

# **AuthentiCity: Preservation's Role in Creating Place**

## **Bill Steiner, 3.31.2005**

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I am a preservationist. My undergraduate degree is history and my graduate degree in historic preservation. I started in preservation, and while my work has become broader, it still encompasses working with community assets of which the historic building stock is always one. So what I am going to say today you will probably all agree with. I am preaching to the converted. I am going to return to this fact at the end because we need to be doing so much more than talking to ourselves.

We have made great strides in the last 30 years in the world of preservation. I think we will always want more, but fundamentally preservation is much more accepted as having value and importance than when I started working. Downtown revitalization, which basically means historic preservation, is now seen not as a frill as it once was, but as integral to a successful community. We have made real progress, and we do not want to lose sight of that. Yet, we need to make more. Part of how we do that is to reframe the role of preservation in the community. It is this that I will return to at the end of this talk by way of a suggestion for preservation's role. I want to do this to challenge ourselves a bit. You agreeing with everything I say might make us all feel good, but I want us to leave questioning and re-evaluating.

*AuthentiCity: Preservation's Role in Creating Place* is how I titled this talk because I am interested in authentic cities. I am interested in real places. I imagine all of us in this room feel the same. To understand why it is important to me, particularly today, I want to recount a few facts, a few trends in this country that are cause for concern.

Then I will try to connect these trends and my concerns with the role of authentic cities as a way to help ameliorate some of what those trends tell us about life in the U.S. Finally I want to put all of that within the context of the conference theme and talk about preservation as a blueprint for more than just what we normally consider to be the purview of preservation – the moving of us beyond talking to ourselves that I started with.

### **The Trends and Concerns**

So what is going on that gives me concern? We have never been better off in many ways than we are today in the United States. Here are a few indicators.

- Average personal income doubled between 1957-2002
- Houses are 38% bigger than in 1975, even though families are smaller
- We own more cars than there are licensed drivers
- More graduate from college
- Nearly all forms of disease are in decline but, parenthetically, we are overweight and 300,000 a year die from "sedentary death syndrome."

Despite this we are no happier than we were 45 years ago:

- Only 33% say they are very happy – the same proportion as in 1960
- 40% of parents feel like they don't have enough time to spend with their kids
- Biggest concern of American adolescents is not having enough time with parents
- Depression is one of the fastest growing problems in mental health

And then there's our civic and community participation:

- Voting has declined 25 % since mid-1960s
- And between 30-40% fewer participate in political parties, clubs and organizations
- Number of Americans who entertain friends at home has declined 45% since 1970
- Parents and kids are 1/3 less likely to vacation together than in 1980
- We spend 2 hours 34 min a day with TV and 8 min a day volunteering, or w/ religious

activities

Finally

- 86% of us are bored with TV
- 65% of us are bored with shopping
- 40% are bored with our lives.

When you consider that television and shopping are the great American pastimes, recognized by the President after 9/11 in suggesting we not change and continue to shop, and we are bored with these activities it suggests that something is very wrong.

Here is a little further evidence of “something rotten in Denmark.” We are a consumer nation so we are told, constantly asked to consume more and more. Apparently we do, for we have in this country 40-50,000 self storage facilities. Every month 120,000 storage units are abandoned. The storage industry is a \$17 billion dollar industry – bigger than the motion picture industry. We are consuming at a staggering rate and putting it in storage and then walking away from it. Perhaps we just love to consume so much that there is nothing amiss with this. But when we are bored with that shopping, when we are bored with life, when we are unhappy, even though we are so much better off than we have ever been, you have to believe that there are causes which are not being addressed.

And what might those causes be? I believe we are lost. Somehow we have come to believe that consuming is the route to happiness. We are lost for a number of reasons. Technology and the way it has sped up life and created what one has termed an “era of continuous partial attention” is one. We can't focus, ping from one thing to the next, never savoring. This is a subject worthy of its own talk, but I want to go to a cause more relevant to our work. I want to focus on the fact that we have been very slowly changing the physical character of our communities and, without realizing it, it has affected how we live, how we interact – or, more precisely, don't. It is the lack of human-to-human contact caused by how we have built that I believe is a large contributor to the discontent we feel.

