Preservation as the Movement of Yes
Getting Away From “No”: Straight Talk to Local Advocates

JOYCE BARRETT

When asked a few years ago at a Preservation Partners meeting, “What are preservation’s greatest barriers?” I named historic/design review boards. There was an audible gasp! But yes, I believe poorly trained, though well-intentioned, “hysterical preservationists” have done about as much damage as wrecking balls.

Are there any among you who do not cringe when you mention your association with historic preservation and are met with, “Oh, you tell people what color to paint their house.” God no! We build communities for the future. Where on earth did anyone get the idea that we care about what color you paint your house? Hmm … I think I know where that came from. Some days, the unflattering view of historic preservation among the general public seems insurmountable. The saddest part is, it was created by well-meaning review boards that likely had no training.

So how do we move away from this perception and reality? We may need new kinds of organizations, new kinds of structures. And we need to bring others along to new ways of thinking.

Heritage Ohio is the first organization in the country to bring the work of coordinating a statewide Main Street program and administering a statewide historic preservation nonprofit under one roof because we believe the National Main Street Center’s approach is the most pragmatic way to solve downtown problems through historic preservation. Our organization engages in three areas of work: revitalization, overseeing Main Street programs in 23 Ohio communities; preservation through traditional activities such as an easement program and an Old House Fair; and advocacy, which has included helping to create a state historic tax credit and now entails working to support continued funding for both the state and federal programs. Our mission is “Helping people to save the places that matter—build community—live better,” and our
programming supports that mission. Nowhere does it say “stand in front of bulldozers” (and we’ve taken some criticism from folks who want us to do that). But if you are looking ahead toward solving problems, you really don’t have much time to fight the battle of “got there too late.” We will never know all the buildings we saved by investing time in creating Ohio’s historic tax credit and working to save the credit over and over again. But that’s a better use of our time, with much more impact in the long run, although it may not be what some people think a “traditional” historic preservation organization does.

Several years ago, I prepared a presentation called “Not Your Grandma’s Preservation Organization.” The intent was to nudge preservation organizations toward looking at changes in our culture as well as looking to the future of how we will sustain membership and interest in historic preservation. Millennials, thankfully, are pushing re-urbanization, and their voices are critical to the future of our organizations. A representative of Heritage Ohio’s new affiliated group, Young Ohio Preservationists, holds a seat on our board of directors, and the input that group provides is sure to influence the perspective of Ohio’s preservation movement in the years to come.
But we’re still in transition. In the meantime, here are some of the folks we have to deal with:

- The people who think every historic building in their community should be a museum. Local communities still struggle with what to do with their significant landmark buildings. But please, no more museums or senior centers—be it the mansion, the train depot or the Carnegie library. Try to find an income-producing use, something that contributes to the tax base.

- The ones who insist, “We need more parking!” How do we get over the notion that parking is more valuable to people than buildings? Even in some tiny towns we work with, there are those who think parking is the secret ingredient for economic success.

- Those who believe, “Old buildings are an eyesore! They’re too far gone.” There are more hobby structural engineers than you can shake a stick at.

- The elected representatives at the local, state and national levels who don’t understand that historic preservation is a solution to problems rather than a problem itself. We need to show them one great example after another to counteract years of negative imagery, both real and imagined.

And about those review commissions? What would happen if they went away? What if all their energy was redirected into technical assistance without a visible stick, but with carrots? What if the public no longer feared the retribution of the preservationists? Yeah, I bet all rehab work wouldn’t be done in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards—I get that—but would our movement continue to progress? Yes. Would it open the doors for
more positive relationships between best-practices proponents and the public? Maybe. It is a conversation we should have. I do believe a poorly trained commission is worse than no commission. So in the meantime, NAPC (National Alliance of Preservation Commissions), you have a lot of work on your plate! And every SHPO and every state and local preservation organization needs to act to get those commission member trained!

Let’s start fresh in thinking about how we can grow a movement. I think we have been shrinking, and to turn this around, we will need to make changes that will make some people uncomfortable. FJ

JOYCE BARRETT is executive director of Heritage Ohio. She served on the Iowa City Historic Preservation Commission for three years in the 1990s and received good training through the Certified Local Government program.

TAKEAWAY
Flip through Joyce Barrett’s presentation “Not Your Grandma’s Preservation Organization.”