Preservation as the Movement of Yes
Looking (and Getting) Past Crisis Moments in Preservation

MARGARET O’NEAL

For the past year, the Preservation Green Lab has been working in Louisville, Kentucky, to advance building reuse and historic preservation as tools to achieve sustainable, healthy and equitable development. This type of systemic change can take decades—as we in the preservation world know so well. Building by building, block by block—local preservation organizations save something, a preservation-friendly developer saves something. But to really change the course of development patterns in a neighborhood, historic commercial district or city requires more than the work of a dedicated group of preservationists. It requires changing the ethic around reuse and reinvestment, raising awareness of what older buildings contribute to environmental and economic sustainability and social well-being. And it may also require those of us in the preservation movement to be a bit more flexible in pursuing our long-term preservation and community development goals.

I am proud of the progress the Green Lab has made in Louisville in just over a year. We have set up a pilot project in the NuLu commercial district that will deliver economic resilience to small businesses through money-saving energy efficiency retrofits. We’ve led a diverse group of stakeholders through a strategic planning process to create policy recommendations that will bring better building reuse outcomes if adopted by city officials. We’ve brought to the city our unique spatial analysis tools, which use

The Preservation Green Lab has been applying reuse and redevelopment models to various buildings and neighborhoods in Louisville, Kentucky, including the small-scale commercial buildings along Main Street.

PHOTO BY ANDY SNOW.
available data to gather a baseline understanding of the city’s built fabric; show how the older, smaller portions of the city contribute positively to social, economic and cultural outcomes; and identify areas of opportunity for both market-driven and nonprofit community-based developers.

However, along with so much progress, we have also dealt with a number of crisis moments—emergency situations such as overnight demolitions and unexpected new threats to specific buildings. These moments, known so well to those of us who work in the field, mark critical points in our work and are key to determining how we might be able to proceed in the long run. These situations not only take our eyes off the prize, but they also feed into the reputation we have as those yelling “No!” at the 11th hour to every proposed change. Where did we come from? Why do we care about this, now?

Reacting to crisis moments, or major threats, has been a part of preservation work for so long, it feels like it’s in our DNA. The movement got its start saying “No!” So how do we change? And what is it about how we react to the crisis moment that might be holding us back? To explore these questions, I reached out to partners that the Green Lab is working with across the country.

**TAKING THE LONG VIEW**

Even though much of our work is rooted in the past, the preservation movement has always been about the future. Whether we are saving monuments to notable people in our nation’s political history or the small-scale commercial buildings along Main Street, the actions aren’t really about us—they’re about ensuring that the buildings that have made us who we are stick around to influence the lives of those who will come after us.

In this way, preservation is a forward-looking endeavor. We are actively determining what will survive for the next generation and, in doing so, assigning worth to the things that live and mourning the things that die. But this mentality of asking “What will survive?” contributes to the popular notion that preservationists want to save all the buildings. However, we can’t save all the old places, even in the most preservation-friendly cities in the world. Growth requires change, and to deny that growth is happening, or that it
can be good and welcome, is at best naive and at worst offensive to those wanting to better their communities. If we want building reuse to be taken seriously as a tool for economic development, we need to be willing to advocate for change.

We have to recognize that what we want are thriving cities and towns, with strong local economies and lively streets, built on a mix of old and new buildings. We don’t want perfectly preserved buildings that aren’t functional or that don’t serve the folks who live near them, nor do we want building that are falling down because of a lack of options for reuse. National Trust president and CEO Stephanie K. Meeks has expressed this well:

*Instead of trapping buildings in amber, we need to keep them in active service to today’s families. We need to work with communities to reconceptualize historic places, so they are meeting the needs of neighborhoods and reflecting the energy and diversity of their environment. We should partner with preservation-minded developers, property owners, real estate agents, city officials and civic organizations to modernize regulations, help existing communities to thrive and make it easier to breathe new life into older buildings.*

So one way of taking the long view is to think about older and historic buildings as living things—places that are constantly being re-animated by each generation that experiences them. This is not a new idea for preservation practitioners, of course, but we often fail to communicate this understanding to those in the development, real estate or planning world. If we take this stance more actively, our job then becomes facilitating progress, connecting with new partners to understand community needs and determine how best to achieve development goals by and with old buildings. A key piece here is making it easier for those interested in investing in older building to breathe new life into old bones. That means sometimes being more flexible in our requirements and expectations—because at the end of the day, in almost all cases, some preservation is better than no preservation.

To take the long view, preservation practice must be proactive, not reactive. Gerald Robbins, executive director of Hyde Jackson...
Square Main Streets in Jamaica Plain—a Boston neighborhood that is participating in the Green Lab’s America Saves! program—describes how his organization is addressing this:

_We know that to maintain the greatness of our community, we need to identify those features worth preserving. For this reason, we will be mapping our community assets over the next several months to inform us of our neighborhood’s strengths and developing community plans from this. Our neighborhood is unique and we want to maintain its value. Long-term vision and planning might take time and be hard to do, but we’d much rather do this than react to repeated pressures in our community._

Whether a city is experiencing intense development pressure, like our partners in Boston, or is just starting to see investment, it is crucial to take stock of the older and historic built resources and assess their long-term potential for continued productive use.

**PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY**

Another key to developing a long view is gathering insights and support from others, including those outside the preservation field. Coalition building has always been a strength of the preservation movement—from the transportation policy battles of the 1990s to the Green Lab’s [Partnership for Building Reuse (PBR)](https://www.greenlab.org/pbr) work with the [Urban Land Institute](https://www.uli.org). This initiative brings together real estate professionals, community development groups, preservationists, sustainability advocates and city leaders to identify local barriers to building reuse and potential solutions for overcoming these obstacles. Our PBR work is so groundbreaking specifically because a dialogue between preservationists and developers—realizing that we often have a common cause—has not been seen in recent years on a national scale.
Alicia Berg, assistant vice president for Campus Planning + Sustainability with the University of Chicago, who is closely involved with the PBR Chicago effort, sees great potential:

In Chicago, preservation has been much more successful when it has been paired with good policy or planning. That is why I am so excited to be part of the Partnership for Building Reuse effort. The relationships we’ve formed with the City and the conversations we’ve had amongst the preservation, real estate and development worlds have been incredibly creative and productive. During this process, we’ve discovered how many developers are interested in the value delivered by older buildings—they just need help navigating and streamlining the process [of rehabilitation]. I’m very optimistic that we will save more buildings as a result.

Developing and maintaining relationships with those outside of the preservation movement can help broaden our horizons while also increasing understanding of the diverse nature of our work. After all, taking the long view will not help us toward our goals unless others share the vision and take the journey with us.

TURNING CRISIS INTO OPPORTUNITY

Saving places is what we do, and the most visible way to save something is when there is a threat. But putting out fires can’t be our only strategy. When we are inundated by fires, we are in a constant state of looking around, rather than looking ahead.

Though it’s not easy, it’s vital that we use crisis moments to our advantage—taking the instance when preservation is being viewed as a roadblock and integrating that specific situation into the broader

The Navy Yard, pictured here, is one of the many buildings and sites that were evaluated for their reuse potential by the Preservation Green Lab team, as part of the Partnership for Building Reuse project in Philadelphia.

PHOTO BY JIM LINDBERG.
This summer in Louisville, the threatened demolition of historic buildings downtown to make way for a large hotel development provided the classic opportunity to say “No!”—but instead of simply doing that, local preservationists brought together preservation advocates (including the Green Lab), stakeholders and local government officials to talk about the role older buildings play in economic development and how a varied, human-scale streetscape produces the best possible environment for a lively downtown. We ultimately failed to save those specific buildings, but through private meetings, a facilitated design charette and media outreach, we successfully brought about discussions of options, progress and growth.

Recent conversations with Louisville city officials have shown that this sharing of our long view has influenced their approach to preservation and development issues. Gretchen Milliken, director of advanced planning for Louisville Metro, says:

> Our ultimate goal is to develop a long-term comprehensive plan that articulates a vision for the role of historic preservation in Louisville—the role it plays in economic development, neighborhood revitalization, and accommodation of future needs and uses—and identifies strategies for achieving that vision.

Cynthia Johnson, historic preservation officer with Louisville Metro, looks forward to developing that plan:

> This is an opportunity to directly engage the public in a progressive approach for the preservation of our cultural heritage. This type of work group will bring people together from multiple perspectives to look at ways to develop new practices and protocols for Louisville’s unique cultural and historic resources that recognize the importance of our city’s heritage and character.
The Green Lab’s research has proven that older buildings—even just ordinary ones—contribute significantly to the vitality of cities and neighborhoods in measureable cultural, economic, social and environmental ways. When a crisis moment comes, we need to make sure the narrative of losing something includes loss of future economic development, equity, health and well-being.

And we need to be savvy in communicating that message, in a compelling, timely and professional way, to governments, the media, potential advocacy partners and the public. As one of our partners in Chicago states: “Very few in the preservation movement have had media training or have been taught to think in terms of key messages and framing the discussion. The preservation movement would be transformed if we had comprehensive marketing expertise and communications training.” Effective messaging can help to shift the conversation away from emergency and toward progress.

WHAT THE LONG VIEW MEANS IN THE SHORT TERM
It’s true that we can’t ignore these crisis moments as they come up. Many local preservationists expect us to step up and advocate at the last minute, when advocacy is often most needed. As Bonnie McDonald, president and CEO of Landmarks Illinois, notes: “Making choices not to react to a crisis can disappoint and disenfranchise long-term advocates and supporters who may walk away with their membership dollars. Further, it may result in a crisis of identity for well-established preservation advocacy nonprofits.”

But the lesson here is that we also have to agree on the end-game: preserving our older and historic buildings so that they may be used by future

The challenge—and opportunity—for Louisville, Kentucky, is to continue supporting preservation while also encouraging new construction and investment.

PHOTO BY ANDY SNOW.
generations. Being used means that they are *useful*—not just that they survived. And this is the vision that we need to maintain—even in the face of crisis. FJ

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