Restore America: Communities at a Crossroads

Speeches from the 2004 National Preservation Conference
Louisville, Kentucky
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The National Trust for Historic Preservation provides leadership, education, advocacy, and resources to save America’s diverse places and revitalize our communities.

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President’s Report

Let me first express my appreciation for our partners and cosponsors, and the many people here in Kentucky and southern Indiana who worked so hard to make this conference happen—especially co-chairs Madeline Abramson, Christy Brown, Linda Bruckheimer, Marlene Helm, and Liz Kennan. The insight and advice of local friends were absolutely essential to the success of this conference.

I also want to express my thanks to Mayor Jerry Abramson and the people of Louisville for making us feel so welcome here. Some of you may have attended the last National Preservation Conference to be held in Louisville, back in 1982. If so, I’m sure you were impressed by the city’s incredible collection of historic buildings and neighborhoods, and by what local preservationists were doing to protect their heritage. I can assure you that if you were impressed then—or, for that matter, if you’re here for the first time—you have a real treat in store. In the 22 years since our last Louisville conference, local preservationists have accomplished some great things, and they’re eager to share them with you during the next few days.

It’s been a very good year for the National Trust. We took important steps to ensure that the preservation movement will remain strong and proactive, and that it will continue to have access to the tools and expertise it needs in order to play an effective role in protecting historic places and shaping livable communities. We also took important steps to ensure that the National Trust itself is positioned to provide the programs and leadership that the movement needs—not only to save the heritage we cherish but also to advance the cause of preservation into the mainstream of our national life.

I want to describe for you some of the highlights of the past year. I believe you’ll share my pride in what we’ve accomplished.

National Trust Historic Sites

I’ll begin where preservation in America began—with historic houses. Many people are first introduced to the idea of preservation and the work of the National Trust through a visit to one of our historic sites. These places link us with 18th-century planters in the South and 20th-century immigrants in New York, with artists and Presidents and generations of African Americans both enslaved and free.

These places are rooted in the past, but they aren’t frozen in time. In fact, two of our historic sites are undergoing some very big—and very exciting—changes right now.

In Washington, D.C., we’ve begun the process of giving a “hidden treasure” the spotlight it deserves. Abraham Lincoln spent almost a quarter of his presidency at his cottage on the grounds of the Soldiers Home, using it as a retreat where he could relax with his family, conduct official business, and learn and refine his theories of emancipation. Despite its significance, the cottage was largely forgotten—but now we’ve taken up the challenge of making it a publicly accessible historic site and learning center. We’ve begun stripping away later alterations and uncovering evidence of the Lincolns’ occupancy. Still ahead are the completion of the restoration of the cottage, the renovation of a nearby building to serve as a visitors’ center, the design
Louisville, Ky., is linked to southern Indiana by bridges across the Ohio River. The impact that two new planned bridges may have on historic areas on either sides of the river was a topic of discussion at the conference. Photo by Byrd Wood.

a number of outside experts, have led us to conclude that we have enough information to carry out a complete restoration of the Montpelier mansion, and a gift from the estate of Paul Mellon has made it possible for us to start work. Our goal is to reveal and restore the form, size, structure, and furnishings of the home that the Madisons knew. But that doesn’t mean the duPont legacy will be ignored: As part of a new visitors’ center, a special gallery will interpret the duPont family history at Montpelier, including re-creations of rooms that the duPonds installed. We expect the project to take about four years, and visitors will be able to witness it from start to finish. Please pay us a visit; you’ll be impressed and excited by what you see.

With our partner the Montpelier Foundation, we’ve launched another ambitious voyage of rediscovery at James Madison’s Montpelier in Virginia. Over the decades since James and Dolley Madison lived there, other owners—most notably the duPont family—had made major changes to the house. Much painstaking research and on-site investigation, coupled with advice from and construction of exhibits, and the development of educational programs. It will take time and money, of course, but the result will be a historic site that offers a uniquely informative and engaging perspective on Lincoln the man and his presidency.

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Another generous friend, Walter Mathis, donated his own home in the King William Historic District of San Antonio to the Trust’s collection of historic sites. It’s not yet open to the public—but when it is, we’ll have an opportunity to share with visitors a handsome example of 19th-century architecture, and an incredibly diverse collection of furnishings, artworks, and memorabilia.

As many of you know, we’ve been working for some time to make our historic sites collection more truly representative of our nation, to diversify and expand it into different building types, historical periods, and geographic regions. The addition of the Mathis house is part of that expansion—as is our ongoing and very promising discussion with the tribal council at the historic Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico.

Also last year, Drayton Hall in South Carolina received a bequest of $15 million from longtime friend and supporter Sally Reahard of Indianapolis. This gift will allow us to re-assess site needs, create a long-range strategic plan for the property, build a new visitors’ center, and undertake other projects that will make Drayton Hall a resource center for our other historic sites.

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Grants Programs and Other Assistance

The Trust’s efforts to save historic places during the past year reached far beyond our own historic sites. Supported by our partner organizations and individuals, we fought to preserve historic neighborhood schools, put the brakes on sprawl and foster reinvestment in older communities, encourage better stewardship of historic resources in our national parks, head off threats to Native American sacred and cultural sites, and more.

The Trust has also increased support for grassroots efforts by providing critical financial assistance. Among
our most effective tools are the Intervention Funds, which allow our regional offices to provide a timely response to preservation emergencies, and our Preservation Services Funds, which offer matching grants to local groups in the early stages of preservation projects.

Those sources of help are being put to work right now in Florida, which we all know faces enormous hardship in the wake of four hurricanes last fall. Virtually every community in the state has been affected, and it’s estimated that a full 20 percent of the state’s building stock—including many historic buildings—has been damaged. In response, the Florida Trust, the Florida Main Street Program, the state historic preservation office, and the National Trust are working hard to get assessment teams and expertise into those areas that need help. We’ve already committed $15,000 of our grant and intervention funds to establish the 2004 Hurricane Relief Fund.

At the 2003 National Preservation Conference in Denver I announced the creation of the Southwest Intervention Fund with a $1 million gift from David Bonderman. We committed to augment this marvelous gift by raising an additional $500,000—and I’m happy to announce that we’ve surpassed that goal. With a gift from the Gates Family Foundation in honor of our trustee Peter Grant, plus additional gifts from the Mayo family in Oklahoma, Trustee Kak Slick in New Mexico, and other donors, we now have a $1.7 million fund to help save historic places in the Mountains/Plains and Southwest regions.

Our goal is to have every state covered by a targeted, endowed preservation fund—and in that regard I have some very good news. I’m delighted to announce that the creation of the Kentucky Preservation Fund, currently totaling $230,000, to be administered by the Trust’s Southern Office in partnership with the Kentucky Heritage Council and Preservation Kentucky.

**New Resource for Community Revitalization**

One of the most important jobs we undertook during the year is still a work in progress.

In my travels, I’ve seen how revitalization is literally transforming older communities from coast to coast. The National Trust can feel very proud of the role we’ve played in this process—but we can do even more. We’ve committed ourselves to the challenge of finding newer, stronger, better ways to use the power of preservation to bring older downtowns and residential neighborhoods back to life. To facilitate the expansive, innovative kinds of work that we want to do, we’re restructuring our Community Revitalization department.

Our goal is to make the Trust the national leader and advocate for historic preservation as a powerful, proven tool for the revitalization of America’s communities. We’re strengthening the Main Street Center’s ability to offer targeted, in-depth assistance to a select number of demonstration communities. We’re expanding our equity investment initiatives to facilitate hands-on Trust participation in local revitalization projects large and small.

In effect, we’re creating some new revitalization resources while giving new strength and focus to the ones that already exist.

**The Next Trust**

The re-thinking of our Community Revitalization program is an important element of The Next Trust strategic plan we adopted last year. Inspired and energized by the outstanding success of our first-ever comprehensive capital campaign, our trustees, advisors, and staff took on the challenge of envisioning and shaping a National Trust that can fulfill its mission most effectively in an environment of new economic, demographic, political, and social realities. The result is the framework for a restructured, reinvigorated organization: “The Next Trust.”

The plan focuses on eight “Big Ideas” that will inspire our programmatic efforts and provide a roadmap for advancing the cause of historic preser-
Saving these places is challenging, but the alternative—losing them—is unthinkable.

Saving these places is challenging, but losing them—is unthinkable.

That vision will be extremely important in the months ahead, because we have plenty of unfinished business to deal with.

Last year Congress took action to eliminate guaranteed funding for the Transportation Enhancements program, which since 1992 has provided more than $2 billion for preservation-related projects.

With the help of its partners, the Trust responded by mounting a comprehensive advocacy campaign—and the result was the restoration of Enhancements funding in the Transportation Appropriations bill.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that we can expect more battles like that one in the coming months and years.

Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act is the strongest federal preservation law on the books.

By forcing road builders to stay away from historic places unless there is no “feasible and prudent” alternative, this law kept a highway from being rammed through New Orleans’ French Quarter and has saved countless other historic sites across the country.

Section 4(f) came under assault last year—as did Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, part of the very bedrock of preservation in this country. The preservation laws on which we depend are on the books today because people fought for their enactment.

We’ll need your help in the equally important fight to keep them.