This has been going on for over 60 years. It began slowly and crept up on us over time, imperceptibly so we really haven't noticed as it happened. We have several generations that only know a suburban nation. This was not some hidden plan, some evil scheme. It came about as a result of rational policy decisions, the consequence of which we are only beginning to understand – and feel in how we look at and experience life. And I would suggest that most of us don't yet understand. We feel the malaise, but do not know why we feel it. So we continue to shop because that is supposed to make us feel better. Only it doesn't.

You all know the policy decisions: Two simple, seemingly benign Federal initiatives. The first began a massive highway building program, and the second started financing mortgages after WWII. The result has been a massive out-migration from cities. In the twenty years prior to these Federal programs, the standards for roads became established. The transportation engineer became a profession in the 1930's. At that time the way roads were built and designed became a science. These two policies have profoundly affected the shape of our communities.

Eighty percent of everything built in this country has been built since WWII. Today nearly ½ of all urban developed land is devoted to roads, parking lots and other motor vehicle infrastructure. While we have always had roads and streets, they previously were designed for multiple users who traveled at relatively low speeds. Since the 50's we have been designing our people moving infrastructure and strategies exclusively around the car. That is why so much of our urban infrastructure is devoted to the automobile.

The Federal Housing Authority, formed in 1934, had by 1959 helped 60% of all people buy their homes. They did not set out to dictate how neighborhoods were built, but through their standards that is exactly what happened. The FHA began determining the shape of our communities. They dictated road size, intersection radiuses, lot size, said no curbs or sidewalks is ok. As a result of these Federal initiatives the way we built our cities changed. The result is that the physical character of our communities has dramatically changed.

The consequence of that physical change is that we interact very little with one another because we are in our cars, we are spread out, we have fewer sidewalks, those that exist are often useless, and so we drive. The car, which gave us such independence has become our master. We can do nothing without it.

Clearly there are other contributors such as zoning that segregates uses. But the driving force has been the shape our communities began to take in order to accommodate what the FHA was mandating and the way we were developing.

Banking fell in line to the point today that banks have a hard time feeling comfortable lending to “nontraditional” kinds of forms of development – like traditional neighborhoods.

An ancillary factor to the physical change of communities and a contributor to our discontent is that the physical character of what we have built has declined. We design commercial areas for the car - to enable the car to get us there, to park it, to have signage that relates to a speeding automobile. Because we are constantly moving farther out, and builders know this, they invest less resulting in a lowered quality of development.

Housing is little different. We use ersatz materials to pretend it is authentic and real. Because we are using formulas, all housing becomes the same. One of the reasons Americans are bored is because everything is so punishingly the same. From houses, to subdivisions, to commercial, to choices in what we buy, it is all the same.

Here is another contributor to the sameness. As the changes in how we build has progressed over the last 60 years we have been building neighborhoods more and more by income levels. We are segregated economically – and probably increasingly segregated more by income than race. Economic segregation means that everybody around you is the same. You begin to see the world narrowly because you do not have different perspectives, or lifestyles, or life experiences to compare and contrast with your own. Not only is this narrowing, it is boring. Zoning out granny flats and mixed uses has not helped. Because of all of this, 60% of Americans would welcome novelty in their lives.

In designing people out of places our human interaction is now prescribed. We go to office parks, shopping malls, industrial parks, church, Rotary, quilting bees. It is all prescribed. In real, authentic places you have what I call accidental community - chances to meet with, rub shoulders with, talk to those you don't necessarily plan to, those who are different from you. People of all stripes mix. Spontaneity, the unexpected and unplanned happen. It contributes to the novelty we miss.

