiency incentives for existing buildings to stronger demolition review ordinances and more stringent materials recycling requirements.

Mitigation strategies like these can help slow climate change, but adaptation will also be necessary and will require us to stretch preservation practice in new directions. Whether and how to fortify, elevate, or move buildings—even entire neighborhoods—will be among the choices that we will eventually have to make. We can be part of more creative, long-term solutions as well, helping to make room for rising sea levels and more frequent flooding in ways that retain community character and culture.
REURBANISM AND EQUITY

The renewed investment in historic cities is not benefitting all residents equally. In former industrial centers, decades of declining manufacturing employment and disinvestment have left many neighborhoods impoverished and isolated. Meanwhile, in booming cities many long-time residents and locally owned businesses struggle to pay skyrocketing rents. Affordable housing is scarce.

Some affordable housing advocates cast historic preservation as a NIMBY (“not in my back yard”) movement that reduces supply and increases rents, but data counter this view. Across the 50 cities in the Atlas, there are approximately 27 percent more affordable housing units on blocks with older, smaller, mixed-age buildings than in areas with newer, larger structures. This “naturally occurring affordable housing” is a precious asset for our cities. Preservationists can work with community advocates to retain these affordable spaces, while at the same time seeking innovative ways to increase housing supply through infill construction, additions, and activation of vacant and underused structures.

Opportunities abound for adding housing and density to our cities in creative ways without demolishing valuable older structures. A forthcoming Preservation Green Lab analysis of Little Havana in Miami—already one of the city’s most densely populated neighborhoods—found that 10,000 new residents could be accommodated simply by developing vacant lots and underused properties at a human scale similar to that of existing buildings. Policy changes can add density to already built areas as well, through additions and infill. For example, legalizing accessory dwelling units—often known as “in-law units” or “granny flats” and frequently barred by outdated zoning—adds space for existing families and new residents in an incremental way.

But more development alone will not solve the equity crisis in cities—it must be paired with incentives to ensure that great urban neighborhoods remain accessible for all. We have seen the impact that HTCs can make. Along with New Markets and low-income housing tax credits, the federal HTC has helped create more than 549,000 units of housing in rehabilitated historic buildings across the country, of which 28 percent are affordable to low- and moderate-income
families. A proposed increase of the credit to 30 percent for smaller projects could extend the impact of HTCs to more areas of our cities. Other creative incentive programs, such as the Legacy Business Registry and Historic Preservation Fund in San Francisco, suggest new ways to support community heritage and local economies. Community land trusts, with their model of acquiring properties and ensuring future affordability through long-term leases, offer another promising approach.

**REURBANISM AND HEALTH**

For cities to succeed in the long term, they must support healthy residents, families, and communities. What is the relationship between public health and the buildings, blocks, and neighborhoods that make up our cities? Preliminary research points to connections between older, human-scale neighborhoods and positive health outcomes. For example, the *Older, Smaller, Better* report found strong correlations between areas of older, smaller, mixed-age buildings and neighborhoods that are conducive to walking and accessible to transit. Developed before cars became dominant, these are places where it is possible to walk, bike, or take public transportation from homes and apartments to a full range of services, places of employment, and amenities.

Older urban neighborhoods also appear to foster healthy social connections. Data from a recent Preservation Green Lab study in Jacksonville, Florida, found that areas with blocks of older, smaller, mixed-age buildings have a more robust “civic commons,” indicated by the number of places where community members can come together, such as libraries, schools, nonprofit centers, places of worship, arts and cultural spaces, parks, and recreation centers.

A rich but still nascent area of research seeks to understand connections between the physical character of the urban environment and our sense of identity, belonging, and well-being. What is the impact of displacement or large-scale demolition on individual lives and community fabric? How does our experience of the scale, proportion, materials, and age of buildings affect safety, social interaction, and mental health? How can a deeper understanding
of these issues improve development practices and lead to better urban policies that support human and community health?

Ultimately, we seek to create cities where people of all backgrounds, incomes, and ages can thrive and navigate change in the years ahead. ReUrbanism can help achieve this vision. Through the conservation and renewal of our built heritage, we can create cities that are healthier, more equitable, and more resilient for all. FJ

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**TAKEAWAY**

**VIDEO**
Watch Stephanie Meeks speak about the innovative ways in which preservation can create thriving communities at the Congress for New Urbanism.
Making a Difference: Reshaping the Past, Present, and Future Toward Greater Equity

JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE

It is often quipped that history is written by the victors. That same notion is easily translated to urban policy and the development of neighborhoods and cities. Our communities have not necessarily been planned, designed, or built to benefit everyone; and today there are still discrepancies in why and how places develop or redevelop based on race, income, and other factors. Along with urban policy, planning, architecture, urban design, and other fields, historic preservation is a tool for the complex and sometimes messy work of continually remaking our built environment to meet present and future demands and desires.

To do this work, urbanists and preservationists need to understand the complete histories and current contexts of a structure or a place, including its people and uses. Places with multiple legacies and contexts also have multiple meanings and values attached to them, and all of these must be taken into account when shaping the built environment. For example, in a recent Next City article, Oscar Perry Abello explores a new mapping tool created by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition using data from the University of Richmond. The tool allows users to identify the impact of redlining policies in the demographic and economic patterns that we find in urban communities today. Basic elements of a city’s construction—housing, transportation, educational facilities, public spaces and services, and environmental health and protection—are often marked by differences dating back to the formative periods of its development. Those differences were frequently shaped by de jure and de facto discriminatory practices against people based on race, class, and ethnicity.

