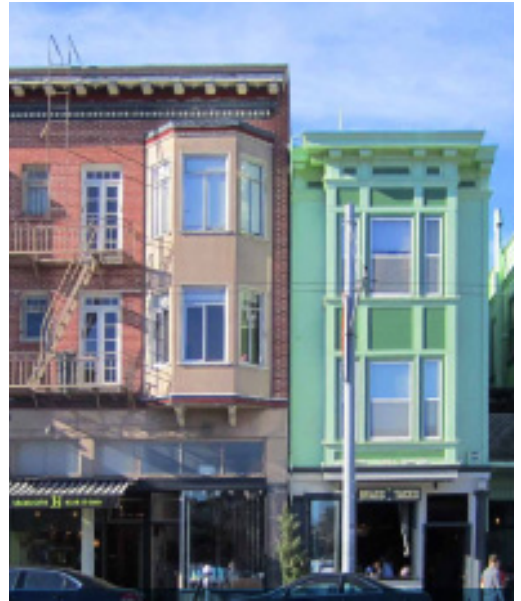




National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

Preservation Leadership Forum

MAY 2014



ForumFocus

Putting the *Older, Smaller, Better* Report to Work for Historic Preservation

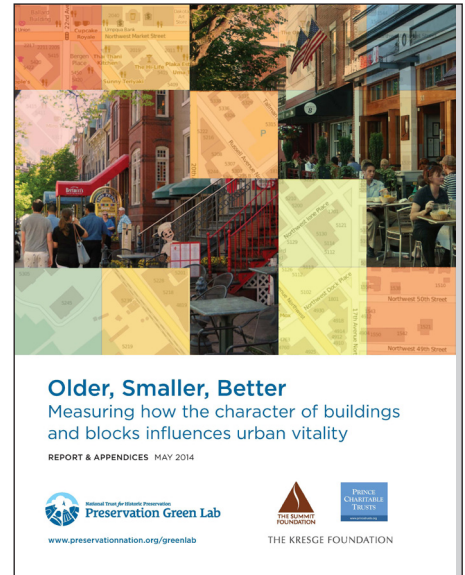
PRESERVATION GREEN LAB
NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Preservation Leadership Forum's Focus series presents in-depth, timely reports and guidance on innovative preservation research and practices. *Forum Focus* is published periodically as a benefit of Forum membership. For more information about Forum and to become a member visit www.preservationnation.org/forum.

Photos left to right: Washington, D.C. (photo courtesy Barracks Row Main Street), Seattle, and San Francisco (photos by Jim Lindberg).

Putting the *Older, Smaller, Better* Report to Work for Historic Preservation

The National Trust's Preservation Green Lab recently published a pioneering report, [Older, Smaller, Better: Measuring how the character of buildings and blocks influences urban vitality](#). This 109-page report uses the vast amount of electronic data available to researchers today—also called “big data”—to quantify how older, smaller buildings contribute to local economies and livable communities. For several decades now, preservationists have measured the economic and community benefits of historic rehabilitation projects. This is the first time, however, that such a full range of electronic data has been used on a citywide scale to document the contributions of older, smaller buildings and blocks. This report not only demonstrates that these buildings add to the economic, social, and cultural vitality of neighborhoods, but it also introduces a new methodology for using electronic data to measure the impact of older, smaller buildings.



This *Forum Focus* is designed to help preservation professionals and advocates use the data contained within the report to advance their own efforts to save historic places. In it, you will find:

- An explanation of the report's methodology and the study's research objectives and steps.
- A breakdown of the report's findings and what they mean for historic preservation.

GENESIS OF THIS REPORT

Preservationists instinctively know that older buildings play a crucial role in contributing to the livability of cities and local economies. Most are familiar with [Jane Jacobs'](#) book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and have long accepted and promoted the book's premise that mass-scale demolition and replacement of older buildings with large new structures drains the life and vitality from urban neighborhoods.

But more than 50 years after the book's publication, preservationists are still fighting to conserve older neighborhoods, hampered by outdated zoning regulations, overly prescriptive building and energy codes, misdirected development incentives, and limited financial tools.

