



design - essays

sponsored by

Save | E-mail | Print | Most Popular | RSS | Reprints

Essay: Can Historic Preservation Help Lead Us Out of the Recession

Sept 28, 2009

-By James T. Kienle, FAIA



Today's headlines are filled with a variety of facts, opinions, and predictions about the economy, natural environment, and sustainable development. Spanning these topics is the proven impact of historic preservation with its inherent "greenness" and economic value, possibly leading the way during these challenging economic times. The current recession began with the collapse of the housing market, which had a domino effect into nearly all sectors of construction. With new construction waning, the economics of reusing existing structures becomes more inviting. Despite the tired cry of "that old building is too expensive to save," I have seen very few buildings in my nearly 40 years of practice that would fit that description. "That old building"

may not only be the greenest on the block, as is often said of late, but it may also be the most cost-effective opportunity to revitalize our communities in this time of uncertainty.

Out with the Old; In With the New—Until Now

During the building boom, preservationists relentlessly tried to educate people about the inherent sustainability and economic advantages of reusing structures, often falling on deaf ears. The seductiveness of building new was too great a temptation to overcome. Land was cheap as cities and towns sprawled into precious farmland. The real estate tax structure favored new construction over reinvestment in existing structures. The older structures in America's downtowns from urban centers to villages sat vacant, often demolished by neglect. It was easier to clear virgin land and build new—ever widening the suburbs—than to reclaim the old.

With new construction now lost to the depressive effects of the current recession, more people are beginning to take heed of the economic value, and inherent and environmental value of older structures. Particularly those structures built before 1940 are more sustainable by design because they considered natural heating and cooling with operable windows, greater thermal mass, more environmentally friendly materials, and natural orientation to the environment. Further, the energy to build them has already been spent. The USGBC has even adjusted its LEED rating system to begin accounting for the value of older structures. Additionally, reusing existing structures usually results in reusing other existing infrastructure, employing the already built network of roads, utilities and community facilities, instead of stretching them to unaffordable levels.

Reusing existing structures is recycling at its best. Not only is the embodied energy preserved, but avoiding demolition also reduces the financial and environmental costs of hauling it off to a landfill. Energy and money are spent in rehabilitating structures, but seldom come close to the costs of a new building. Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation pointed out at the 2008 Greenbuild International Conference & Expo: "Demolishing a 500,000-sq.-ft. building creates 40,000 tons of debris, enough to fill 250 railroad boxcars, a train two miles long, heading for the landfill. Constructing a new 500,000-sq.-ft. building would release as much carbon into the atmosphere as driving a car 30 million miles. It takes 35 to 50 years for an energy-efficient new home to recover the carbon expended to construct it."

Lerner Theater in Elkhart, Ind.



Lerner Theater in Elkhart, Ind., before the renovation efforts began Photo Credit: James T. Kienle, Moody Nolan, Inc.

< Previous | 1 of 2 | Next >

Realizing the Value of Preservation

The cost advantages and environmental impact of new construction versus recycling older structures are important to keep in mind as urban areas are revitalized. Hopefully, these factors are enough to keep developers and planners from making the same mistakes seen during the urban renewal period of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, when whole blocks of historic structures were wiped out to build new neighborhoods and commercial areas. Reusing an older structure and creating appropriate in-fill is a challenge and requires significant vision from the architect. It is often simply easier to wipe out the old and start with a clean slate, but if you take into consideration the entire cost in dollars and energy of this approach with demolition, landfills, creating new infrastructure and new construction, the challenge is one that the architectural profession needs to embrace more ardently.