Many communities have been subject to—and even formed under—these difficult circumstances. Nonetheless, a wide range of people have valued these places across generations as homes
and communities; for their cultural roots; and because of their investments of work, money, time, and energy. Some of the zones created by unjust policies and practices—redlining, unfair taxation, highway construction, the siting of polluting land uses, undesirable or substandard public facilities and infrastructure, and other factors—have shifted and blurred across generations of change. But the framework remains: our environment has been designed, built, and regulated based on race and class. The system is not broken, it is operating as intended toward an engineered inequality.

So what can be done about these daunting circumstances, which are nearly ubiquitous in America’s urban environments? In a recent conversation focused on creating opportunity and equity, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, said to New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, “inequality has been constructed—and the question is, how can it be deconstructed?” Developing tools and strategies for this deconstruction is now a focus for many leaders and institutions, communities and grassroots organizations, academics and practitioners. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has brought issues of social equity into ReUrbanism, its platform committing to the revitalization of cities. Three of the 10 ReUrbanism principles point to strategies for connecting the built environment to larger human needs:

- Cities are only successful when they work for everyone;
- Preservation is about managing change; and
- Every community has stories and places that matter.

People working in the urban fields can take certain steps to move toward building more equitable and thriving communities: “redesign” the designers, change how business is done, and affirm through their work that people and places matter. A project manager in a private planning or design firm, a local government administrator or elected official, principals at a real estate development firm, a researcher or professor, a local community advocate, and many others can all use their work and influence to promote meaningful changes in thinking and process.
REDESIGN THE DESIGNERS

How do we make our cities work for everyone? Many urbanists know the famous Jane Jacobs quote, “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” Today it remains the case that the majority of people who plan, design, and build our communities and cities do not reflect the diversity of those same communities and cities. The demographics of the planning and design fields have improved in the past few generations, but there are still very few people of color or from lower-income backgrounds doing this work or enrolled in the attendant academic programs. There are even fewer in the leadership, resource-allocation, and decision-making positions. Historic preservation, in particular, has had difficulty expanding and promoting diversity, resulting in many missed opportunities to create a multiplicity of ideas, talents, and perspectives among those who influence the constant change of urban and built environments. Imagine if only a small number of musicians, artists, athletes, leaders, and public figures of color had shaped America and its identity. How much would be lost? Lack of diversity in planning and design fields is a big problem that is not being addressed or even taken seriously at the scale necessary to make a meaningful impact.

This isn’t to say that existing professionals cannot develop the skills, sensibilities, awareness, and ethics to work in communities that are not their own. But, even with a history of good intentions and evolving best practices, it isn’t always likely that a place shaped by a select few will fully work to benefit everyone. Improved access for people from more diverse backgrounds, particularly people of color and those from lower-income families, can create pathways into the fields that affect their communities. Efforts to this end should include improving access to the various urban and development disciplines as well as to educational and job opportunities for young people.

My path into the urban design and planning field began with a high school summer internship at an architecture firm. My predominantly black inner-city public school was slated to add a new
gymnasium, and the general contractor and architecture firm that were awarded the contract agreed to hire interns from the school. That internship provided me with the exposure to understand how my interests and skills aligned with a career in the field, gave me access to mentors, and broadened my view of potential options. Creating real opportunities within disadvantaged communities can be a difficult, thankless, and long process without immediately tangible successes, but it plants the seeds for long-term results: more leadership, stewardship, and capacity within communities and greater diversity in the professions.

Providing exposure and opportunity is only a first step: Urban practice also needs to diversify its schools of thought and ways of working by redesigning the designers—and preservationists—by giving them the tools and competencies to work in the diverse communities that they are tasked to serve. Much of the academic and professional training for urban planners, designers, and preservationists is spent building the spatial, technical, communication, and critical thinking skills they need to transform spaces and places. However, they often apply those skills toward results that may not align with the goals or needs of the given community. The built environment fields need to develop a broader range of sensibilities, frameworks, skills, and technologies to include not only social or community engagement but also better understanding and relations.

For example, students in the urban design program at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation collaborate in groups that cross cultures and disciplines. They are tasked with developing an understanding of In recent years graduate urban design students and faculty at Columbia University have worked with partners in the Hudson Valley cities of Newburgh, Beacon, and Poughkeepsie. Students learn about the issues and contexts in urban and regional environments through “site interactions.” PHOTO BY JUSTIN MOORE
a site or an issue that considers in depth the social and cultural complexities of urban contexts. The students work in communities—which may be in New York City, upstate in Newburgh or Poughkeepsie, or abroad in Rio de Janeiro or Madurai—to engage the people there and develop their ideas about transforming their spaces. These experiences become as important and integrated into the students’ way of working as the traditional concept, research, and design processes. The program challenges traditional ideas of what “projects” are—and of what is worth doing with, for, or to a place and its inhabitants. As these students develop their skills and enter the professional world, new ways of thinking about and working in the urban context become possible and even likely.

**CHANGE HOW BUSINESS IS DONE**

Along with changing how our practitioners and leaders think and work, we might also shift our institutional, government, and business practices. In New York City various city agencies—led by the Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development along with GOODcorps and Gehl Studio—developed a new urban planning and design framework called the *Neighborhood Planning Playbook*. It includes tools designed to reveal the complexities of a neighborhood.

As a part of the Greenpoint Hospital redevelopment study in Brooklyn, the city’s housing, development, and urban planning agencies held a series of community workshops based on the Neighborhood Planning Playbook.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN MOORE
and provide a framework for comprehension, communication, education, and exchange with community residents and stakeholders. The playbook aims to help the city better study, develop, and implement plans for neighborhood change—and, most importantly, build public engagement and communication into all stages of the work. This enhances the transparency of community development and creates more opportunities for stakeholders to understand projects and affect their outcomes. To that end, the playbook identifies certain strategies for expanding public involvement, including neighborhood walks; social media and text message campaigns; participatory budgeting and crowdfunding; or tactical urbanism or pilot projects—temporary or low-cost, often small-scale projects aimed at assessing whether a place can be successfully transformed and testing the potential impact of the transformation.