There’s more: We still haven’t created effective incentives for rehabilitating older buildings to meet the nation’s critical shortage of workforce housing.

Our national parks and the treasures they hold are still woefully underfunded. Cultural resources on other public lands are inadequately protected, and are threatened by everything from oil and gas exploration to off-road recreational vehicles.

Sprawl is still rampant, and smart-growth policies are being attacked or even rolled back in many localities.

Clearly, there’s more than enough to keep us busy for some time. But we also have reasons to celebrate. Here’s one example: Late last year, the Federal Highway Administration announced that it was withdrawing its support for the proposed 710 Freeway Extension that would have ripped through several historic districts and destroyed more than a thousand homes and displaced more than 3,000 people in Pasadena, South Pasadena, and El Sereno, Calif.

This freeway was first proposed in 1949. That means the fight against it—which isn’t quite over yet—has lasted well over half a century.

The long struggle in Pasadena holds a couple of important lessons for all of us.

First and most obviously, it underscores the importance of persistence in the pursuit of a goal. The second lesson is even more fundamental. It’s this: America’s historic places—both the world-famous icons and the lesser-known landmarks in the neighborhoods where we live—matter. They are the places where we connect with the people and events that shaped our nation and our lives. The places where we gather to celebrate, to remember, to be inspired.

The places we care about.

Saving these places is challenging, but the alternative—losing them—is unthinkable.

The work of preservation is never done—but it’s well worth doing.

The challenges never stop coming—but they’re not unbeatable.

With the loyal support of our partners, friends, and members, the National Trust met many challenges in the past year. Now we’re developing a sound, strategic vision for addressing the challenges—
Experiencing History Firsthand in Our National Parks

Fran P. Mainella

Historic preservation is ultimately preserving what makes a community unique—what gives a community its “one-of-a-kindness” and its “sense of place.” This is an increasingly important issue in a world that constantly changes.

It is ultimately the one issue that underlines all our national historic preservation programs, such as the National Register of Historic Places or the historic rehabilitation tax incentives.

And it is the one issue that resonates in our great national parks. I have just come from two national parks—Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky and Stones River National Battlefield in Tennessee.

Both parks commemorate a unique “place.” Mammoth Cave preserves not only the remarkable natural wonders above and below ground. But it also preserves and commemorates a complex human story beginning with the first Americans who lived on the land that would become the park and continues with the traditional communities removed when the park was first created in the early 1940s.

That story is not dusty history. Both communities survive and remain vibrantly interested in the lands within the park and demand a voice in the care and preservation of this unique place and how their stories are told by the Park Service.

The same is true at Stones River which preserves the site of the winter of 1862-63 Civil War battle. Now almost 150 years after the guns fell silent at Stones River, we Americans continue to care deeply about what happened at that unique place—how it is told—and how it is preserved.

The history of the Civil War is not dead. Just pick up any newspaper these days. In fact, history is never dead. Why? Because we preserve the site of the Battle of Stones River not so much for what happened there long ago—but for the lessons it holds for us today. How it speaks to us and to the generations of Americans yet to come.

How we come to these places to learn who we are as Americans—where we have been and where we are going.

There is nothing more compelling and meaningful than standing on the place where history happened. Experiencing it firsthand—for yourself. That is the most powerful learning experience.

As preservationists, we are about preserving “place.” We must never forget that.

Preserving Natural and Cultural Treasures

I always feel it’s important to say a word about the National Park Service as this nation’s principal heritage ministry. Most of our citizens think of the National Park Service as the steward of America’s wild and irreplaceable natural treasures—Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Denali, Everglades, Acadia.

And we are! But did you know that fully 62 percent of the 388 units of our great national parks were created by Congress to preserve and tell some aspect of the great American story?

As treasured historian David McCullough has said, “What better place to experience the history of the nation than in our great national parks?”

There is nothing more compelling and meaningful than standing on the place where history happened.

National parks such as the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace or Cumberland Gap National Historical Park in Kentucky. Or the great battlefields of the American Revolution or the Civil War at places like Stones River, Gettysburg, Shiloh, Antietam, Saratoga, Copwens, or Kings Mountain. Sites from our nation’s earliest history in Alaska at Bering Land Bridge to southwest Pennsylvania, the site of the tragedy of Flight 93 on September 11, 2001.

Preserving the American story is as important a mission for the National Park Service as our commitment to preserve habitat and species. We also take seriously our commitment as the nation’s heritage minister with our responsibility for the national preservation program—for the more than 1.3 million properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places to the more than 2,300 National Historic Landmarks designated since the 1930s.

We value our partnerships with state historic preservation offices, tribal historic preservation programs and the thousands of local governments without whom the National Park Service could not carry out its mission.

The National Park Service is proud to once again be a co-sponsor of the National Preservation Conference. It cannot be said enough that the National Trust is the National Park Service’s principal private sector partner in historic preservation. It has been a productive partnership for more than 50 years and the National Park Service looks to many more.

Fran P. Mainella is the director of the National Park Service.
The Purpose of a Coherent Community

Wendell Berry

I know well that I am hardly the first aging man to look back on his youth as "a better time," and perhaps I am sufficiently aware of the dangers. It is true nevertheless that in my lifetime I have witnessed a lot of destruction. I can’t forget, for example, that in the time of my childhood people in my part of the world drank fearlessly from springs and wells and swam without anxiety in whatever water was deep enough. We probably should have worried (a little) about coliform and other bacteria, but the possibility of contamination by persistent chemicals did not yet exist for us.

Now, of course, we know that water pollution is only a part of a package that includes air pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, urban sprawl, architectural ugliness, and other symptoms of a general disregard for the world’s life and health. Now we not only cannot drink fearlessly from wells and springs; we cannot drink fearlessly from the public plumbing; we cannot fearlessly breathe the air.

Here is a set of sentences culled from a book I wish were better known:

We have been greatly engaged in digging up the stored resources, and in destroying vast products of the earth for some small kernel that we can apply to our necessities or add to our enjoyment.

We…blast the minerals and the metals from underneath the crust and leave the earth raw and sore…exterminate whole races of animals; choke the streams with refuse and refuse; rob the land of its available stores, denuding the surface, exposing great areas to erosion.

Those who appropriate the accumulations of the earth should complete their work, cleaning up the remains, leaving the areas wholesome, inoffensive, and safe.

Yet there is even a more defenseless devastation…It is the organized destructiveness of those who would make military domination the major premise in the constitution of society…disrespecting the works of the creator.

Rivalry that leads to arms is a natural fruit of unrestrained rivalry in trade.

We have taken [the earth] for granted…and with little care or conscious thought of the consequences of our use of it.

If those grief-stricken sentences sound familiar, that is not because they are contemporary. They were written in the first year of World War I by Liberty Hyde Bailey, the great dean, by then retired, of the College of Agriculture at Cornell University. Those sentences become even more poignant for a person today who reads on in that little book, The Holy Earth, because the next chapter sets forth the belief that we were then at the beginning of a new era in our use of the land, when we would use little and do no harm.

But since Dean Bailey died at 96 in 1954, something like one-third of the world’s farmable soil has been lost to erosion; we have brought clearly into sight the end of the era of cheap fossil fuels; we have polluted the entire earth with our poisons. Since 1954 most of our towns and cities have become formless, decadent, and ugly; and huge expanses of our fertile countryside have become monocultural deserts, toxic, depopulated, and ugly.

The Rise of “Redemptive” Organizations

As signs, or perhaps symptoms, of the general destructiveness of the industrial economy, we now have hundreds of large and small organizations devoted to protecting or saving things of value that are endangered: peace, kindness, freedom, childhood, health, wilderness areas, rivers, species of plants and animals, cultures, languages, farmland, family farms, farm families, families, the atmosphere, scenic roads, fine old buildings, historic places, holy places, quietness, darkness. More and more, as I ponder over our lengthening catalog of calamities and discouragements, I think of these organizations. I think of them with great sympathy, and with love, for I think they are the basis of our worldly hope. They are the basis of our right to hope that our own greatly endangered species may somehow be saved, if not from extinction, at least from the necessity of recognizing itself as the ultimate parasite, deserving extinction.

Collectively, these organizations comprise a movement of redemption, a movement to deliver the holy earth from its ruthless exploiters who are claiming everywhere their “right” to plunder, waste, corrupt, and destroy the great possessions that have been given to us on the condition only of our devoted care.

These many redemptive organizations are now required to confront consciously and capably, really for the first time in human history, a question which is almost overwhelming in its magnitude and urgency, but which also is utterly fascinating, fully worthy of a lifetime’s effort and study: Can we change the ways we live and work so as to establish a preserving harmony between the made and the given worlds? Or, to make that question more practical and immediate: Can great power or great wealth be kind to small places? Can the necessary industries subsist upon their natural sources without destroying them? Can the life of a farm or working forest be made compatible with its local ecosystem? Can city and countryside live and trade together to their mutual benefit? Can an urban economy vouchsafe the health and prosperity of its suppliers, its consumers, and its neighbors? One takes much hope and encouragement from the knowledge that everywhere in our country and in the world, thanks to these
organizations, people in significant numbers are beginning to suffer these questions.