Furthermore, not only is reusing an existing structure and infrastructure an appealing option for the cost and environmental advantages of recycling a building versus building new, but studies show that dollar for dollar, historic preservation is one of the highest job-generating economic

industry news briefs

- WATG-Designed Binh Tien Resort and Spa Breaks Ground
- First U.S. Commercial LED Lit Building Opens in Auburn, Wash.
- Call For Entries
- Haworth Acquires Minority Position in Tuohy Furniture
- Major Hoteliers Make Big Plans for Asia-Pacific

[more industry news](#)

newsletter sign up



advertisement

richloomfabricsgroup ORDER SAMPLES

most popular

most emailed

- Essay: Can Historic Preservation Help Lead Us Out of the Recession
- Haworth Acquires Minority Position in Tuohy Furniture
- LMNOP Presents Stephen Viscusi
- Designing for Health: The Age Factor—Energizing the Healthcare Workplace
- Stylish Sustainability

advertisement

October 28-29, 2009
The Baltimore Convention Center

development options as illustrated in the 2005 presentation "The Economics of Historic Preservation" by Don Rypkema:

- In Michigan, \$1 million in building rehabilitation creates 12 more jobs than does manufacturing \$1 million worth of cars;
- In West Virginia, \$1 million of rehabilitation creates 20 more jobs than mining \$1 million worth of coal;
- In Oklahoma, \$1 million of rehabilitation creates 29 more jobs than pumping \$1 million worth of oil;
- In Oregon, \$1 million of rehabilitation creates 22 more jobs than cutting \$1 million worth of timber;
- In Pennsylvania, \$1 million of rehabilitation creates 12 more jobs than processing \$1 million worth of steel;
- In California, \$1 million of rehabilitation creates five more jobs than manufacturing \$1 million worth of electronic equipment;
- In South Dakota, \$1 million of rehabilitation creates 17 more jobs than growing \$1 million worth of agricultural products;
- In South Carolina, \$1 million of rehabilitation creates eight more jobs than manufacturing \$1 million worth of textiles.

The Advisory Council for Historic Preservation further observes: "These are not just temporary construction jobs but also permanent jobs of various types, including continuing building repair and maintenance. As past studies have found, there are both direct and indirect economic effects from historic preservation, and there is an economic multiplier effect that ripples through the economy."

The current recession has been grave indeed, and many are not confident it has run its course, but historic preservation may be the vanguard for the construction industry and a major catalyst for economic improvement. It offers interesting and challenging opportunities for developers to reuse the built environment, and architects to step up with creative design to take advantage of the cost and environmental benefits of helping rebuild our economy.

James T. Kienle, FAIA, is the director of the historic preservation studio at Moody*Nolan, Inc., in Columbus, Ohio. Moody*Nolan is the largest African-American owned and operated architecture and engineering firm in the nation. For more information, visit www.moodynolan.com.

BOOKMARK Save E-mail Print Most Popular RSS Reprints

Overall rating: (4.33) Great

3 Comments

1. **Within the Walls** comments:
 October 17, 2009 ★★★★★
 excellent article! I have done a good bit of research into the economic impact of the arts in general and think that viewing our "industry" in terms of pure economic power is really important to our success. The days of esoteric design are over.

2. **Forward Thinking** comments:
 October 14, 2009 ★★★★★
 Great read. One item that was hinted at: There are many property owners who WANT to restore/renovate their old buildings but fear that the money will be wasted because no one else will follow suit. In my experience, historic preservation is contagious and the first job done is almost always a catalyst the other building owners in the neighborhood to fix up their properties. This in turn builds community interest as the public/shop keepers/patrons/etc. compare notes (and blog) on who is doing what, who is doing it quicker, and who is doing it best!

Post a Comment

Asterisk (*) is a required field.

*Username:

*Rate This Article: (1=Bad, 5=Perfect)

★★★★★

*Comment:

submit

reset



recent design essay



Trends: Daylighting the Emergency Department

October 15, 2009 - Studies show that daylighting conditions in Healthcare Emergency Departments helps patients recover faster and improves worker productivity

more

Essay: Engineering Aspects of Healthcare Design

October 14, 2009 - In spite of the current reprieve from spiking energy costs, the trend toward sustainability—and particularly energy-use reduction—continues to gain attention among engineers serving the healthcare sector

more

Back to Essays Homepage



ADVERTISEMENT