The first of the neighborhood plans to use this more robust community process was the East New York Community Plan in Brooklyn. The 2016 plan has already resulted in neighborhood rezoning for new affordable housing development; infrastructure and public space improvement; and a plan for the adaptive reuse of a former courthouse at 127 Pennsylvania Avenue as the New York City Police Department Community Center, the first such facility of its kind in the city.

At the 2013 National Preservation Conference in Indianapolis, my organization, Urban Patch—along with Leigh Riley Evans from the Mapleton-Fall Creek Development Corporation, Brent Leggs from the National Trust, Anthony Bridgeman from the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, and India Pierce Lee from the Cleveland Foundation—developed a field session and workshop, “Re-Booting the Inner City: New Partnerships for Community Preservation & Development.” This session focused on a program aimed at developing a citizen-led approach to community change. The community wasn’t just “brought to the table” to give input to some outside actor; people from the community called and organized the meeting. Following a walking tour of the historic and predominantly black Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, the session turned to classroom presentations and a workshop that welcomed community
residents from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds into a conversation about community and preservation issues. The diverse group of participants identified common concerns, including preserving buildings; protecting heritage and the environment; and improving access to food, services, and employment through neighborhood change. The conversation between national preservation and community development experts; conference attendees from around the region and country; and local Indianapolis community leaders, residents, and youth yielded shared objectives for partnership and preservation strategies. These included prioritizing renovation over demolition and encouraging the use of local contractors and businesses for redevelopment projects. The workshop catalyzed efforts to develop housing, public space, and neighborhood services—and to ensure respect for the heritage and cultural identity of the place—that continue today.

AFFIRM THAT PEOPLE AND PLACES MATTER

The ReUrbanism initiative asserts that if places matter, then the people in those places—and their stories—matter too. Contemporary social movements like Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March have underlined the importance of public awareness in demanding necessary change. Activist DeRay McKesson often says that “protests are a means of telling the truth in public.” Similarly, when we say that every community has stories and places that matter, the underlying public affirmation brings value to the people connected to those places. These are things that we collectively
see and experience in the urban context, and something about places experiencing change is public and common to all of us. It elevates the responsibility of change-makers to understand; problem-solve; and realize the value or values of a place and its people before they are changed, exchanged, or possibly taken away.

It can be hard to pinpoint the specific impacts that urban planning, design, or preservation have on the complex social and racial inequities that have been present in our cities for generations. That is why planning, design, and conservation of the built environment are usually not seen as determining factors in social injustice, which makes it easy to avoid the problems or reassign responsibility to others. Advocates and leaders rightly focus on more direct policies and actions like providing better access to education and jobs, criminal justice reform, or food access and health care. But our structures, spaces, landscapes, and places do matter, and they have an impact across the multiple inequities that exist in American society and its spatialized contexts. By shaping built environments, urban practitioners can influence the availability of quality housing, transportation, public spaces and facilities, and healthy environmental conditions. We can contribute to making our cities great, to a more equitable and sustainable future, by making and remaking, designing and redesigning, adapting and re-adapting, and constructing and reconstructing places with and for the people and communities who inhabit them. FJ

JUSTIN GARRETT MOORE, AICP, is the executive director of the New York City Public Design Commission.

MAP
Use an interactive map to learn about “redlining in New Deal America.”
Managing, Not Stopping, Change

ADRIAN SCOTT FINE

The process of change and transformation within a community is seldom seamless or smooth. To put it simply, change is hard, especially for places that are experiencing a significant shift on the precipitous edge of either growth or decline. A boom or bust economy can be either good or bad for historic places, due to either prosperity and development pressures or disinvestment and decline. At the moment many urban places are experiencing the former, with a boom cycle fully underway, seemingly with no end in sight.

Cities large and small are undergoing change as a result of unprecedented levels of reinvestment and construction, as well as populations moving in and out of neighborhoods. In some places this process is occurring at an accelerated pace, causing community members to feel that they have lost all control. Likewise it has prompted renewed debate within preservation planning circles about long-standing challenges that are not easily solved. Claims of gentrification and displacement—two related but distinctly different terms with multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings—are
common. Both are loaded with controversy, but at their core, both indicate disruption for people and places. Connected to all of this change is a potential loss of community character.

The key questions are, how do we plan for this change and manage it in a thoughtful way? And how do we retain the places and people we cherish as an integral part of this new wave of development, rather than needlessly pushing them out or tossing them away?

In heritage conservation, increasingly we are less concerned with stopping change and more concerned with managing it. Essentially we are serving as change agents, helping to facilitate change by understanding it, assessing its potential impacts, and offering up viable alternatives when necessary. We try to plan for change rather than put up roadblocks.

Of course, this role likely does not comport with common misconceptions about preservationists being the voices of “no”—obstructionists who stand in the way of progress. Labels like these will always be bandied about, and preservationists still need to reserve the right to stand up and oppose the most destructive of forces when necessary. More often, though, if we hope to remain relevant and have a seat at the table, we must work for “win-win” outcomes that will blend the old with the new.