And yet, grateful as I am for these organizations, so many of whose names begin with “Save,” I can’t help but notice that this movement or this consciousness that I am calling redemptive, and am moreover a part of, is not only the losing side in our current public struggles, but in terms of its standing and influence is hardly a side at all. It doesn’t have a significant political presence. It is virtually unrepresented in our state and federal governments. Most of its concerns are not on the agenda of either major party.

Scattered Efforts and Negative Messages

And so I need to add to my praise some criticism, not in disparagement but in hope, for when we try to think of those organizations all together as a political constituency we see that, as such, it is badly disintegrated and fragmented. Its efforts are scattered, often mutually exclusive, sometimes mutually competitive, and mostly negative. In some of its parts, it is fearful of becoming too radical. For the purpose of its own coherence, it is not radical enough.

It is immensely heartening to know that the National Trust is interested in coherence and so can devote itself to such multiple purposes as “the preservation and restoration of buildings and landscapes,” can propose “to save historic places and revitalize communities,” and can see “historic preservation as a tool for restoring economic vitality to traditional business districts.” But even within and among those excellent aims there is trouble.

If, for example, you are interested in the preservation and restoration of landscapes, you will find out quickly that there are, with us, two classes of landscapes, the would-be pristine landscapes of parks and wilderness preserves and the economic landscapes of farms and working forests, and that the conservationists and the land users who seek to preserve those landscapes, though they have many of the same enemies and many reasons to be allies, have a long history of mutual enmity and dislike.

Or if you are interested in restoring economic vitality to traditional business districts in our town and urban centers, you will find an even more complicated muddle. Businesses, with us, are of two kinds: locally owned businesses that are relatively small, and national or supranational corporations. The interests of these kinds of businesses are almost diametrically opposed, and yet the local business people, who everywhere are being destroyed by the great corporations, are all too likely to believe that their interests are the same—and, at the same time, are all too likely to be antipathetic to the rural land users and the conservationists who are their natural allies.

Even a great redemptive effort, under way nearly everywhere and supported by the good work of many people, when it is as scattered and disconnected as this one, is almost inevitably going to be mostly negative. Among the many organizations I am talking about, the most popular words, after “save,” are “stop” and “no.” Even the preservation of something of value is negative if it reduces the possibility of preserving something else of value.

It is, of course, perfectly all right to be against something that is wrong. If we see that something is wrong we have no choice but to oppose it—for the sake, if for nothing else, of our own souls. And yet, in so destructive an age as ours, it is possible for our sense of wrong to become an affliction.

All of us who are committed to saving things of value have been in what Wes Jackson calls “the ain’t-it-awful conversation,” in which we recite the current litany of outrages. We have been in that conversation and, if we have brought to it a modicum of sanity, we have recognized sooner or later the need to get out of it.

The logical end of the ain’t-it-awful conversation, as of the life devoted merely to opposition, is despair. People quit having any fun, they begin to talk about the “inevitability” of what they are against, and they give up. Mere opposition finally blinds us to the good of the things we are trying to save. And it divides us hopelessly from our opponents, who no doubt are caricaturing us while we are demonizing them. We lose, in short, the sense of shared humanity that would permit us to say even to our worst enemies, “We are working, after all, in your interest and your children’s. Ours is a common effort for the common good. Come and join us.”

That this redemptive movement is not yet seen clearly enough as a common effort for the common good is perfectly understandable. Undoubtedly it began in the only way it could have begun. Its many organizations have necessarily defined themselves by the singular problems they have addressed:

“The river is being polluted. Save the river. Stop pollution. No to the polluters.”

“We are losing our architectural inheritance. Save the inner city. Stop the demolition. No to the wreckers.”

This is clear enough. If we are sympathetic, we have to say this is all right. The only possible objection is that it is incomplete; it does not go far enough. The effort is not only defined by the problem but is limited by it. An effort that is defined only or mainly by a

Can the necessary industries subsist upon their natural sources without destroying them? Can the life of a farm or working forest be made compatible with its local ecosystem?
problem is negative necessarily.
And under the rhetoric of Save and Stop and No there lies an odd and embarrassing fact. Who is polluting the river? Well, among others, we are, we members of Save the River, who flush our toilets and use the latest toxic products only a little less thoughtlessly than everybody else. Who is wrecking the inner city? We are, of course, we members of Save the Inner City, who drive our cars and shop at the malls and the chain stores only a little less thoughtlessly than everybody else. It doesn’t make any difference that we mostly don’t have an alternative to doing as we do; we still share the guilt.

In a centralized, specialized, commercialized, mechanized society such as ours, we all are necessarily, and in considerable measure, helping to cause the problem we are helping to deplore and trying to solve.

I would be wrong, at this point, if I failed to notice that our side, this redemptive movement compounded of so many aims and efforts, has won a good many victories, and we are right to rejoice in them and take courage from them. But these victories, I am afraid, are isolated. They don’t yet constitute a significant pattern or tendency of cultural change. We have won victories, but we still are losing.

Approaching Problems in Context
If our efforts are fragmented and our victories are piecemeal, then clearly we have got to think again and think better. In order to think better, I believe, we are going to have to revive and reinvigorate the tired old idea of context. A creature can live only in a context that favors its life. An artifact exists and means only in a context that supports it and reinforces its meaning.

There is no escape from the issue of context, and if we think of modern life in terms of context we are going to find it abounding in inconsistencies, and in moral discomforts that we have taught ourselves not to feel. For example:

If we can’t preserve the health of the natural world in our economic landscapes of farm and ranch and working forest, and even in our cities, then we are not going to be able to preserve it in our parks and wilderness preserves.

To countenance mountaintop removal in Kentucky and West Virginia is to agree to the eventual destruction of Yosemite and Yellowstone and the Smokies.

We can’t for long preserve the fine arts if we neglect or destroy the domestic arts of farming, forestry, cooking, clothing, building, homemaking, community life, and local economy.

We can’t preserve historic buildings to any purpose or for very long outside the contexts of community life and local economy.

In short, we can’t preserve the best of human and earthly life merely as a museum of obsolete artifacts, rare creatures, and unusual scenery.

Contradictions so obvious and so ordinary alert us to the importance of preserving or advocating a whole thing. We have too many reasons to suspect that even the most valuable things cannot be preserved, or not for long, merely by the desire to save them, or even by the necessary money, or even by the necessary votes. And so let us say that a whole thing is anything worth preserving plus its preserving context. Let us call the preserving context a community, for that is the name of the having-in-common that does in fact preserve us. And let us understand that we must never allow our thoughts or wishes to separate the community from its habitat, or from its economy which is its way of living in its habitat, or from its culture which is its way of remembering (or forgetting) where it is and how to live there.

We seem to have been living for a long time on the assumption that we can safely deal with parts, leaving the whole to take care of itself. But now the news from everywhere is that we have to begin gathering up the scattered pieces, figuring out where they belong, and putting them back together. For the parts can be reconciled to one another only within the pattern of the whole thing to which they belong. The local business people, farmers, foresters, conservationists, investors, bankers, and builders are not going to get along on the basis of economic determinism. The ground of their reconciliation will have to be larger than the ground of their divisions. It will have to promise life, satisfaction, and hope to them all.

Seeking a Coherent Community
The common denominator is the local community. Only the purpose of a coherent community, fully alive both in the world and in the minds of its members, can carry us beyond fragmentation, contradiction, and negativity, teaching us to preserve, not in opposition but in affirmation and affection, all things needful to make us glad to live.

A coherent community is undoubtedly an excellent purpose. Perhaps we can agree that it is. But we will have to agree also, I am afraid, that none of us lives in one, and that none of us knows where to find one. History provides many examples of coherent communities, but not one that we can “go back to.” We have no place to begin but where we are.

Where we are is a world dominated by a global economy that places no value whatsoever on community or community coherence. In this economy, whose business is to set in contention things that belong together, you can do nothing more divisive than to assert the claims of community. This puts you immediately at odds with powerful people to whom the claims of community mean nothing, who ignore the issues of locality, who recognize no neighbors and are loyal to no place. These people believe, as W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm wrote in the New York Times of November 7, 2003, that “microeconomic failure” — by which they mean loss of jobs, displacement of workers, and the disruption of communities — is necessary for “macroeconomic progress.” Such failure, they wrote, “is the way the macro economy transfers resources to where they belong.” We must not object to microeconomic failure, these writers said, because “Large-scale upheaval in jobs and power, and with virtually
all the world’s people as its dependents.

Putting the pieces back together is going to be slow work. The pieces can be scattered in a hurry merely by indifference or neglect or violence. But the same forces that scattered them cannot put them back together. For that, we are going to need the hope and the purpose of a coherent community, clearly articulated and steadily borne in mind. And we are going to have to resign ourselves to patience and small steps.

We are indebted to Mr. Cox and Mr. Alm also for displaying in blatant outline the great fault of their thesis. That fault is in their debasement of vocation to “job,” implying that what a worker does or where it is done does not matter so long as the worker gets paid for doing it. Their reduction of vocation to “job” leads necessarily to their further reduction of working people to “resources,” not different in kind or value from raw materials or machine parts.

To this, the purpose of a coherent community gives us the necessary answer, which is at the same time the means of unifying and making politically effective our now disparate efforts to save the good things: The members of a community cohere on the basis of their recognized need for one another, a need that is in many ways practical but never utilitarian. The members of a coherent community, moreover, keep the good things they have because of a recognized need for them, a need sufficiently practical but never utilitarian.