Not only that, but the world has changed dramatically in the last half century. Do Jacobs' arguments still hold true in the 21st century? Where do older, smaller buildings fit within cities that are seeking to maximize transit investments, increase density, and compete in the global economy?

Staff at the National Trust's [Green Lab](#) began to look for answers. With funding support from The Summit Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and the Prince Charitable Trusts, they worked with [Impresa, Inc.](#) and [Basemap](#) to develop a new methodology that used electronic data to measure the role of older, smaller buildings in urban neighborhoods. [Gehl Studio](#) and [State of Place](#)™ offered insights on the results of the Green Lab's analysis, based on their experience studying the interactions of people and place.



Barracks Row,
Washington, D.C.
Credit: Barracks Row
Main Street

UNDERSTANDING THE METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PROCESS

Researchers focused on three cities: Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. These cities were selected because all three have extensive areas of older, urban fabric. They are also experiencing rapid growth and intense development pressure. Researchers then used spatial analysis or spatial statistics (i.e., mapping, comparing, and analyzing data tied to specific geographic locations) to evaluate the character of various urban neighborhoods in each of the three cities.

They had two research objectives:

1. To assess the contributions of older, smaller buildings to the economic, social, and cultural vitality of neighborhoods in the three study cities.
2. To create a methodology for measuring the performance of older, smaller buildings that can be used to inform plans, policies, and sustainability metrics in communities nationwide.

WHAT IS BIG DATA AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR HISTORIC BUILDINGS?

Big Data is a term used to describe the ever-expanding and vast amounts of data now available thanks to the electronic world that we now inhabit. What does that mean for historic preservation? For the purposes of this report, it means that researchers could get a clearer picture of how older, smaller buildings are being used and when. This is [valuable information for preservation advocates](#)—it can point them to smarter preservation policies, and can help them engage broad public audiences with information about the character of our towns and cities.

Research was carried out in six steps:

1. Researchers gathered data from city, county, state, and federal government departments and agencies as well as publicly accessible websites. The research team looked for data that would help them measure urban vitality—meaning the amount of regular social, cultural, and economic activity that occurs in an area of the city. This data ranged from counts of jobs and businesses, to walkability metrics and measures of population density and diversity. They also compiled information on the age of the buildings in the study cities.
2. Researchers overlaid a 200-by-200-meter grid over a map of each city. Each grid square was a little smaller than two city blocks. Dividing each city into equally sized grid squares allowed an “apples to apples” comparison of areas throughout the city. This is in contrast to census tracts, for example, which are much more irregularly divided geographically.
3. Researchers matched and fitted the collected data to the grid squares. Since the data was linked to specific geographic locations—ranging from individual property parcel numbers to census blocks—researchers had to make some adjustments to align some of the statistics to the 200-by-200-meter grid.
4. Researchers excluded squares that were not in mixed-use and commercial areas. Including strictly residential areas would have made it difficult to achieve meaningful comparisons between distinctly different land use types.

DEFINING MEASUREMENTS

Building Age: The age of the building drawn from the property assessor’s records. Each square was assigned a building age which represents the median age of all primary buildings in that grid square.

Diversity of Building Age: Rating system that measured the diversity of building ages within each grid square. Grid squares with a combination of new and old buildings were assigned higher “diversity of building age” scores than neighborhoods composed of buildings constructed around the same time.

Granularity: Refers to the size of buildings and the size of the parcels on which they stood. Areas of high granularity have large numbers of small buildings on small lots. Areas of low granularity have fewer, bigger buildings occupying large lots.

Size: Refers to the physical size of a project, i.e., total square footage (buildings and land), number of structures, and relation to its surroundings. Physical size affects not only project costs, but also its feasibility, possible number of jobs, and return on investment.