**THE PACE OF CHANGE**

Places rarely experience change due to one thing. Rather, it is ushered in by a combination of factors—for instance, a robust real estate market coupled with an expansion of public transit. Such factors are interconnected, feed off each other, and can sometimes accelerate change. New York City’s wildly successful High Line Park, an unused New York Central Railroad spur resurrected as elevated parkland, has had a transformative effect on its immediate surroundings. It has become a model for similar projects now underway across the country. Within a five-minute walk of the elevated line, property values increased by 103 percent between 2003 and 2011. Because construction began in 2006 and the High Line opened in 2009, it’s difficult to determine how much of this increase is directly due to the new park. The rapid physical
transformation of the immediate area is, however, undeniable and a potential case study for other places hoping to replicate this approach. But some residents regard new community amenities warily, as a potential negative and an early signal that change is imminent. Existing residents being pushed out so that new, more affluent people can move in and enjoy improved amenities is a classic chicken-and-egg dilemma. Which comes first?

In Washington, D.C, construction is underway to reclaim the abandoned 11th Street Bridge over the Anacostia River and transform it into the city’s first elevated park. Set to open in late 2019, the 11th Street Bridge Park will reuse former bridge piers and create a new park space above, physically connecting two vastly different and older communities, one poor and the other well heeled. There is a $390,000 difference in the median home value between the neighborhoods east and west of the planned bridge park. All seem to agree that this $45 million investment could have the unintended consequence of pricing existing residents out of their homes by increasing rents or property taxes. For speculative house flippers and buyers trying to enter the market, the lower-cost east side would appear to be poised for change. To counteract this, a community-led Equitable Development Plan has been created to ensure that both jobs and housing are available to all.

Los Angeles provides several examples of places experiencing new phases of growth and physical transformation, with its postwar landscape and low-rise buildings giving way to new high-rise towers as a result of the demand for greater density. From Downtown to Hollywood, the city is changing at a rapid pace, inevitably affecting historic places and sometimes entire neighborhoods. Ballot measures, new land use and zoning policies, and community plans are all shaping how future growth and development will take place in the city.

Two historic Los Angeles neighborhoods are experiencing similar change, one driven by new public transit and another through the introduction of new types of businesses. In South Los Angeles, Leimert Park—a solid middle-class neighborhood of 1920s and ’30s Spanish-style homes and a master-planned community with broad
landscaped boulevards—is generally known only to those living there, still undiscovered by most of the city. When racial covenants were lifted and struck down by the courts in the late 1940s, Leimert Park quickly transformed into a largely African American neighborhood. Residents are deeply proud of their neighborhood’s Afrocentric roots and heritage and want to ensure that this character is retained. They see a new subway line, which is well underway and set to open in 2019, as a threat to that character. Though residents fought hard to secure a stop in Leimert Park, they are also wary of what it may ultimately bring to the community. Already, two years before the line opens, home values there increased nearly 50 percent between 2014 and 2017, outpacing the rate of appreciation in the rest of Los Angeles County by 20 percent.

Boyle Heights, a historic, predominantly Latina/o neighborhood, is ground zero for attempts to stop change. The neighborhood’s location across the Los Angeles River from Downtown had once served as a barrier, but that is no longer true—it is now considered prime for those who want to live centrally but are already priced out elsewhere. The startup of new coffee shops and art galleries is perceived negatively by some in the community as the first sign of change. In nearby and once-similar neighborhoods of Echo Park and Highland Park, you’re now more likely to find 20-somethings andhipster-centric businesses catering to their needs than the area’s once-predominant Latina/o community and families. In response, anti-gentrification forces have used various confrontational tactics, including staged protests and other disruptions, to try to drive out Boyle Heights’ new businesses. At least one art gallery has closed down.

**KEEPING COMMUNITY CHARACTER**

At the heart of these situations is residents’ strong desire to maintain the character and livability of their communities. Community character can come from a tree-lined street of historic homes, a long-standing corner store and gathering place, or a neighborhood theater. It could stem from architectural features, social or cultural activity, or a combination thereof. While difficult to define, community character gives a neighborhood and place its context and
meaning, and it is particularly fragile in fast-paced development environments. Recognizing and telling the story of a place and its people are exponentially more difficult if rapid change has eroded or completely undermined the community character.

There’s no easy way to address this complex challenge; it requires a combination of nuanced strategies. Policies and local legislation can help guide growth and ensure that residents have a say in how their community is changing. However, the goal cannot be to prevent change. It must rather be to direct and manage it in ways that preserve community character.

Teardowns and mansionization, a long-standing trend affecting older and historic neighborhoods from coast to coast, are examples of the sort of change that necessitates controls. Countless older homes have been demolished and replaced with massive, out-of-scale new houses that dwarf established neighborhoods. Older, character-rich neighborhoods are most vulnerable to this trend due to their locations and high land values. A Los Angeles resident describes “reckless development ruining the character and culture of the neighborhood and driving out long-term residents.”

In response, in early 2015 the city of Los Angeles adopted an Interim Control Ordinance to slow the teardown trend in about 20 older neighborhoods across the city, essentially creating a cooling-off period during which a solution could be developed. Residents, community leaders, city planners, and elected officials all worked together to review existing ordinances and identify new tools. The result is a new Baseline Mansionization Ordinance, adopted by the city in early 2017 to eliminate loopholes and bonuses that previously allowed for incompatible development.

The new legislation replaces a flawed process but does not prevent teardowns altogether. (As they say, the perfect can be the enemy of the good.) Instead, it attempts to manage change through a combination of carrots and sticks. Older homes can still be demolished in many Los Angeles neighborhoods, but the new and improved rules greatly discourage it. New infill homes are to be smaller, scaled to fit better within existing neighborhoods. An informal campaign called “Make Garages Count” zeroed in on one
particular problem: bulky, front-loaded garages. Arguably more than any other design element, attached garages at the front of houses change the pattern, feel, setting, and overall character of an older neighborhood. Builders now have to count part of the square footage of front garages toward their allowable total; when they build garages at the rear to match prevailing neighborhood patterns, the square footage is exempt.