If it is to cohere, a community cannot agree to the loss of any of its members, or the disemployment of any of its members, as an acceptable cost of an economic program. If it is to cohere, a community must remember its history and its obligations; it is therefore irreconcilably opposed to “mobility” as a social norm. Persons, places, and things have a practical value, but they are not reducible to such value; they are not interchangeable. That is why we outlawed slavery. That is why a house for sale is not a home.

 Wendell Berry is a writer and member of a farming family in Henry County, Ky. Copyright 2004 by Wendell Berry. Reprinted with permission.

Decentralization and Sprawl Development: Consequences, Causes, Solutions

I am going to talk about the major trends affecting cities and metropolitan areas in the United States, particularly the decentralization of economic and residential life. I am then going to address the consequences of these trends—“why they matter”—as well as show how existing government policies facilitate and subsidize these patterns—“why they are happening.” Finally, I will discuss how “smart growth” solutions, including historic preservation, can help build more sustainable and competitive metropolitan communities.

The following trends emerge from the 2000 census:

First, cities are growing—which is good news—but metropolitan areas are still sprawling.

There is a resurgence of American cities. During the 1970s, the top 50 cities in the country lost population; during the 1980s they grew by about 6.3 percent. During the 1990s, by contrast, they grew by close to 10 percent. Several large cities like Atlanta, Denver, Chicago, and Memphis literally turned around in the 1990s. These cities moved from losing populations (in Chicago’s case for four straight decades) to gaining populations.

In spite of this growth, population decentralization, the out-migration of people, remains the dominant growth pattern in the United States. Suburbs grew almost twice as fast as cities in the 1990s, by about 17 percent to 9 percent. And every household type grew at faster rates in the suburbs than in the cities. The relentless pace of population decentralization was particularly present in metropolitan areas surrounding “turnaround cities.” Atlanta, for example, grew by 6 percent in the 1990s, a total of 22,000 people. Yet its suburbs grew by 44 percent or 1.1 million people. Similarly, Chicago saw 4 percent growth in the 1990s, or 112,000 people. Yet its suburbs grew by 15 percent or 650,000 people.

Second, as people go, so do jobs. That’s a cliché, but it is absolutely true. The suburbs now dominate employment
growth and are no longer just bedroom communities for workers commuting to traditional downtowns. Rather, they are now strong employment centers serving a variety of functions in their regional economies. The American economy is rapidly becoming an exit ramp economy, with office, commercial, and retail facilities increasingly located along suburban freeways.

A new spatial geography of work and opportunity has emerged in metro America. Across the largest 100 metro areas, on average, only 22 percent of people work within three miles of the city center. Incredibly, one-third of the jobs are located more than ten miles away from traditional downtowns.

This employment decentralization varies widely across the country. In places like New York, a substantial portion of the office market still remains within the central business district. But in places like Dallas or Atlanta or even Miami, office space, which is generally perceived as a central city function, is now finding its way out to the fringe of metropolitan areas.

In all metropolitan areas, the new geography of work is transforming our daily commuting patterns; the highest share of metropolitan commutes now begins and ends within suburbs. We are all literally stuck in traffic.

Finally, immigration and demographic diversity are transforming our social landscape—it is no longer “your parents’ city or suburb.” For example, the growth that occurred in central cities in the 1990s was dominated by immigration. The Hispanic population in American cities increased by 43 percent during the 1990s; the Asian population by 38 percent. By contrast, the black population grew about 6 percent and the white population actually continued to decline.

If not for immigration, several of the nation’s largest cities, particularly New York, would have actually lost population during the 1990s and continued their economic slide. As a result of these demographic shifts, America’s largest cities became majority minority for the first time in our history. The ratio of the largest cities shifted from about 53 percent white, 24 percent black, and 17 percent Hispanic in 1990 to 44 percent white, 24 percent black, and 23 percent Hispanic in 2000.

Nor is this just about cities. In many metropolitan areas, a majority of immigrants are skipping the city and moving directly to the suburbs. In Washington, D.C., for instance, about 87 percent of the immigrants who came to Washington—one of the biggest immigrant magnets in the 1990s—settled in the suburbs. Today more than one in four suburban households is a minority. Thirty-nine percent of African Americans now live in the suburbs, 55 percent of Asians, and 50 percent of Hispanics.

Despite this growing racial diversity, we are still seeing patterns of segregation and racial and ethnic separation. Race and ethnicity continue to shape metropolitan growth patterns in the United States in profound ways. Population decentralization and sprawl development on the fringe are, in many respects, the flip sides of continued racial and ethnic separation.

Consequences of Decentralization

What are the consequences of these trends? In the past, observations about decentralization and sprawl focused primarily on its effect on land, the environment, and the quality of life in our metropolitan communities.

The American economy is restructuring, making the transition from a manufacturing economy to a knowl-
Share of jobs from radius of the central business district (1996)

Nationally, one third of jobs are located more than ten miles away from traditional downtowns. Source: The Brookings Institution, Metropolitan Policy Program.

Decentralization is costly because it isolates minorities and low-income residents from job opportunities. Decentralization and sprawling development patterns, especially the development of the exclusive communities at the fringe of metropolitan areas, exacerbates the social isolation of the core. It reduces educational opportunities in cities and distances low-income people from job opportunities. In many metropolitan areas, a pronounced “spatial mismatch” has arisen between neighborhoods where low-income workers and minorities live and places where jobs are growing.

Causes of Current Trends

Why is this happening? Some believe that our growth patterns are inevitable, the natural result of demographic change, market restructuring, and consumer preferences. Some observers seem to believe that there is an American gene that makes each of us seek out that large plot of land 30 miles away from the city center.

Yet our research shows that major federal and state spending programs, tax expenditures, regulatory and administrative policies—what we call the “rules of the development game”—have also fundamentally shaped unbalanced growth patterns in metropolitan areas. These rules, taken together, facilitate sprawl, concentrate poverty, and basically give us the kind of greenfield development that exists throughout the country.

Our recent work in Pennsylvania showed how five kinds of policies are contributing to the decentralization of metropolitan areas:

1. Major state spending programs—on roads, on economic development, on infrastructure—skew funding to greenfields and away from older communities. In Pennsylvania, for example, 58 percent of transportation funding is going to newer communities, yet only 42 percent of the state’s population lives in these communities. Economic development spending lacks any kind of strategic discipline and goes to support the construction of industrial parks and office parks along new freeways rather than traditional arterials, contributing to the exit ramp economy.

2. State tax systems are biased against older cities and suburbs. City revenue bases are small, in part, because cities have so many tax-exempt properties such as nonprofit universities and hospitals. City expenses are very high because of concentrated poverty and aging infrastructure.

3. States do not have any coherent planning among all their disparate agencies. What the road builders do is separate from what the housing department does. And what the housing department does is different from what the environmental department does. In addition, most states do not require municipalities to have land-use plans that put smart, fiscally responsible growth at the center of new development.

4. There are many barriers to reinvestment. For example, it is hard to develop brownfields in the United States. It is hard to assemble financing for urban land projects because of the contamination on many of these sites and the expenses associated with remediation.

5. Fragmented governments are also contributing to decentralization. Many rustbelt states, in particular, have large numbers of local governments. In Illinois, for example, there are 2,824 local general purpose governments. We have sprawl, in part, because we have too many parochial governments, each
of which tries to out-compete its neighbor for high-end retail, high-end residential, high-end industrial and commercial growth.

Solutions: A Smart Growth Approach

So what is the answer? In the past decade we have seen a new ethic emerge about growth and development in the United States. “Smart growth”—the term primarily used to describe this new paradigm—means many things to many people. The core of smart growth, however, involves efforts to change the rules of the development game that now facilitate sprawl and concentrate poverty, to change them in such a way that we can slow decentralization, promote the reinvestment of cities and older suburbs, and enhance access to opportunity.

To slow decentralization we need to:

• Encourage collaborative regional governance between cities and suburbs.
• Reform land-use policies for metropolitan areas, making sprawl hard and redevelopment easy.
• Change our approach to infrastructure spending for roads, water, and sewers, which set the skeleton of these metropolitan areas.
• Change our tax system, so we reduce the disparities between older and new communities and level the playing field.
• Give low-income workers and minority workers access to opportunity.

Across the country, states, in particular, are adopting these strategies and taking steps to reduce sprawling development.

In Georgia, for example, a regional transportation authority has been created to consider alternatives to road building and combat air pollution and traffic congestion.

In Ohio, the Clean Ohio Fund, a new kind of city/rural coalition, unites rural land preservation interests with those who want to redevelop cities and communities.

In Maryland, there has been a major effort—initiated by former governor Parris Glendening—to weed the subsidy out of sprawl and target state investments to older communities.

In Minnesota, a fiscal disparities law allocates 40 percent of the growth in property tax revenues from commercial and industrial development (including the development of big box retail) to a regional pool, narrowing the tax inequities between central cities, older suburbs, and rapidly growing communities at the fringe.