And this is the great tragedy of how we have developed. We don't interact as a people of many colors and interests. We interact as special interests. It has eliminated variety. It has made our human interaction as generic as everything else around us. And it is a big reason for why we are bored.

So to review

- We are covered up with abundance
- We aren't happy
- We have designed human interaction out of our communities, and
- We have built generic, everything-is-the-same spaces for 60 years, making up 80% of everything ever built.

## **How To Respond – Human Interaction in a Human Place**

Assuming this is not good, what do we do? We need antidotes coming in the form of attachment to others, the ability to interact freely, spontaneously in unplanned ways, and we need a physical environment that supports these qualities so that we develop a sense of community and a sense of place.

And there are few things that provide a sense of place more than a historic context, the buildings and public spaces that are rooted in the past and reflect a culture and lifestyle that was more diverse. What is ironic is that the places that everybody fled for the suburbs – our inner cities and neighborhoods that were felt to be inhospitable, ugly and dangerous – are now the places that have the character, interest and sense of place that people so desperately need. So the sense of place provided by the historic core of our communities is imperative if we are to begin to recapture fuller lives. The public realm is where we build the relationships and have the experiences that tie us to place. The public realm of the last 60 years is one without sidewalks or civic space. The antidote to our unhappiness is feeling like we belong to a place worth caring about, establishing relationships tied to the place through other people – human interaction in a human place.

Areas of our cities where the historic buildings are concentrated are those that have the qualities I am talking about. Clearly, there are other important factors we must address as well, such as the influence of technology and the need to mix uses – things we don't have time for today, but important components of what is needed. The base, however, is the form and character of our historic areas.

While we have abdicated our cities to the car, the skeleton that exists in historic areas is still there. It may have been

altered over the years, but the bones are there to be recaptured.

## **Our Challenge as Preservationists**

As I said at the beginning, I am preaching to the converted. You all know this and understand it. And here is where I want to talk about us in the preservation world, moving beyond talking to ourselves, in fact, embracing a new way.

What I would like to suggest to you is that preservation is not about preserving a few buildings from the past. It is about capturing the authenticity of a place so that people can be reintroduced to real places and so that people can experience and gain the benefits of living in real places. This is a broader way of looking at the role of preservation.

Looking at preservation this way is, for us, fundamentally challenging. We have always seen our role narrowly, although I will say that this has been changing at least for some. Typically, however, we have thought only about preserving our history, the rare beauties from our past, the work of those who went before. Those are still important reasons for us to carry out our preservation work, and important ways to continue to expend our energy. But it strikes me that it could be so much more.

What if we begin to think about preservation as an antidote to the malaise Americans feel about life? I would challenge us to begin to see what it is we do in this different light.

Political commentator George Will said in his book *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, “A nation is to a certain extent a state of mind. When we come to know it in a new way it becomes a new place.” That is our challenge in preservation. We need to come to know what we do in a new way. When we do, we will transform it into a mainstream philosophy and approach to the way successful communities are built and work.

To do this we have got to move preservation from a movement of preserving the past, to one that is a blueprint for the future. I mentioned that 80% of everything built in this country has been built since WWII. While in theory that means we have nearly a decade's worth of those buildings that could be eligible for the National Register today, it really means that historic buildings make up a small percentage of our built environment. If nothing had ever been torn down, new or old, historic buildings would make up 20% of our built environment.

Now here is what I find staggering. The Brookings Institution has projected that by 2030 over half of the built environment will have been built in the next 25 years. That means that those places we find historic are going to be an even smaller percentage of the whole – at best just 10%. If we continue as we are, we preservationists are concerned with a smaller and smaller percentage of the built environment.

So do we continue to see our role only as preserving those fewer and fewer buildings that are worth preserving. Or can we see ourselves in a new role?

I would like to see us do the latter moving to the past as the blueprint to build the future. The historic preservation blueprint provides us two things. It provides the template for a quality physical environment in which to live. And it gives us the template for a walkable public environment in which we nurture the interaction that we need as a people.