DENSITY, BUT AT WHAT COST?
While true density—density of people and activity—is good for communities, not everything described as “density” really lives up to the name. For example, mansionization proponents have claimed that building larger homes in older neighborhoods increases density; in reality, it only adds square footage. Historic neighborhoods often offer dense urban environments and include a combination of large- and small-scaled buildings. These are the interesting and authentic places that feel comfortable and in which we enjoy spending time. They are scaled and built for humans, have evolved over time, and have a story to tell. The key to preserving community character while increasing density is to ensure compatibility between the old and the new. We need a more surgical approach that integrates new development into an existing context.

The question is where and how to place density, and the answer may be more art than science. The funky Arts District in Downtown Los Angeles is one of the hottest neighborhoods in the city, a former industrial zone that is now drawing people in to shop, dine, and live. “Background” or character buildings—relatively small, modest buildings that establish the look and feel of a street and neighborhood—

Tour of the Arts District in Downtown Los Angeles. PHOTO BY ADRIAN FINE
may not be individually significant, but collectively they help define the character of the Arts District.

More than 30 development projects are currently proposed within the district. One by one, or block by block, in the Arts District and across the city, background buildings are slated for replacement with mid- and high-rise developments that feel sterile and disconnected from the existing community context.

But efforts are underway to incentivize preservation by putting greater value on existing buildings rather than just the land. And dusting off old preservation tools and tweaking them for current use is one strategy; a proposed pilot project introduces a new transfer of floor area ratio for the Arts District. It would provide a financial incentive to reuse rather than demolish background buildings while still allowing for greater density within the district. If successful, this approach could offer a mix and balance of old and new construction and could be applied across Los Angeles.

Housing Strategy and Preservation
Preservation is rarely just about saving older buildings. As we attempt to manage change, our issues converge with others—the need for affordable housing, for example—sometimes competing for priority.
Building our way toward a dense community can have some clear drawbacks, so we must be careful. The current push to erect a 775-foot-tall residential tower near the Boston Common and Public Garden exemplifies the dangers of only planning for the short term. The project violates a law against constructing buildings that would cast extended shadows on the city’s historic parks. If built, it is estimated that the tower will cast a new shadow lasting 90 minutes or more per day on the Common and Public Garden.

Not everyone is happy about the tower project, and it raises concerns about when the push for density goes too far—about the cumulative impacts from future projects. Nevertheless, a majority of the Boston city council voted in favor of it. The deal promises a huge $153-million-dollar cash outlay that the city can set aside for affordable housing interests and maintenance of the Boston Common and Public Garden.

As communities in Boston and other cities grapple with such difficult decisions, weighing potential short-term gains against long-term implications, the big picture needs to remain in sight. Is the loss of sunlight in a cherished public amenity worth the trade-off? Some affordable housing advocates believe so, choosing access to funding over access to sunlight.

Providing access to affordable housing is a legitimate need that many see as an overriding goal for planning and development, as the United States is experiencing a housing crisis. A recent study by the National Multifamily Housing Council and National Apartment Association indicates that we need to build 4.6 million new apartments by 2030 to keep pace with demand. This would translate to 38,407 units in Philadelphia, 15,467 units in Detroit, and 164,201 units in Los Angeles. Meeting this need will require changes to historic places, both positive and negative.

The preservation community has a real stake in helping shape housing strategy, given that a majority of the nation’s renting population currently lives in buildings nearly 40 years old and older. Some of the best examples of preservation are affordable housing rehabilitation efforts. Instead of the false choice of pitting preservation and affordable housing against one another, we
should be working together to press for meaningful change in policy and greater access to resources.

Los Angeles is currently betting on a proposed linkage fee on new construction, expected to generate revenue—estimated at $100 million per year—for an affordable housing fund. Why not also use some of this funding to reinvest in and rehabilitate the existing stock of dense affordable housing located in older buildings and neighborhoods?

**BALANCING COMPETING INTERESTS**

If preservation were ranked by popularity alongside housing and density, it would likely come in last. We know this from experience—preservation is perceived by some as “nice to have” but expendable when resources are scarce. Other interests are understood to be more important, more critical, and serving a more imperative need. As communities change to meet current needs and desires, preservation cannot afford to be left behind.

As cities grow up, figuratively and literally, there will be a significant push for greater density, demolition, and displacement, creating the real potential for losses of community character. Admittedly, this is a big issue requiring a big-picture perspective. Preserving places, however, does not mean never allowing them to change.
Increasingly our job is to demonstrate our relevance and value and to be open to compromise while pressing for “win-win” outcomes. We need planning that allows places to adapt while still maintaining the qualities we have come to cherish, including respecting current residents and enabling them to stay. Change is often about give and take. The enduring question is, how much? FJ

ADRIAN SCOTT FINE is the director of advocacy for the Los Angeles Conservancy.

**TAKEAWAY**
Read “L.A.’s Older Neighborhoods Get Relief from Development Pressure,” a Forum Blog post by Adrian Scott Fine.

**TAKEAWAY**
Read “Shifting the Paradigm from Demolition to Reuse: New Tools,” a Forum Blog post by Will Cook and Tom Mayes.
ReUrbanism for Suburbs

KYLE SHELTON

Cities are not the only places that can benefit from the tenets of “older, smaller, better” or from adopting ReUrbanism. While many metropolitan regions are still seeing the bulk of their growth occur in sprawling suburbs and previously undeveloped greenfields, counter trends are becoming increasingly evident; many other regions are beginning to densify, urbanize, and look ever more like cities.

