ReUrbanism: Past Meets Future in American Cities
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](https://www.preservationgreenlab.com) 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](https://www.mainsstreetamerica.org) and the [National Trust Community Investment Corporation](https://www.nationaltrust.org/), 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.

Valencia Street in San Francisco. PHOTO BY JIM LINDBERG
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.