The list goes on and on. These state advances show that smart growth is politically potent. It is possible to knit together what has been, in the past, a theoretical coalition between city activists, elected officials, downtown developers, regional business leaders, environmentalists, and advocates of suburban livability and rural conservation. It is possible to move beyond traditional partisan and ideological divisions and create coalitions that cross jurisdictional, disciplinary, and racial and ethnic lines.

Historic preservation can be a critical component of these efforts to slow the decentralization and sprawling development that is so drastically changing the American landscape.

Bruce Katz is a vice president at the Brookings Institution and founding director of its Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. Copyright 2004 by Bruce Katz. Reprinted with permission.

Tribal Museums and the New National Museum of the American Indian

In late September I marched in the procession to commemorate the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. It was and still remains a very emotional moment for me and, I suspect, for all who attended. This magnificent structure is the pinnacle for more than 150 tribal museums throughout the country. It represents the last of the three entities that were to be created following the legislation that created the National Museum of the American Indian.

The first was the National Museum of the American Indian Indian museum located in the U.S. Customs House in New York City. This museum, which opened in the 1990s, provided a glimpse of what was to come and presented some of the richness of the Heye Foundation’s collection to the public.1 The Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Md., opened soon after. This facility is equipped to care for the Heye Collection with a combination of traditional care practices and state-of-the-art techniques. Curators can care for objects as living entities of the present and, using current curatorial/conservation techniques, are able to ensure that they last for the future. The third entity is the new National Museum of the American Indian which opened on September 21, the autumnal equinox, on the Mall.

In addition, individual tribal museums are becoming the fastest growing segment of the museum world in America. Indeed, Lisa Watt (Seneca) has stated that, “There are two and only two kinds of tribes in America today, those that have museums and those that wish to have museums.” They are not, however, museums in the strictest sense of your perception. They vary from being museums that show collections, to history centers, to heritage centers that strive to carry on traditional ways and crafts and even the resurrection of tribal languages. They are multifaceted in their format and in their governance structure.

Michel Hammond
New Approaches Counter Misperceptions

Before the National Museum of the American Indian opened, several studies were conducted in order to understand the public’s perception of tribes and Native American people. Various surveys indicated that the public viewed Indians as people of the past, and a very romanticized past at that. Articles published by the National Museum of the American Indian and others, including James Nason (Comanche), curator of Pacific and American Ethnology at the Burke Museum, came up with essentially the same conclusions.

In general the public perceived Indians as people of the past who had freedom of movement and were at one with their environment. The control that they had over their destiny was destroyed with the arrival of Europeans. These perceptions are pervasive in most of the exhibits that are about Native peoples in the museums of America and, for that matter, the world. The stereotypes are there for all to see. And, as such, they help to deny that there is a strong Indian presence in America today.

In one of his articles, James Nason quotes George B. Goode in his 1889 Report to Congress on the state of the National Museum and the museum’s role in preserving Indian Culture: “American museums are still preserving with care the memorials of the vanishing race of red men. The George Catlin Indian Gallery (of the American History Association) is valuable beyond the possibility of appraisement, in that it is the sole record of the physical characters, the costumes, and ceremonies of several tribes long extinct.”

Nason goes on to lament that “frozen moments” help to further instill the notion that Indians are peoples of the past. Museum displays consisted of Indian artifacts and their association with Native Americans, which were represented by mannequins. The ubiquitous dioramas were the archetype of this kind of display. The passive voice runs rampant through the labels. Nason sums it up best when he states, “Never in the history of museums have so many displays like this conveyed so little to so many for so long.”

Now, tribal museums and the National Museum of the American Indian can change non-Native attitudes toward Indians, as long as people are willing to change and are willing to see things from a different perspective. Museum-goers need to see objects of the past as objects of the present. They need to understand that the same thoughts and beliefs that created the object in the past represent the same thoughts and beliefs of the present culture. Exhibits about Native Americans need to deal with the concepts of change and continuity within the same context—a seemingly disparate state but not for the Native American community.

More important, tribal museums represent the communities from which they are created. They are created to serve that community. As such, they are one with the community and not just a building that houses the material culture of the people. The material culture contains all the community values that nurture the culture and allow its continuity and its ability to change.

Tribal museums deal less with objects and more with themes, ideas, and issues. They are less concerned with chronology. As a Yup’ik friend indicated to me once, “Time is what keeps everything from happening all at once.”

The Agua Caliente Cultural Museum’s Thematic Approach

The Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, in Palm Springs, Calif., which is scheduled to open in late 2006, will have 20,000 square feet of permanent exhibits. When I lecture about the new museum, I am often asked whether or not we have enough objects to fill such a space. The answer is “no!” But we do not plan to be this conveyed so little to so many for so long.”

Museum-goers need to see objects of the past as objects of the present. They need to understand that the same thoughts and beliefs that created the object in the past represent the same thoughts and beliefs of the present culture.
Caliente’s enduring relationship to the land and its environment has sustained the Agua Caliente people for thousands of years. Since the beginning of time, the Agua Caliente have inhabited the harsh desert of the Coachella Valley. Life cycles are a continuum and not the linear processes that prevail in other environments. Native American writer Sherman Alexie has stated, “If I stand at the window long enough I will see the long thread of history float randomly through the breeze.” But the key is land and the enduring relationship to the land. And it is this theme that resonates quite strongly in the historic preservation field.

“Grounded” by Place

In the September/October 2004 issue of Preservation magazine, an article by Ann Patchett helps explain what tribal museums are all about. Her article, “Destiny Delivered” is about place. She starts with an opening line that Melville would have been proud of: “I am not from here.” She laments the fact that no matter how long she has lived in Nashville, her birth certificate will always say that she was born in Los Angeles and therefore will never be fully accepted. Midway in her article she touches on the nexus of what tribal museums mean to Native Americans. “After all, with the exception of the American Indians, the one thing that our ancestors have in common is that they were not from here.”

Said another way, the one thing that all Native Americans have in common is that they are from here. Place, the land, is synonymous with home.

Native American writer Michael Dorris states it best: “Among our not so distant ancestors and in much of the world today, the connection between a person and a specific place has traditionally been intimate and consistent over time—in many respects one of the primary characteristics of both individual identity and group definition.”

Home is an ongoing character in our lives. It serves as elder, as friend, as reference, as point of both origin and return, as haven. We absorb its solace even though we pass through it ultimately as anonymously as those who preceded us.

Place and elders! Again, a passage from Michael Dorris.

“The presence in daily intercourse of elders—keepers of the hearth fire—protects stability, continuity, and perspective, all highly valued. Men and women who have been through the seasons of life are honored as the segment of a population who can, by reference to their own experience and longevity, simultaneously take pleasure in the exuberance of a child, remember the confusion of an adolescent, empathize with the adult emotions of love and jealousy, grief and disappointment, anger and passion. Out of the fray, they alone can ideally attain the serenity of calm vision, offer advice without the suspicion of personal profit. They are, in a literal and figurative sense, ‘grounded.’”

The tribal elder—how important to the continuity of tribal culture and how
grounded. One of the highest accolades that we have received during the planning process for the new Agua Caliente Cultural Museum is that tribal members are starting to refer to it as the new tribal elder. It is grounded to the land, and the people to the land. There is a realization that the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum is a museum in a large population center—400,000 in the entire Coachella Valley—that is about the first inhabitants of the area, who are still living there today.

Reflections on the New National Museum

We are not from here. Yet reviews of the exhibitions at the National Museum of the American Indian clearly show that outside understanding was not evident. In the opinion of writers for the Washington Post and the New York Times, the exhibitions were not up to the scholarly approach of other Smithsonian museums. Critics wanted to see the best that the Heye Collection had to offer. It was also the Washington Post that labeled a picture of a tribal member in full regalia using a cell phone as “seemingly anachronistic.”

The early morning procession in September was not just a march. It was blessing ceremonies, songs, and dances that consecrated the grounds that at one time had belonged to Native peoples. The National Museum of the American Indian is more than a collection of objects. It is a spiritual place where tribal people can feel at one with the place. It is a place that many will consider home.

Rick West, a Peace Chief of the Southern Cheyenne Nation and the founding director of the National Museum of the American Indian, commented on the new facility in the September/October 2004 issue of Museum News:

... the interconnectedness of everything, the symbiosis of who we are and what we do—it embodies a whole philosophy of Native life and culture and speaks volumes about the nature of Native objects to Native peoples themselves... As the originating element of American culture, Native Americans should have been among the first to be acknowledged with a museum on the National Mall and yet they arrived last.

In an illuminating act of great symbolism, we now occupy the keystone place in America’s monumental core, next to the Capitol and across from the National Gallery of Art—between the political and cultural heart of America. This circling back of American history on itself to a new point of affirmation and resolution is not only completely right, it is pure historical poetry.

The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian represents cultural redemption and reconciliation in the 21st century.

One final quote by Lee Rosenbaum in the November 18, 2004 Wall Street Journal is necessary.

As an art museum, the Smithsonian Institution’s new National Museum of the American Indian is a failure. But as a museum relating the lives, beliefs, and histories of diverse Native American tribes from the Arctic to South America, NMAI is a substantial success. Only by accepting this museum on its own terms can you appreciate the accomplishments of its staff and the ‘community curators’ from 24 tribes who collaborated to tell the peoples’ stories from the inside.