Much of this trend is rooted in a drive to make suburban areas more competitive with cities as potential centers for jobs—and for the residents who come with them. For example, several suburban areas are currently bidding to be the location of Amazon’s second headquarters. Some, such as those around Dulles International Airport in Northern Virginia and Generation Park in Houston, have pinned their pitches to traditionally urban features, like attractive amenities and a walkable core.

But newly developed “urban” suburbs are not the only ones trying to create dense activity spaces that resemble bustling city centers. Formerly rural towns and older postwar suburban communities are getting in on the act as well. By adding amenities to traditional main streets and retrofitting malls into mixed-use hubs, these areas are working to attract attention and dollars from residents living in the master-planned, suburban single-family developments that now surround them. All of these shifts reflect a growing desire to create, within sprawling suburban landscapes, spaces that offer residents the new-for-the-suburbs—old-for-the-city—experience of mixed-use, walkable nodes.

These trends suggest an opening that preservationists and ReUrbanists can use to show that their practices apply as well to the suburb as they do to the city. The National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Atlas of ReUrbanism gives “character scores” based on median building age, building age diversity, and building and land parcel size. Areas with high scores tend to be culturally rich, socially active, and walkable, and their creation and preservation
offer clear economic benefits. If high-character areas benefit the residents of our cities, why not try to cultivate and protect the same types of places to help improve opportunities for the residents of our suburbs?

There are ways to promote a scaled-down version of ReUrbanism—such as by building out from historic main streets—or an alternative version of ReUrbanism—such as by retrofitting 1970s shopping malls into mixed-use hubs that combine environments for living, working, and playing.

In towns such as Conroe, Texas, one of America’s fastest-growing communities, suburban ReUrbanism—evident in the re-emergence of its older, smaller central town—could hold promise. Situated just north of the growing urban suburb and job center of The Woodlands, Conroe is a once-small town that embraced the suburban development that emerged around it in the past two decades. Now the city is looking for ways to re-engage with its history as a county seat and to leverage its historic downtown—an attractive feature that other nearby suburbs can’t offer.

Plano, a suburb of Dallas with a history as an agricultural center, has built out its downtown from its historic core. The suburb has benefitted greatly from its downtown Dallas Area Rapid Transit light rail stop, but careful planning to preserve the historic main street and leverage it alongside new development has also
brought dividends. Plano has become a model for creating an entirely different kind of suburb—one that embraces both new and old, a place where the historic street grid and older buildings mesh with mixed-use developments and light rail. Pursuing the principles of ReUrbanism in the centers of older suburbs and small towns as they undergo development offers them a chance to build from an existing spine of historic buildings.

Just as it is important to ensure that the benefits of ReUrbanism reach lower-income central city neighborhoods, suburban ReUrbanism should work to strengthen places of concentrated poverty and underinvestment. In suburban areas without a historic or urbanizing core, an alternative ReUrbanism could focus on the diversity of buildings available to be retrofitted. Many underserved, lower-income suburban communities are dotted with strip malls and dominated by car-based infrastructure. While these areas are unlikely to earn high character scores, reusing their spaces and aiming for a long-term balance of new and old buildings could serve them well. This work could be especially effective if redevelopment were coupled with simultaneous efforts to rebuild suburban areas in ways that encourage walkability and connectivity. Strip malls can anchor this effort and be transformed from car-based destinations into pedestrian- and transit-focused 24-hour hubs.

The Near Northwest side in Houston, Texas, is an older, postwar suburban area with a predominantly middle-to-low-income population. Its main thoroughfares are strip malls, and its residential areas are typical: single-family lots with a scattering of apartments. On the Atlas, this part of Houston does not receive a high character score. But the low score belies a number of interesting projects that represent what suburban ReUrbanism might offer. Long-term planning efforts call for building on the existing density

Near Northwest Houston’s character score on the Atlas of ReUrbanism. Reds and oranges indicate high character score; blues indicate a low character score.
along the area’s commercial corridors and for creating a more walkable, mixed-use community. The White Oak Bayou Village shopping center is being turned from a completely car-centric strip mall into an area that is oriented to the new bike trail and bayou waterway that run behind it. An old golf course is being made into a space that can be used both for flood detention and recreation. The Near Northwest is taking steps that will bring it more in line with the city centers touted by ReUrbanism, create more affordable housing, and maintain many of its postwar suburban homes—aiming to reap the benefits that come from that built environment.

Obviously, manufacturing ReUrbanism in newer suburbs is not the primary focus of the preservation efforts of the National Trust, nor are these areas necessarily the best models for the importance of preserving older, smaller communities. But projecting the ideas of ReUrbanism forward into the more speculative realm of suburban ReUrbanism presents an opportunity to reshape future development in places where preservation is not a typical practice. Coupling preservation efforts with other pushes to ensure greater affordability and economic development offers opportunities to share the important ideas of ReUrbanism—and the attendant benefits—more broadly. FJ

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TAKEAWAY
Read “How Do You Map the Character of a City?,” a Forum Blog post by Kyle Shelton.

VIDEO
Watch Stephen Klineberg discuss changing demographics at the PastForward 2016 Opening Plenary.
Roadmap to ReUrbanism: Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Building Reuse

MARGARET O’NEAL

Cities and towns across the country have valuable, yet often untapped, assets in their older buildings and neighborhoods. Older buildings and blocks are foundational to creating strong economies and providing smaller, adaptable spaces that can help cities weather an economic storm. They offer affordable commercial space and housing of all types, creating communities that can be home to new and established businesses and residents alike. And they provide a distinctiveness that gives communities character while maintaining room for growth and change. Keeping older buildings in use is an essential element of sustaining and promoting better cities and towns.