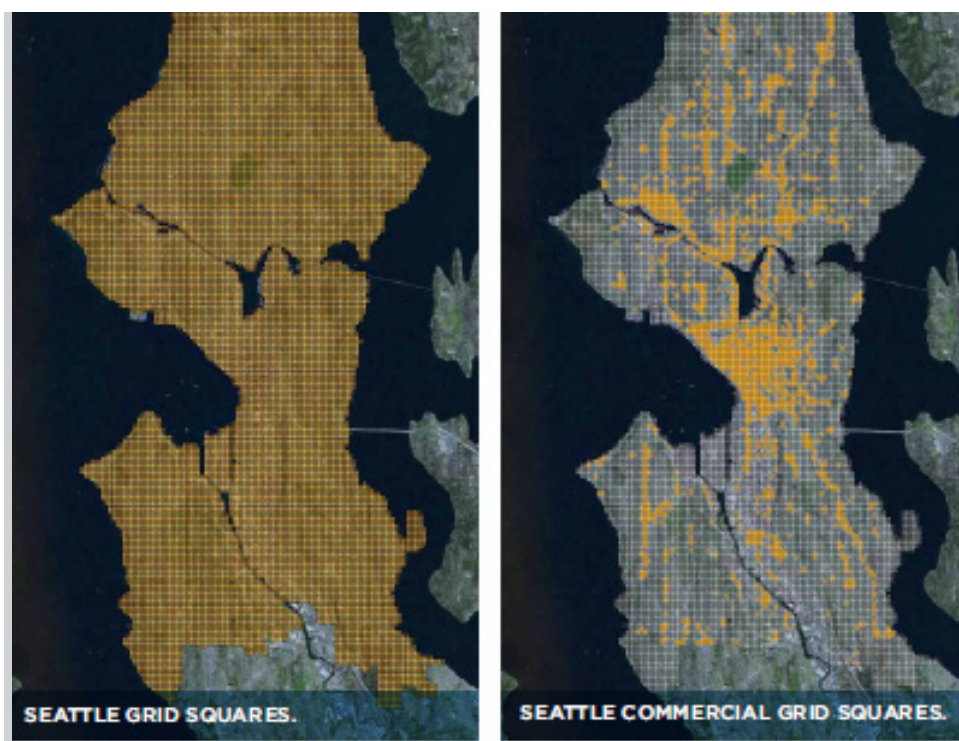
Property Use: Rehabilitations often involve a change in use (i.e., a mill converted to apartments). Identifying the property’s current or historical use (i.e., woolen mill, bank, church) informs how the property must be physically adapted to its new or future use. A property’s current or historical use may also affect how it is zoned, and, by extension, its potential reuse options.

5. Researchers developed a composite “Character Score” that combined three specific building characteristics—building age, diversity of building age, and granularity—into a single measure or “score.”
6. Researchers ran statistical models to test the relationships between the Character Score of each grid square and 40 urban vitality measures. For example, a high Character Score was found to correlate with a higher than average number of non-chain businesses.

UNDERSTANDING THE RESULTS

Much like adding the final pieces to a jigsaw puzzle, once the various data was applied to the grids overlaying the three cities, an overall picture emerged. Researchers found that blocks and districts with a fine-grained mix of old and new buildings were more economically, socially, and culturally vital than areas with mostly newer, larger buildings. Building age, building age diversity, and the granularity of building fabric emerged as significant predictors of community vitality. In particular:

1. Areas with a combination of small, old and new buildings had significantly greater human activity, represented by measures such as cellphone usage and sidewalk seating permits, than areas composed of large, new buildings. For example, the research team found significantly greater cellphone activity at 10:00 p.m. on Friday night in areas with a mix of old and new buildings.
2. There is clear connection between the older, more age-diverse, and fine-grained areas of the three study cities and various measures of economic activity. By many measures, these areas support an equal or greater density



In order to analyze each city, a grid of 200-by-200-meter squares was overlaid on the cities’ geographies. The map on the left shows a grid of 12,675 squares covering the entire city of Seattle.

The map on the right shows the 1,944 grid squares containing commercial and mixed uses highlighted in yellow. This study focused on these commercial and mixed-use grid squares in each city.

of economic activity per commercial square foot than areas composed of mostly large, new buildings. They contain higher concentrations of businesses, jobs, and creative jobs on a “per commercial square foot” basis.

