

The Value of Historic Preservation

Norman Metzger — 09/02/2014

The Editor said to write about the value of historic preservation -- quality of life, walkability, etc. A reasonable assignment although my eyes did start to glaze over just a bit. Afterwards, as I noodled the question, I began to think about dates: August 2014, 1929, and December 1967. And, as a bonus, three more dates: 1973, 1976, and 1978

August 2014 After a morning Cappuccino at Peregrine, I strolled past Le Pain Quotidien (LPQ to some), and was stopped by a young woman sitting with her baby at an outside table. She had noticed my Capitol Hill Restoration Society tee-shirt. She exclaimed "Thank you! This is such a wonderful neighborhood; we love it." Her family was new to the Hill, having moved in only a few days before. I thanked her, and suggested that she later stroll to Capitol Hill Books just around the corner and pick up a copy of Brick Walks and Iron Fences, by Nancy Metzger (no conflict with my interest).

1929 The National Capitol Parks and Planning Commission (now just NCPC) offered its scheme for extending the Mall eastwards. One could admire it for its immodesty but not its plan: To replace the East Capitol Street homes with a site for each state on every block reaching toward the Anacostia. It was to be a "traditional French boulevard enclosed by neoclassical buildings and embellished by a park at Lincoln Park...." p. 123, Washington in Maps, Iris Miller).

1967 A Joint Committee of Members from The Capitol Hill Community sent its Capitol Hill Prospectus to Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson noting in its conclusion that

[M]uch of the spirit and grandeur of its historical past have been recaptured to make Capitol Hill one of Washington's most distinctive residential communities. The resurgence of this center-city residential location has come about mainly through the enterprise of the inhabitants of the area themselves, who have been interested in restoring the fine homes there, and equally interested in re-establishing a community of pride, vitality, and concern.

My three bonus dates:

1973 - Designated an Historic District.

1976 - The Capitol Hill Historic District listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

1978 - The D.C. Council enacted the city's first comprehensive historic preservation ordinance, the Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act.

Of course, my unexpected conversation with the new resident didn't magically conjure up these dates -- my memory is supposed to be regressing, after all. But I began to reflect and to understand that what happened on those dates is what created the Capitol Hill we know. A disastrous plan that didn't happen (among others; e.g. an 11th Street highway across the Hill). The 1967 observation by "Members from The Capitol Hill Community," many gone, that for the community to thrive its people needed to move beyond their "fine homes," but also needed to be "equally interested in re-establishing a community of pride, vitality, and concern." They gave us an inheritance that we treasure and in our own ways guard.

Fine. But still remains the Editor's question, the value of historic preservation. I turned from history to today and the literal. "Value" can mean many things; it can mean community but indubitably it means "economic." Is historic preservation -- living in an historic district -- worth it? Or is it an economic sinkhole? What is the relation to property values vis-à-vis not living in an historic district? What is its role in not only revitalizing neighborhoods and but keeping them robust and vital? Turns out these questions have very data-laden answers.

Economic Impact of Historic Preservation

There is a very robust literature on the economic impact of historic preservation resting on detailed analyses in many cities -- five cities in Utah, four in Connecticut, Philadelphia, Louisville, Greensboro, NC -- with more studies coming -- Savannah, Georgia, Pittsburgh, Pa. etc. That work was nicely summarized by Donovan Rypkema of PlaceEconomics (placeeconomics.com) in the July-August 2014 issue of The Alliance Review of the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions (napc.uga.edu). Dr. Rypkema noted that these and other studies have had "surprisingly consistent results -- local historic districts most often enhance the value of residential properties." No surprise to most of us, as we've watched the rise -- at times spectacularly -- of home prices on Capitol Hill. More pointed is what happens in historic districts when black clouds appear, and prices fall -- as they did on the Hill and elsewhere in the 1990s and 2008, and, given that everything cycles, will again. There is reassurance in studies in Connecticut, Utah, and Kentucky towns that the "rate of foreclosure in the local [historic] districts was half that of comparable [non-historic] neighborhoods." True, foreclosure rate is an indirect measure of risks to property values in a downturn but still telling.

Of course, there is more to quality of life than property values. "As analysis has broadened," quoting Rypkema, additional benefits of local historic districts have emerged, and not just from preservationists. Among these is 'walkability'. The American Journal of Preventive Medicine noted that:

'Neighborhoods built a half century or more ago were designed with "walkability" in mind. And living in them reduces an individual's risk of becoming overweight or obese.'

It's of course reassuring to have multiple studies of historic districts in many states affirm what we observe in our own community: Our legacy from those who fought to make our community so splendid is economically sound, that the value of an historic district is very palpable. But, then, nothing is forever. So, perhaps the greatest value of historic preservation may be not only what is before us now, but also that it can be a major bulwark for futures that may not always be so rosy.

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