At the Preservation Green Lab, we have taken great strides toward demonstrating the value that older buildings and blocks deliver to cities and towns across the country. We’ve ushered the preservation movement from making subjective and general statements to using the data-driven language of developers and policymakers, leveraging the ever-expanding trove of publicly available data. Our research—summarized in the 2014 report, Older, Smaller, Better—has shown that older buildings and blocks are havens of creativity, ingenuity, and entrepreneurialism. They are economic and cultural ecosystems that provide density and diversity. We have found that, in city after city, the relationship between older buildings and a robust local economy is strong. One can no longer deny the value of these assets.

Our next task? Moving from why to reactivate older urban places to how to get it done.

MAKING REUSE EASIER AND MORE LIKELY

The National Trust’s ReUrbanism initiative seeks to make reuse of buildings the default development option in cities across the
county, rendering demolition the option of last resort. As it stands, the regulatory system in many places makes demolition the easier choice. “If I want to rehab a building in Philadelphia, I need to get multiple approvals, but I can get a demolition permit the same day I apply for one,” notes Paul Steinke, executive director of the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia.

Through our Partnership for Building Reuse, the Preservation Green Lab has worked with the Urban Land Institute in five cities across the country—Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, and Baltimore—to uncover specific barriers to building reuse and develop local solutions that make reuse easier and more likely. In each city, the Preservation Green Lab and a local advisory committee convened a variety of stakeholders and practitioners—including preservationists, developers, real estate and finance professionals, and city staff—to identify specific barriers to redevelopment. We found that four major obstacles were most commonly cited.

Requirements to Provide Parking
As the 10 principles of ReUrbanism note, cities should be built for people and not for cars. Yet the auto-oriented development patterns of the late 20th century persist—along with, in many places,
unavoidable continued car use necessitated by a lack of reliable public transit and an imbalance in the location of good jobs. Many cities have parking regulations that use a rigid formula to determine how many spaces each business or building needs to provide. At face value, this may make sense: If you have a hardware or grocery store, you should be able to provide parking for the number of customers you may have at any one time. However, many studies have proven that these formulas often overestimate the amount of parking needed. To prove this point, the #BlackFriday Parking project crowdsources photographs of parking lots that are half empty on Black Friday, the supposed busiest shopping day of the year. If the spots aren’t used then, when will they ever be?

Big box lots aside, many smaller redevelopment projects—such as those along historic commercial corridors—may need to provide even less parking, as they can take advantage of shared lots and street spaces. Adjusting the parking formula—or removing parking minimums altogether, either for reuse projects or for targeted zones of cities—can be one of the most powerful incentives to even the development playing field.

Despite the American love affair with the automobile, this notion is gaining traction across the country. Between 2015 and 2016, estimates of the number of cities that have removed or reduced parking requirements for certain districts increased from a couple dozen to well over 100. Many will find this to be a tricky political fight in their town, but it’s important to note that reducing or eliminating requirements does not equate to eliminating parking spaces. A study of the impacts of Los Angeles’ Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, which eliminated the requirement to create any new parking for new residential units, found that some developers still did deliver parking as an in-demand amenity. In 2004 London planners changed their parking minimums to parking maximums in an attempt to decrease the number of spaces being built and increase investment in providing more housing. They found that, after this change, only 17 percent of new developments provided the previous minimum, 25 percent provided no parking at all, and 22 percent met the maximum allowed. This shows that removing
the minimum doesn’t eliminate parking—it decouples parking from development, allowing market forces to determine where spaces would be most useful.

Many advocates for affordability in cities find that parking requirements increase the cost of housing—whether or not residents have cars. Seattle’s Sightline Institute found that parking requirements added an average of $200 per month to the rent of each new housing unit, regardless of car ownership. Other research has shown that requiring two spaces per unit can increase the cost of a development project by as much as 25 percent, making it impossible for some projects to even get off the ground.

It goes without saying that advocacy around eliminating parking requirements must go hand-in-hand with advocacy for increased access to reliable public transit. If we are serious about reducing this barrier, transit advocates should be part of the conversation.

Out-of-Date Zoning
As with parking provisions, zoning codes often reflect the priorities of a different era and can be a major barrier to encouraging the sensitive, organic neighborhood development that many urban advocates seek. In New York City, zoning was established, in part, to prevent skyscrapers from blocking out sun and airflow to smaller buildings—creating a setback design that allows sunlight to reach
the sidewalk. In other cities, zoning was born of a desire to separate incompatible uses—industrial from residential, for example.

On its surface, this practice is sound. Who would want to live next to a slaughterhouse if they could avoid it? However, much has changed since the 20th century, and the type of development reinforced by single-use districts is no longer serving the needs of much of the population. In fact, recent studies have begun to note how much of certain cities would be “illegal” under current zoning. The highly valued, mixed-use, 24-hour commercial corridors that have a diversity of housing options couldn’t be built today as a result of current zoning.

In Baltimore, neighborhood corner stores are prevalent throughout the city, grandfathered in when many neighborhoods were rezoned solely for residential use in the 1970s. But when the ownership changed hands, the parcels were not allowed to house commercial space. In Remington, a neighborhood near Johns Hopkins University, this meant that eight out of the 12 corner stores in the neighborhood remained vacant for years. In 2012 the city embarked on a comprehensive rezoning effort to address this and other issues. But this intensive process can often take a city planning staff years to complete. In 2015 Remington residents and the Greater Remington Improvement Association promoted a bill—eventually passed by the city council—that allows those eight stores to re-open for their original use.

Though an entire rewrite of the zoning code that encourages reuse and infill development is likely to have greater impact, smaller tweaks like the Remington bill can have an immediate effect. This strikes at the core of what ReUrbanism seeks to do—leverage the original urbanism present in so many cities and towns to provide a wealth of activities, uses, and housing types within a connected, walkable community.