3. Blocks with older, smaller buildings have many startup and non-chain businesses, which signals regular economic activity and distinctiveness.
4. Older sections of the study cities are thriving and contain younger populations and more diverse places.

A CLOSER LOOK AT ONE EXAMPLE

Researchers looked at five neighborhoods in the three study cities: Seattle’s Chinatown International District and Pike/Pine Corridor; Washington, D.C.’s Barracks Row and H Street NE; and San Francisco’s Mid-Market. A closer look at the Seattle Pike/Pine neighborhood demonstrates how researchers used data to measure urban vitality.

Seattle’s Pike/Pine Corridor is a cultural hive of restaurants and night clubs, apartments and condominiums, local retailers and coffee shops, and office spaces encompassing 26 square blocks. An early streetcar suburb of Seattle, in 1905, Pike/Pine became Seattle’s “auto row,” home to a cluster of car dealerships and car-oriented businesses. Today, the area contains a mix of old and new buildings, and its distinctive collection of large garages with wide bay doors now houses coffee shops and clubs.

It is also one of Seattle’s most active and vital neighborhoods according to the study’s performance metrics.

Let’s look more carefully at the various measurements that support this finding:

- Cellphone activity: At 10:00 p.m. on a Friday night, cellphone activity was greater in Pike/Pine than any other area in the three cities studies for this report.
- Jobs: Pike/Pine hosts more jobs per square foot of commercial space than the city average.
- Local businesses: More than 96 percent of the business in the area are local, non-chain establishments, higher than the city average.
- Walkability: Pike/Pine has a much higher [Walk Score](#)[®] rating than the city average.
- In the case of Pike/Pine, data clearly demonstrates that the historic character of the buildings is an asset to the neighborhood’s social, cultural and economic vitality.



Close analysis of this study’s key measures of building character reveals that areas of Seattle that have older buildings are often particularly active, vibrant places. Credit: Jim Lindberg

TAKE AWAYS

Older, Smaller, Better shows that Jane Jacobs was right. Mixed use and commercial districts made up of small buildings from different eras play an important role in fostering social, economic, and cultural vitality. The report documents how these areas serve as thriving incubators for small businesses, as centers for neighborhood services, and as regional destinations for restaurants, nightlife, and specialty retail.

The report also demonstrates how preservationists can use newly available data to measure the performance of older neighborhoods in their communities. *Older, Smaller, Better* expands our understanding of how small-scale, mixed-vintage districts contribute to economic, social and cultural sustainability, and benefit the environment. The information that is gained from this type of analysis can be used to inform plans, policies, and sustainability metrics in communities nationwide.

The study also demonstrates the importance of balancing a compatible mix of old and new buildings in commercial and mixed-use districts. Preservationists have long understood the need to blend appropriate new construction with existing buildings, and they must continue to promote a full range of zoning tools that conserve existing buildings and encourage compatible new construction.

Older, Smaller, Better shows that older, smaller buildings and blocks play a critical role in healthy, livable cities and “punch above their weight class” when considering a full spectrum of outcomes on a per-square-foot basis—from the number of jobs and businesses to the vitality of nightlife and presence of young residents.

For more on *Older, Smaller, Better* visit the [Preservation Leadership Forum blog](#).
Access the full report at www.oldersmallerbetter.com.



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

Preservation Leadership Forum

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Preservation Leadership Forum

National Trust for Historic Preservation

The Watergate Office Building

2600 Virginia Avenue NW Suite 1000 Washington, DC 20037

P 202.588.6000 | forumonline@savingplaces.org | preservationnation.org/forum

The National Trust for Historic Preservation works to save America's historic places for the next generation. We take direct, on-the-ground action when historic buildings and sites are threatened. Our work helps build vibrant, sustainable communities. We advocate with governments to save America's heritage. We strive to create a cultural legacy that is as diverse as the nation itself so that all of us can take pride in our part of the American story.