

# PRESERVATION AND THE URBAN AGENDA

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## BACKGROUND

Detroit is the oldest major city in the Midwest. Founded in 1701, the city's over three centuries of European/American history—from frontiers to furs, manufacturing to music, ship building to skyscrapers, and civil rights to civil strife—offer a story as compelling, as rich and as varied as that of any city in North America. There is no doubt that Detroit's place in the American experience is secure.

After growing steadily and progressively for two hundred years, the first half of the 20th Century saw Detroit boom like no city before, creating a great middle class that exported a pattern of life which reverberated across the country and around the globe. Detroit shaped the century, but its subsequent decline has been as marked and as profound as its phenomenal ascendancy. Detroit's particular struggle with the myriad of urban issues that plague other cities—loss of population and rampant disinvestment, racial divisiveness and socioeconomic friction, loss of institutional and corporate resources, economic homogeneity, municipal inefficiency and intra-municipal wrangling, loss of urban fabric, eroding infrastructure and lack of transportation options—is especially poignant, and a continuing challenge to both citizens and those in leadership roles.

Easily the most visible victim of Detroit's great decline is its built environment, sprawling over 140 square miles and distinguished by 8,000 vacant structures and 30,000 vacant lots that once contained thriving communities. Of particular concern is the city's greater urban core, generally following the length of its radial streets (most notably Woodward), coalescing in the area enclosed by Grand Boulevard, and specifically concentrated within its unique street grid of the historic downtown—now cut off from the rest of the city by I-75, I-375, and the Lodge freeways.

Yet despite widespread loss, downtown contains numerous structures that speak eloquently to the city's growing prominence on the world stage during the first part of the 20th century: Detroit's collection of pre-war skyscrapers rank third behind only Chicago and New York; the city's theater district (once topping New York in number of seats) still rivals that of any U.S. city; finely constructed and structurally sound commercial and warehouse buildings, though under-appreciated, abound. While notable examples have fallen for no clear purpose, such as Hudson's, old City Hall, and the Hotel Tuller, enough urban fabric exists, though tattered and severely endangered, to concentrate and incubate a smart, strategic planning initiative that begins in Detroit's heart and organically grows out.

City after city has discovered the multiple returns on leveraging preservation and adaptive reuse as proven economic development tools: Portland and New York City convert outdated schools into thriving arts centers; Cleveland and Atlanta transform tired warehouses into million dollar lofts; Chicago and Pittsburgh recast historic houses of worship into unique living and dining spaces. Why not in Motown? Downtown Detroit is decades behind the national trend and its stock of buildings and ingrained investment are put on an alarmingly simplistic dual track: show me the money, or get demolished. While laudable projects such as the Opera House, the Kales Building, and the lofts at Merchants Row and Woodward Place move forward, salvageable structures like the Statler and the Madison-Lenox, are imminently threatened.

We must act now. Detroit desperately needs a bold, holistic vision for economic development through preservation, and its leadership must engage and empower a greater Urban Agenda.

## OBSTACLES

Obstacles that stand in the way of effectively redeveloping Detroit's historic structures are inextricably linked to the city's larger challenges listed above. However, from an administrative and urban planning perspective, three overarching themes emerge:

- **LACK OF URBAN UNDERSTANDING AND POLITICAL WILL**—Cities are made for people first. Great cities understand this precedent and build for people before building for cars. Real “city life” in Detroit has suffered terribly from a willingness to cater to the car at any and all costs, placing an undue priority and rationalization on auto-focused development, from “strip malling” to surface parking to road widening, this mentality has created a hodgepodge development pattern that is neither appealing nor sustainable. Historic urban buildings and neighborhoods are constantly under stress because of the parking specter and because historic properties are painted as obsolete vestiges of an unattainable or sometimes undesirable past when in fact they often lend themselves more effectively to a healthy, walkable urban environment. Unless and until leadership gains a basic understanding of urbanity's great inherent value—historic and cultural resources, vertical economies, mixed land use, contained development, environmental sensitivity, etc.—the *city* of Detroit will continue to decline.
- **LACK OF COMPREHENSIVE URBAN VISION**—Subsequently, an urban vision for Detroit has not been described in a thoughtful or compelling way. Using the city's viable structures and infrastructure as *assets* and as *starting points*, Detroit's leadership must describe the kind of city we can move toward together. Not only must growing pockets of activity be identified and nurtured, but also real urban connections between them must be made. In light of (or maybe because of) Detroit's great recent

struggles, leadership has not stepped back to articulate the importance of the city's place in a realistic way within its regional, national and global context.

- **LACK OF EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE**—The City has been an extraordinarily poor steward of its own laws and codes. There is promise in new programs like the City of Detroit Department of Administrative Hearings (DAH), created in January of 2005. This program must be supported and leveraged to enforce the City Code as it applies to property maintenance and blight prevention. There must be a better mechanism put forward to deal with the entrenched property owners who let historically significant buildings languish while waiting for an unrealistic payday. With a strong vision in place, a commitment to firm enforcement must ensue.