It is about place and about the land. With the key impetus of the National Museum, more and more tribal museums will be opening in the near future. They will center on place—where the past, present, and the future are one.

Michael Hammond, Ph.D., is the executive director of the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum in Palm Springs, Calif., and was previously director of the Museum of Warm Springs in Oregon, another Native American museum.

Endnotes:

1 George Gustav Heye (1874-1957), a wealthy New Yorker and passionate collector of Native American artifacts, acquired nearly one million objects on trips throughout the United States and abroad. A portion of these were displayed at the National Museum of the American Indian’s George Gustav Heye Center in the U.S. Customs House in New York City. The Heye collection now forms the cornerstone of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

2 On travels through the West from 1830 to 1846, American artist George Catlin painted hundreds of works recording the Native life and culture he observed, and that he feared was disappearing. He later displayed these works on tour as his Indian Gallery. The collection is now owned by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.
Improving People’s Lives in the Context of Where They Live

As I look through your conference program I realize that as preservationists, you are kindred souls. You understand how important context is to the work you do. You realize that you must be concerned about more than place, that you must also take into account the buildings, the context, and the people. Like you, I am concerned about context, and the work that I do is completely focused on context, and the people. Like you, I am concerned about context, and the work that I do is completely focused on people and the needs they have in the context of where they live.

I grew up in a segregated St. Louis neighborhood in the 1950s and early ‘60s. The racism at the time was harsh, but I personally didn’t experience it because I was shielded by a community of caring adults who must have devoted 24 hours a day to making sure the children who were in their charge were protected from the sting and burn of racism.

Part of their job was made easy because things were completely segregated—the neighborhoods, the schools, the places where we played and volunteered, the places where we prayed. The adults could have just accepted segregation, but that would not have been enough; they wanted to make sure that not only were we physically protected, but that we could experience the best that St. Louis had to offer. In those days, St. Louis was a wonderful city with many amenities.

I remember going to the outdoor opera every summer, and I never knew that we probably weren’t that welcome because a ring of adults would sit around us and all the children would sit inside, and those adults would protect us from whatever others might have been feeling (all the time shooting stares down at us to make sure we didn’t embarrass them in any way).

These experiences represent what happens when you have a strong community. Although I’ll admit that as a teenager growing up in St. Louis I felt more constrained than anything else, not free to do what I wanted to do, but looking back, I recognize several things: that for African Americans growing up during that time and before that time, community was the scaffolding that allowed us to make progress and achieve our full potential.

We were locked out, but we were not locked in. We were able, through the scaffolding that the community provided, to move up and achieve all kinds of things.

There were clearly dark sides to segregation, and I realize that even the good things I remember had a flip side. Looking back, I realize that the extraordinary public schools that I attended during the segregated period were so good because the African American teachers that I had at every grade and at every level were some of the best-prepared teachers in the country. These were people who during other times would have been United States senators, journalists, scholars, engineers. But those pathways were not open to them and they found themselves having to channel all their yearnings and ambitions into the only occupation that was available to them.

But what I realize even more is that while I was fortunate to have a strong support system growing up, most of the African American children in St. Louis were not so lucky. The African American middle class in St. Louis represented just a drop in the bucket. Many children were poor and did not have the support of adults to protect them from that sting and burn of racism. I tell you this story to illustrate the point that community matters. Community is the context in which change happens.

As I look at where we are today in terms of opportunity and inclusion, it’s clear that, more than ever, where you live has become a proxy for opportunity. Where you live determines whether your children get to go to high quality schools; whether you are in a position to access good jobs; whether the transportation system is going to help you or whether you will be the victim of pollutants because of highways running through your neighborhood.

Where you live determines whether you will have a house that produces equity and enables you to build wealth so that you can achieve other things in life, such as starting a new business or sending a child on to school.

Where you live even determines how healthy you are going to be. Much has been learned recently about what it means to live in a place where you don’t have access to physical activity or access to fresh fruits and vegetables. This notion of where you live becoming a proxy for opportunity has become extremely important to those of us who struggle to achieve full inclusion and participation in this country.

Connecting Personal Experience to Public Policy

PolicyLink seeks to make the connection between the wisdom that people gain on the ground from working in partnership in their local community and their ability to make change in the world of policy. “Islands of excellence” exist all over: a public school in a community where public schools are failing that produces extraordinary results for the children who go there; a wonderful housing development where beautiful affordable housing is available to the people in the community; a center where young people are finding their best selves, realizing their potential, avoiding the dangers of early sex and violence. But these islands of excellence last only as long as the extraordinary leader who put it together happens to
be there, only as long as the foundation or government leader who thought this was important continues to pour money into it.

Without a policy approach, these things are fleeting. At PolicyLink we try to connect what people are doing to create greater inclusion in their community to the larger goal of sustainability. In essence, we connect people’s experiences to local, regional, and national policy.

Not focusing on policy makes progress sporadic and the process of making change forever adversarial. At some point we need to stand on a platform and begin to spiral upward. Without a policy orientation we will never be able to spiral upward because practice will always be inconsistent with what we believe needs to be in place.

For a policy approach to work, it must be presented as part of a framework. PolicyLink has been working hard to develop the framework that takes community and the quest for regional equity into consideration. This framework serves as a litmus test to tell us whether or not what we are seeking to do is actually achieving the goals that we want.

We need to develop in ways that harness and create market forces that lead to a double bottom line: economic return for investors but economic and social returns for people who live in those communities.

Paths to Equitable Development

The kind of framework that we need is one that supports strategies that enable everyone in a community to contribute to and benefit from local and regional development. We certainly want to make sure that people can benefit from economic success and that economic prosperity is broadly shared. Equitable development is the concept that we think best defines the kind of policy framework that is needed.

Equitable development means that we consciously integrate the people strategies with the place strategies. Those two camps rarely get together. We have some people who work on the place, making sure we have an elegant transportation system, that the housing is beautiful, and maybe even focusing on affordability and maybe even seeing that the environment is being protected. And then we have a whole group of people on the other side who work on job training programs, childcare programs, and education and health and civil rights.

When we work separately from each other, we don’t reap the maximum benefit of what would happen if we worked together. If we work on preparing people to take advantage of opportunity at the same time that we are improving the housing stock, we create housing that serves the people, not housing that creates a new community full of what people had hoped for, for so long, but that they can’t enjoy because they can no longer afford to stay in the neighborhood.

Equitable development consciously says that we will develop in ways that reduce local and regional disparities. There is no reason why where you live should reduce your opportunities in the negative ways that I talked about. If good schools are important, then every community should have them. We need to develop in ways that harness and create market forces that lead to a double bottom line: economic return for investors but economic and social returns for people who live in those communities. Most importantly, we need to develop in ways that reflect the aspirations, the potential, and the dreams of people who live in communities.

We must always keep in mind a vision of a thriving democracy. We often think that the democratic process has to do with elections and voting, but democracy is really about voice. Equitable development is the policy framework that will enable us to promote voice and participation and take us to the next level.

And what will the next level look like? The next level will be one where all communities are livable. If a livable community is what we aspire to in one place, it is what we should aspire to in every place. It should not be just new suburban communities that are livable or gentrifying urban communities that are livable. Every community needs to have the basics: good schools, amenities like grocery stores and farmers markets, and safe sidewalks.

If we achieve regional equity, all communities will be livable communities.

But sometimes livable communities aren’t going to come fast enough, so we also need to think about how to connect people to regional opportunity. Connecting people to regional opportunity means connecting people to transit, making sure that people can get to work even if it happens to be in the suburbs.

Another thing we need to make sure of is that we don’t continue to concentrate people in communities that don’t serve their needs. For so long, we have built affordable housing where the poor people are. We assumed that low-income housing credits must be used in the low-income communities. And while revitalizing low-income communities is a wonderful thing to do, it takes more than housing to do that. The people in these communities also need to have access to good schools, to employment opportunities, to parks. Ultimately, we need to think about spreading affordable housing throughout the region so that people can connect to opportunity wherever it might be.

And we must ensure that in the quest for regional equity
people are able to stay and benefit from improvements in their neighborhood. It makes no sense at all to finally bring the things that people want to their community and not make it possible for people to stay and enjoy those things. We need to make sure that the investments we are making all over the region benefit everyone.

In this country, we have been unappreciative of what we ought to expect when we spend our public dollars. Very little happens in development without some public sector money. And yet, we haven’t demanded that everybody be able to benefit from that.

A Time of Transition

The notion of regional equity is important to this country as it tries to think about democracy. I suspect that this country is in another “groan zone.” You know, when you want to change, you have to go through a groan zone that feels just horrible, but then you make it through to the other side and realize that you are standing on one of those platforms I talked about, ready to start spiraling upward.

In a book I’m reading about Alexander Hamilton one thing that stands out is how sharply people disagreed during those times, how passionate they were about their disagreements. They came to blows and duels because of what they thought the choice ought to be. It is understandable because the country was new and fragile and so vulnerable. People were very serious about building something strong that would last.

I think we are at another delicate, vulnerable stage now. We have become a country that is being shaped by its diversity. Diversity will be the story of America for the next 50 years as it continues to grow. This is no longer going to be one of those places where one group of people has the majority and the power.

