ReUrbanism: Past Meets Future in American Cities
Managing, Not Stopping, Change

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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

New development in San Francisco.

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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 and hipster-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. “Back-ground” or character buildings—relatively small, modest buildings that establish the look and feel of a street and neighborhood—
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.

Some of the former industrial buildings in the Downtown Los Angeles Arts District await adaptive reuse—or potential development pressures that could spur demolition.

PHOTO BY ADRIAN FINE
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

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**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.