## COMMON ISSUES & CONSTITUENTS

Everybody benefits from preservation and restored cityscapes. The results build connections and coalitions, uniting the past, present and future. New, creative economies can be formed with minimal investment, turning an abandoned warehouse into a small business or arts venue. Engaging the built environment, as it exists now *and* how we would like to be, builds a deeper understanding of our city's past and the promise of its great potential. Leveraging a broad-brush approach to creative economic development brings numerous constituents and interest groups to the table, including, but not limited to:

- **ARTS COMMUNITY**—One of the strongest beneficiaries and supporters of preservation is the arts community, who can mold new uses out of old structures in creative and low cost ways. Declining neighborhoods across the country have been turned around with the infusion of artists and the investment they bring. Probably the best-known example is the SoHo neighborhood in New York City, where formerly abandoned and under-utilized loft buildings were given over to artists in the 1970's and were later rezoned to allow for residential uses.
- **BANKERS & LENDING INSTITUTIONS**—Mortgage lenders become better members of the development community when they learn how to work with historic properties and are actively engaged in the rebuilding of the urban fabric. While deals with historic properties are often more complex, the multi-faceted and rigorous approach builds a greater level of trust and consistency between the lending institution and the community.

- **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS**—Community Development Corporations (CDC's) have been highly successful leveraging the National Trust for Historic Preservation's *Main Street* organizational model to redevelop local commercial districts. CDC's are natural allies for historic preservation initiatives as they look for creative and cost effective ways to build community, often leveraging numerous additional funding sources to fill financing gaps.
- **ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS**—Rebuilding the urban core through a strategic planning response speaks directly to the interests of the environmental community. In a regional sense, every building or lot that gets redeveloped in Detroit is one less that gets built on a greenfield or a wetland. The appropriate recycling and reuse of building materials is an area of growing concern and interest that has spawned successful building salvage operations in several U.S. cities; a grass roots effort is currently underway in Detroit.
- **PRESERVATION COMMUNITY**—Obviously, the preservation community advocates to this end. In Detroit, the Historic Neighborhoods Coalition, Preservation Wayne, Cityscape Detroit, the Detroit Architectural League, Friends of the Book-Cadillac and others believe that the preservation debate in Detroit is far from healthy, and unfortunately far more accepted as part of the mainstream decision making process in other cities.
- **NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT INTERESTS**—Opening up Detroit to outside development interests would expose the local market to best practices and new thinking in ways that would transform the development process downtown in a fundamental way. These development interests have had their eyes on Detroit and its first rate and underutilized building stock for many years and would wholeheartedly support a progressive and engaged administration along the lines of a preservation strategic planning initiative.
- **TRANSIT ADVOCATES**—The focus of strategic planning dialogue around preservation and the revitalization of urban building typology is completely consistent with transit advocacy and new transportation initiatives. A more holistic approach to preservation and a strong push to redevelop historic transit corridors with urban density will result in better transit options and the possibility of a real system in the future.

## PRESERVATION IS *about* ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

At its core, preservation is a proven economic development tool that has been utilized successfully to the tune of billions of investment dollars in cities throughout the United States. Cities like Atlanta, Boston, Baltimore, Charleston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, Louisville, New Orleans, New York, Pittsburgh, Portland, San Francisco, Santa Fe, Seattle, St. Louis, Washington D.C. and many others have figured it out and have left Detroit decades behind the trend.

While any individual project may present funding challenges and can require years of preparation and planning, the long term prospects and vision that a strategic preservation program can leverage is enormous. Along the lines of economic development, three specific areas of economic opportunity should be mentioned:

- **PRESERVATION IS A JOBS PROGRAM**—Preservation is a jobs program that encourages and empowers developers and local building trades to leverage a greater array of resources than are currently available to new construction projects. Preservation projects also create more jobs and a more diverse pool of jobs than new construction projects. In the long run, an evolved preservation ethic results in a versatile trades workforce that can help to build and sustain community.
- **PRESERVATION REINFORCES CULTURE AND DRIVES TOURISM**—Preservation builds upon and supports local culture and history. It serves to provide continuity and stability in community as cities change. Preservation celebrates authenticity and drives tourism dollars towards districts and destinations that resonate on a cultural level. This value is inherent in historic structures and sites, and is one of the few inherent assets that Detroit can leverage against its suburban neighbors without spending a dime.
- **PRESERVATION CAPTURES DETROIT'S FAIR SHARE FROM LANSING AND WASHINGTON**—Every year, tens of millions of dollars go unused in the form of federal and state tax credits that are only available to preservation projects. And every historic property that is lost in Detroit represents a terminal loss of unused development dollars—which can translate to 30%-50% of rehabilitation costs. Other cities have done a far better job of capturing this money, developing whole city departments and specialized law practices devoted to utilizing these resources in a focused way.

## SOLUTIONS

There are many possible solutions to the preservation question in Detroit. These are actionable items that can be implemented without a great deal of expense and without dramatically shifting administrative processes:

- Institute Moratorium on Downtown Demolitions
- Develop a Preservation-Focused Strategic Plan for Downtown
- Institute a Section 106\*-like Process to Evaluate Historic Structures in Detroit
- Fast-Track Historic Structures for the Department of Administrative Hearings
- Develop a Strategic Plan for Parking in the Entire CBD
- Develop a Marketing Strategy for City-Owned Historic Properties
- Work with Local Lenders to Develop Small Business Loans/Incentives for Buildings
- Develop a Strategic Plan to Build out from Historic Structures and Fill in Between
- Move Away from Dual Track Mentality: Redevelop or Demolish...
- Work with the State to Leverage Statewide and National Incentives
- Open the Process up to Outside Development Interests
- Investigate Creative Prorated Tax Rates to Devalue Vacant/Parking Oriented Lots

\*“Section 106” refers to the portion of the National Historic Preservation Act that clearly lays out a rational plan for the evaluation, stabilization, marketing and, if need be, disposal of historic resources. This process must be employed when Federal funds are being used.