To create change, we are going to have to find a new way of listening to each other, finding the things we have in common and finding those bridges that will take us together to the places that we need to be. During times like this, it doesn’t surprise me that we are fighting with each other.

Of course I’d rather see more calm and more agreement, but I think back to times when we had more agreement in the country, and people who looked like me weren’t doing very well. There was too much agreement that kept people out and down who were different, too much agreement that that situation was okay.

For instance, there is too much nostalgia for public education. People used to say that the schools worked for everybody. The kids paid attention. It is myth. We spend too much time being nostalgic for a time that never was, while avoiding a future that is inevitable.

There is no question as we go forward that we have got to come to grips with race. We have to think about our struggles and think about our differences. In my book, Searching for the Uncommon Common Ground, which I wrote with two colleagues, we thought hard about how to write a single essay about race. As a Latino, Asian, and African American, we could have just written three different essays. But we sought to come to agreement on some basic issues.

One of the questions we asked was: Is the black-white paradigm now irrelevant and are we now into a multiculturalism? We concluded that the black/white paradigm is defining, embedded, persistent—and inadequate. It is defining. Negative images of African Americans have shaped public policy for years with the result that urban communities today continue to be neglected and are not serving the people who live there, no matter their race or ethnicity—schools are failing children, the housing stock is not what it should be, there is a tense relationship with the police, and there is probably no grocery store.

In 1996 when we reformed welfare there were many different opinions about what we should do. But everyone carried an image in their minds of a black woman with a lot of children. That image was imbedded in the policies that we now have.

But for all of that, the black-white paradigm is inadequate. Achieving full inclusion in this country will depend on taking everybody’s singular journey into account.

To go forward, we have to move well beyond the black-white paradigm. It is not an either/or; there are no right answers. But I would suggest a couple things. We have to create a long pathway into the conversation about race so that people understand why it is important. We have to understand that in order to achieve full inclusion, everybody’s voice has to be heard. In addition, we will need a framework that sets out a clear picture of what success will look like. These steps must be placed in the context of history and, in order to have a community that matters, we must get people to understand that context. Once the historical context is understood, we will be able to move forward and create a new context for the future.

Sustaining the Beauty and Vitality of Charleston for All Its Citizens

Joseph P. Riley

This morning I will talk for a while about Charleston. As you know, Charleston is a very old American city; it was built before the automobile and the elevators. And people like you had the courage in the early 20th century to save Charleston’s built environment that the industrial revolution hadn’t destroyed, because we didn’t have any economic activity after the Civil War. Your work gave the future generation the remarkable beauty and human scale of Charleston. But Charleston is not a theme park, it is not a movie set; and it was filled with all the opportunities to make mistakes.

The main thing is to keep the bad things from happening. In the 1950s the city demolished the beautiful historic Charleston Hotel where the National Democratic Convention of 1860 met. It was demolished because community leaders knew that to be a great city you needed a drive-in motel. Every great city had to have a drive-in motel. Thankfully the ugly motel is not there any longer either.

Affordable Housing

But what we have tried to do is not to make mistakes. When work started in poor sections of our community in the 1950s and ’60s, affordable housing was as ugly as sin, usually with a cyclone fence around it so you would know it wasn’t very safe, and you wouldn’t want to live there anyway. We were determined to build beautiful affordable housing. There is no excuse to ever allow anything to be built in our communities that isn’t beautiful. If it doesn’t add to the beauty of the community, it shouldn’t be built.

Years ago, when we got a grant for a new public housing project, I said to the housing director, no, we aren’t going to do any more “projects.” They don’t work. They ignore all the accumulated lessons of Western civilization. They ignore human feelings and neighborhood scale. We are not going to build these brick monoliths anymore. We are going to scatter affordable housing throughout the neighborhoods. Well, the housing department reluctantly agreed. So then we debated about where to put them. We hired architects, they came up with designs, they were ugly as sin. We fired them, we got some other architects to do it.

What we finally built didn’t cost any more than the ugly stuff. We scattered it in the neighborhoods; it looked like it belonged there. People who lived there had very nice homes.

When these opened, I was at a party, and a server came up to me and said, “Mayor Riley, I want to thank you. Because on Monday I’m moving into 7 Marion Street, and it’s so beautiful.” And I thought then, the word “beautiful” is not usually applied to public housing. Yet we must have a commitment to make everything beautiful.

One new affordable apartment building was in a neighborhood that was kind of run down. Market-rate housing soon followed, around the corner more housing went in. One building, good urban design, very poor people, well managed—it became a catalyst for the restoration of the entire neighborhood.

We worked hard to keep the bulldozers out of our poorer neighborhoods. Every time we let something come down, we are forever taking away a memory. Communities need memories. People need memories. And so we worked hard to keep the bulldozers out. It cost money and it wasn’t easy.

In the regeneration of our cities we want to make sure that we have places that are affordable. And as we succeed in restoring our communities, we don’t want to lose the diversity. When we make our cities more beautiful, we want to make sure that people of all backgrounds and incomes have a chance to enjoy them.

Often people say, “It’s just housing for poor people, for crying out loud.” We said, “No, we are going to make it
The human scale of Charleston's commercial buildings, the wide sidewalks, and the street-level windows make the city an inviting destination for visitors and residents. Photo courtesy of the City of Charleston.

Main Streets

The greatest and hardest challenge is to maintain our main streets, our public center. We need to remember what we keep fighting for. It is the buildings, the tax base and the jobs to be sure, but the public realm is what every culture needs. It is what towns and cities need; a public center, a democratic place where the richest, the poorest, people of all backgrounds and colors can come and renew their citizenship. When cities are restored, when they are healthy, when they are active, when there is eye contact, there is a civilization. We’ve got to be very careful that we don’t give up to the private realm. Otherwise we lose what we share together. That is why the restoration of our main streets is so important.

Our downtown was very difficult. It was dead. It was gone. We did it by the numbers. Our planning studies showed what the buildings used to be like. We put some money in and wouldn’t let them tear down buildings. We restored our buildings, apartments, and shops. We were making some good progress.

But you know, the downtown is an ecosystem. There are lots of unintended consequences of well-meaning actions. We’ve got to know exactly what we are doing. If the downtown isn’t doing too well, we say, let’s get a developer to do something. We’ve got to be sure and understand the reverberations of our actions.

People should not walk past vacant lots or harsh buildings or blank walls in an urban setting. Cities need lots of people on the streets. We had to add critical mass. We had to respect the scale of the buildings. For one project, we moved the street back six feet, acquired storefronts, and got a hotel conference center and retail. We changed the space to bring activity to the street. From the street you can see what is going on in the buildings, and the people inside can look out on the street.

When the plans for that new hotel/conference center in our downtown called for a blank wall on the side, I asked if they could put in some real storefronts. The response was that the sidewalk was too narrow. And I said, widen the sidewalks. Then they said the street would become too narrow. And I said give me two smaller lanes. They said that wouldn’t work. Why? Because if there is a beer delivery truck illegally parked, then the Greyhound bus that uses that street wouldn’t be able to pass it. So I said, what if we don’t let the beer truck park illegally?

So now we’ve go some real storefronts, and wider sidewalks. And we have some street trees. When it’s the mother holding the child’s hand walking down the sidewalk in a safe and attractive zone, celebrating the ownership of the public realm—that’s what is really important. (And the beer truck finds a place to park—legally.)

When we make our cities more beautiful, we want to make sure that people of all backgrounds and incomes have a chance to enjoy them.

I ran into a friend one Sunday morning and he told me that he liked to come downtown and park his car and walk around because everything looked so nice and he was so proud of it. That is why your main streets are so important, to give our citizens a sense of pride in the heart of the city.

Parking

Parking is a challenge. Years ago when faced with a garage on a prominent site, I said to the designer, I want a parking garage that doesn’t look like a parking garage. The architect said “form follows function,” a building has got to look like what it is. I said, no, we will not use that theory in this particular location in Charleston. He was determined that you would see the car. So I took pictures from around town, where there are closed shutters, to use an example. Whoever said that to have a good city you need really ugly parking lots!

We give our streets every chance we can to get back to the pedestrian. The porte cochere, the piercings, eliminating the blank walls. These buildings, you give them a chance and produce life on the street for the human beings that live in the city.

Public Places

Charleston, as you know, was built on the water. When faced with burned-out piers on the water we took the opportunity to build a public park. It belongs to everyone. It was beautifully designed. Every park is different and you’ve got to know the purpose. In this park, we have no events. Here is the place you can go. No one has rights superior to others. Its raison d’etre was “a thing of beauty is a joy forever.” In bustling cities, people need places of peace and repose and inspiration.

Development followed it. We got the developer to build an art gallery behind the park. Don’t be afraid to create a great public realm; the private development will soon follow.
The visioning is so important. We came up with a vision for nearby Calhoun Street, which faced development pressures. Our planning study said no motels, we need civic buildings instead. We got the main library and school board headquarters built there. All this because the preservation organization demanded that we create a vision for that street.

Tourism

Charleston is a delicate place and it isn’t very big. And we have a tourism industry that we worked very hard to develop. Tourism has changed from a seasonal event—the azaleas in the spring—to a year-round event. We had lots more people coming. We accepted the challenge of organizing and managing our tourism industry. We wanted to be in control of how our city would be and how people would use it, and positively use the benefits of our tourism industry. We turned an old railroad building and yard into a visitors’ center. We encourage visitors to use our trolley. Visitors use the city as we want them to.