It might be argued that the New Urbanists are already doing this. And to an extent they are. But in many cases it is simply a new subdivision with different clothing. It is too narrow in its approach. (I will admit, parenthetically, that are some, like Vince Graham at I’On, who has tried to connect his development to those surrounding him. He was resisted by the folks living around him, which only reinforces in my mind the valuable role we in the preservation world can play in showing a real alternative.) Most New Urbanist developments are not connected to the rest of the community, are built in green fields even farther out than the previous subdivision, and are too often a feel-good way for people to pretend they are doing something different or better. Further, they are for the rich and segregate us by income.

Preservation represents an authentic approach to cities. What we are trying to preserve is a blueprint for the way we can and should build into the future. It is there in front of us. What we preserve can be touched, experienced, analyzed. It has a patina that is comfortable. It has shown its adaptability and longevity. It is of undeniable quality. There is tremendous opportunity to fill in where we have torn down, to revitalize what exists rather than moving farther out – building on the bones. But above all it is a blueprint for all that is to be built over the next 25 years –

the buildings that will represent half of the building stock of 2030.

## **The Obstacles**

If we are to do as I suggest, transform preservation's role, we have challenges which we must face, steps we must take.

First and largest is ourselves. We have to think about what we are differently. I do not mean to discount all we currently do. It is valuable work and must continue. But we have to transform how we see the role of preservation in the affairs of this country today. We need to see ourselves as players. Until we transform how we see ourselves we can do nothing more than what we currently do. This is our single, most fundamental challenge: to transform our view of ourselves. If we can do this, the rest will be easy.

The second thing we have to do is build coalitions. While I may have problems with New Urbanists, they espouse the same things we do in terms of what makes places livable, vibrant and real. We must work together to help others understand why the communities and type of community they and we represent are of value to Americans today.

There are others to partner with. I have always contended we need to be hand-in-hand with environmentalists. We both preserve scarce resources. The preservation of buildings leads to less use of the natural resources that is the environmentalists' concern.

We need to be working with affordable housing advocates and planners. Concentrated low income housing tends to be located in or near historic areas. This creates disinvestment and abandonment of historic resources. Sprawl, the building of economically segregated housing, continues to concentrate low income housing not only in core areas of cities but in first ring suburbs. Montgomery County, Maryland leads the nation in requiring that all new developments have at least 10% affordable housing. This is a 20 year old policy that has led to tremendous diversity. It has also led to interesting places. They have mixed neighborhoods. It is a policy we need to adopt across the country.

Clearly those working against sprawl are our allies. We currently subsidize sprawl with state and federal policies particularly including our transportation policies and funding. The huge transportation dollars we spend are poorly allocated.

The list can go on and on. But ultimately it brings us back to the first thing we need to do which is transform ourselves. And this is where I will leave you today. Until we see ourselves in a different light, nobody else can. Preservation is the blueprint for where we need to go. The places we work to preserve are the kinds of places that offer an answer for the bored, unhappy American. Yes, the public will need to be educated, and introduced to authentic and real places. But I know, once introduced, they will see how it is what they want.

Some of you know I lead an annual trip of discovery to Italy. The purpose of that trip is to reintroduce people to what it is like to live in a pedestrian friendly, human supportive environment. While I ask participants to evaluate and begin to understand design and uses and how they contribute to creating such great spaces, the single greatest thing that they are impressed with and leave with is how supportive the place is of people. Each and every one of the travelers leaves mourning the loss of that here. Put that discovery of how valuable a place for people is against the malaise we feel in this country and you suddenly have a group of people willing to work for a different way: human interaction in a human place.

It can, of course, seem overwhelming to return to the US where there seems to be no choice. But in fact we do have a choice. And we still have examples upon which to draw. We just need to lead people, to show them the alternative, to point the way. It is a role that we as preservationists can embrace, if we choose.

Thank you very much.  
bsteiner@surfbest.net