Inflexibility of Building Codes
The building codes we live with today were put in place to regulate various aspects of how buildings perform. Many life-safety codes originate from devastating fires or other disasters that demonstrated the need to regulate egress or materials. Others, such as energy
codes, are designed to generate a specific outcome. In most cases, they have been written as a set of rigid regulations to be strictly interpreted and enforced. However, this formulaic approach to codes can eliminate the opportunity for developers to come up with creative, case-specific solutions that better suit their adaptive reuse projects.

The formula goes like this: If you use certain materials and follow specific installation guidelines, you automatically meet code. Following this kind of checklist is sometimes called a “prescriptive” approach. This may work for large developers or new projects—if you are starting from scratch, you can just follow the checklist. But if you want to convert a warehouse into apartments or a gas station into a coffee shop, you’re going to need to get creative. In our Partnership for Building Reuse discussions, we heard numerous examples of prescriptive building code application posing a challenge for reuse projects—such as the requirement for a secondary internal staircase, which may be important for huge multifamily projects but may not be necessary in a smaller building with a particular layout; or the requirement that windows be a specific dimension, rather than simply operable and large enough to use as an egress. Additionally, when developers are forced to apply building codes mainly designed for new construction to buildings with materials, layouts, and features from earlier times, it can add unpredictability to the redevelopment process, a disincentive for those not already familiar with rehab projects.

Historic buildings or reuse projects don’t need to be exempt from building codes, but allowing for some flexibility within the codes themselves or in their application to reuse or smaller infill development would make these types of projects much easier and more likely. Many cities and states have begun adopting flexible building codes, modeled on the International Existing Building Code (IEBC), specifically to incentivize this type of development. The IEBC is part of a family of international codes developed by the International Codes Council, which provides a framework for the health and life safety codes in much of the United States. The IEBC offers alternate approaches to repairs, alterations, and additions for existing buildings while still meeting the desired safety
outcomes of the original building codes. What this really means is that developers and designers are given the flexibility to meet the outcome—a quick exit in case of fire, for example—in the way that makes the most sense for the specific building.

New Jersey officials recognized a need to create more housing by redeveloping existing single-family residential areas and other underused nonresidential assets. To make this work, they created a Rehabilitation Subcode within the state’s building code. Adopted in 1998, this was the first building code in the nation written specifically for existing buildings, describing how to meet health and life safety goals in redevelopment. The subcode lays out a clear set of requirements that are predictable to developers and in proportion to the work planned, so as not to significantly extend its scope. Notably, it allows flexibility in order to enable developers to retain historic fabric.

**Inadequate Financing**

Finally, stakeholders noted time and time again the need for better access to capital and greater financial incentives for reuse projects. More so than with new development, budgets for reuse projects can be unpredictable, as unknowable issues crop up, requiring tweaks to the plan. That leads lenders to shy away from rehabilitation projects, perceiving them as riskier. Additionally, the complex layering of public and private funding that many reuse projects require can be unfamiliar to some lenders and an obstacle to new developers.

Historic tax credits (HTCs)—at the federal and state levels—have provided an impressive boost to reuse projects across the country. Over the life of the federal HTC, $23 billion in credits have leveraged...
$131 billion in private investment—generating more than $28 billion in federal tax revenue alone. Strong federal- and state-level HTCs for rehab work are among the best tools to incentivize reuse and can make—or break—a developer’s ability to have a project “pencil out” financially. Ongoing advocacy efforts to maintain and strengthen these credits are critical to the success of ReUrbanism.

But other creative credits and financial incentives can also help spur investment in older neighborhoods. In 2013 South Carolina passed the Abandoned Buildings Revitalization Act, which offers an income tax credit of up to 25 percent to redevelop a building (of any age) that has been at least two-thirds vacant for five years or more. Motor City Match, a program of the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, leverages Community Development Block Grants to connect owners of vacant commercial space with tenants who are looking to start new businesses—a matchmaking system that should be replicated in any town looking to strengthen its local economy. In the most recent round of grants alone, Motor City Match has leveraged nearly $3 million in grants to serve 572 businesses, including 10 women-owned businesses.

Those undertaking efforts to create new incentives and improve access to financing should always consider how to broaden the developer pool in every city. The historical model of an owner-occupied business should be viable today, at a time when we seek to build economic resilience and neighborhood wealth. The more people participate in real estate development, the better off the preservation movement will be; incremental development is how many of our most-loved neighborhoods evolved in the first place, and we should promote and celebrate that. Training, education, and marketing can go a long way in this effort, and including smaller deals in new financing packages is equally important.

**NEXT STEP: DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING MODEL POLICIES**

Older buildings and blocks are foundational to the healthy, equitable, and resilient cities of the future, so they need to be actively stewarded as resources by city leaders and urban advocates. The Partnership for Building Reuse process provided the greatest insight to date on how the regulatory regime of modern cities is set
up in favor of new construction and larger developments. To change that, we must develop a toolkit of creative strategies and policy solutions.

The beginnings of this toolkit lay in the final report coming out of this work, *Untapped Potential: Strategies for Revitalization and Reuse*. Released in October 2017, it details the major barriers discussed in this article and presents the best strategies for cities across the country to overcome those barriers. The report also comes with a model Adaptive Reuse Incentive Program—an out-of-the-box adoptable overlay that brings together the best regulatory incentives for developers of older, smaller buildings.

Supported by research and policy, ReUrbanism will provide a path forward for urban advocates and city leaders to both recognize the value of their older buildings and take action to put them back into use. FJ

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