Every detail is important. Our cities are family heirlooms that we have inherited and that we are to hold in trust and pass on to future generations more beautiful than we found them. Our culture desperately wants beauty. We’ve got enough hardness, plastic, and thinness in our culture.

There is a moral imperative here. Our towns and cities must be places where every citizen’s heart can sing.

Joseph P. Riley is mayor of Charleston, S.C.

“Changing Values” as an Effective Tool for Urban Preservationists

Values of the greater culture are reflected in the built environment, and these values are clearly visible in America’s inner cities. For the past 60 years our land was built on suburban values, and it is apparent that the urban landscape is not generally valued by most Americans. This fact is especially important for historic preservationists who are fighting to save important structures in their cities, including in the downtown and surrounding area. Historic preservation in cities, including the protection of old churches, grand office buildings, palatial department stores, and entire neighborhoods, can be greatly enhanced by employing a new tool—demonstrating the joys and benefits of a city lifestyle, thereby helping Americans change their value systems.

Preservationists in cities have long been considered passionate crusaders with a clearly defined mission. As experts in the city’s built environment, they have been successful in saving important structures and improving the appearance and quality of city neighborhoods. In too many situations, however, their value systems are in direct conflict with others, such as developers who expect to make big profits, property owners who do not want to be bothered, and even elected officials unwilling to cooperate.

Confronting the cast of characters associated with “progress” is usually complicated and often arduous. This is because the values associated with progress are not always sensitive to preservation goals in the city.

For instance, preservation planners who administer and enforce historic district regulations must endure frequent accusations of being “communist,” even in urban neighborhoods that have long-established design guidelines. Staff members of local preservation organizations, Main Street groups, and other urban activists who raise money and awareness to save downtown buildings from becoming surface parking lots are looked...
upon as “radical” by the auto-centric public. Old neighborhood structures in many cities are considered worthy of the wrecking ball by everyday people, but are tomorrow’s urban showplaces in the eyes of the crusaders. Indeed, urban preservationists must confront a sharp values divide.

Unfortunately, confrontation and the preservation of historic city environments seem to go together, in large part, because the majority culture in America is based on a suburban-oriented value system. Suburban cultural influences have been responsible for helping to conceive and implement many far-reaching plans in decisions in cities. In order to compete with the growing suburbs—to attempt to stop the attrition of residents, tax dollars, and services—cities have tried to physically morph into something more suburb-like. Suburban values began to take over in cities, and transformed the downtowns with plywood nailed over facades and fenestrations, resulting in something unappealing. Old downtown buildings with windows and sidewalks were lost to streets and sidewalks were transformed into giant surface parking lots.

Historic homes sit crumbling, rotting, and waiting for an arsonist’s match. Every city has blocks, even miles, of historic commercial corridors featuring too many buildings with window-boards, transformed into giant surface parking lots.

Rallying the preservationist troops to save buildings, to embrace historic zoning, and to paint Main Street admirable. House by house, block by block, crusaders continue to win many hearts and minds to join the cause of saving history. But large-scale success cannot happen without a paradigm shift of American values. The historic preservationists’ job will become easier and more successful when more people understand the value of cities.

A cultural shift sounds difficult, but it happened almost overnight in the years after World War II. It can happen again, and if it does, this will be the greatest gift to ever come to the historic preservation movement in cities.

A cultural paradigm shift first requires a simple analysis of what “normal” means in the greater culture. Generally speaking, the American way of life is not an urban way of life; suburban living is normal for most people. Urban residence and lifestyle remain a distant and vague anomaly in the mind and experience of most people outside of Manhattan and San Francisco.

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A Call to Promote “Urban” Values

A values change is necessary because none of these dramatic suburban adjustments stopped most cities around the country from shrinking in population or their tax coffers from dwindling. Values must change because many cities have now lost half or more of their peak populations, while their suburban communities have swelled. Even in cities that are growing (mostly “on-paper” because of annexation), their downtowns and surrounding neighborhoods contain buildings that have become laboratories for urban archeologists. And because so many downtowns placed such high value on bulldozing grand cultural anchors and paving over what remained, up to half of the land area in many downtowns has been transformed into giant surface parking lots.

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Viewed from the suburbs, the city center may seem imposing, impersonal, and unwelcoming. It will take a “values shift” to get suburbanites to consider making it their home. Photo by Byrd Wood.
Another suburban value is having a desire for things “new” and “clean,” including houses, streets, neighborhoods, churches, and stores. When places get old and dirty, most suburbanites relocate to newer and cleaner communities, often even farther outside of the city. Urbanites value things that are old and full of history. Neighborhood memoirs, gritty streets, handsome architecture, and distinctive street design and character are important city values.

Development values, those that govern how people feel about construction and population growth, must also change. For instance, those with suburban values frown on proposed subdivisions bringing new homes and people who will surely clog roads, over-crowd the school system, and destroy back porch views. On the other hand, city residents with urban values will cheer upon hearing news of a restored historic building in the downtown that promises to bring in more people, business, and vitality. Suburban values place high worth on structures that are in the middle of the city’s activity. They also appreciate new buildings full of new people that are built on former parking lots (where the historic buildings were razed).

If only a fraction of Americans would begin to question these kinds of suburban values, imagine the profound impact they could bring to the preservation movement in cities! Consider the influence that a widespread change in values could have on the effectiveness of neighborhood activists who have been struggling to bring back their local economy and welcome new residents. Think of how an influx of people who are excited about a “hometown downtown” lifestyle would increase demand for living in historic structures, as well as encourage new residential and business opportunities in city centers. How many more historic structures would be revived and celebrated instead of being razed for surface parking lots? How many more structures would be retrofitted into stores, workplaces, residences, or other neighborhood uses, instead of having their windows covered over with aluminum or stucco?

Ways to Engage “Everyday People”
Simplifying the language that is used in urban professions such as preservation and city planning is one useful way to approach the complex issue of longstanding value systems. Too often, professionals can only communicate effectively within their own vocational cohort; they are unable to communicate to the public at large. For instance, the average person does not understand New Market Tax Credits, or care to analyze the local historic zoning code. Everyday people are not going to lobby for the FHA to reauthorize legislation for preservation; neither will they usually participate in community meetings other than to protest or complain about a nearby development proposal. This is important because preservationists and planners working in the system will not be able to influence a wider values change alone. Everyday people will.

If the joys and benefits of urban living were more widely understood, more people would become drawn to it and interested in a host of issues for which city-oriented professionals create acronyms.

One way to catch people’s attention would be with the kind of quiz many enjoy taking, found in magazines and newspapers, such as Reader’s Digest and USA Today. The following test represents this kind of wider-appeal approach:

Are you ready to…?
- Engage with a diverse group of people at a sidewalk café
- Simplify your home living so you can be out of the house more
- Park your car once and for all
- Walk to restaurants,
If the joys and benefits of urban living were more widely understood, more people would become drawn to and interested in a host of issues for which city-oriented professionals create acronyms.
many of the city's most openly creative types of neighbors.

If you are a Blank Canvas urbanite, then you...

• Enjoy a good challenge.
• Like to know that you are “a part of something happening” and enjoy contributing to positive change.
• Are patient and able to endure years of slow progress.
• Want to make your own mark and be able to influence land-use and development changes.
• Are a passionate urban developer who wants to live and develop where the most dramatic changes can be appreciated.
• Do not mind living in the part of the city with the least available local neighborhood services.
• Are not scared by empty streets and sidewalks.
• See beauty and hope in boarded-up and abandoned buildings.
• Do not mind living around existing manufacturing and industrial uses.
• Can live in a building not intended for residential living until you arrive.
• Think it would be fun to establish or be a part of a new, active, influential neighborhood group.
• Consider yourself an “urban activist.”

Quizzes such as these are found in popular periodicals asking readers to “discover your color season and dress-for-success style” and “match your needs to a spouse.” If the idea of city living was mainstreamed like this, then young people who were incubated in the suburbs might become interested in finding their “Postindustrial” lifestyle in a converted industrial warehouse in their own city, instead of eyeing the much sought-after SoHo. A good number of baby boomers, 78 million strong, might seek out a local “Garden” lifestyle and restore a historic home just down the freeway instead of dreaming about Savannah. Artisans and funky-types who want an “Eclectic” lifestyle will find or create one in the city of their choice, instead of considering San Francisco neighborhoods to corner the market on funky. And people who test out to be “Blank Canvas” urbanites will think about the decimated areas of their cities and become urban activists.

It will take much more than quizzes, but a mainstreamed idea of city living is possible. The benefits of this happening for people who love old buildings, historic neighborhoods, and cities in general are immeasurable. After all, the radical idea of living in tract housing in Levittown, N.Y. during the 1940s was a huge success. A value-change to a city lifestyle, with a popularized, everyday-people approach, can have the same success.

Kyle Ezell is the founder of Get Urban America, an organization devoted to revitalizing cities with new urban dwellers, energy and ideas, as well as the author of Get Urban! He is currently project coordinator for urban revitalization in Columbus, Ohio.