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## CITYSPACE

### What's Old Can Be New



**Building blocks: The Ebenezer Maxwell Mansion in Germantown serves as evidence that cities are well-served to protect their architectural heritage.** Photo By:

Michael T. Regan

#### Other cities are profiting from their architectural past. We should too.

*by Gersil N. Kay*

Last month, the Center City Proprietors' Association presented the groundbreaking "Historic Preservation: Preserving Philadelphia's Future" program. But what do the members of CCPA, a group of entrepreneurs, have to do with protecting historic properties?

David Brownlee, a distinguished architectural historian, answered that very question: There are both economic and cultural benefits to be drawn from conserving Philadelphia's three-century architectural heritage.

The historic tourism industry is lucrative for Philadelphia and the entire Delaware Valley. It brings business, jobs and tax revenues. People come from all over the world to see our authentic structures found nowhere else in the U.S. in such quality and quantity. Conventioneers do not spend 24 hours a day in the convention hall; they choose venues that offer enjoyable extracurricular activities including shopping, amusement, sports and sightseeing.

Few other American cities have the breadth of examples of old-school buildings, and even fewer locales possess the walkability of our streetscapes in a country where many city centers have been drastically eroded. Even without guided tours, the public is instinctively drawn to pre-World War II structures because they represent our architectural "roots" and are user-friendly.

Also, properly revived buildings are profitable. For one, properties were erected to last much longer than the mortgage in olden days. Also, construction methods and materials of yesteryear resulted from a millennium of experience that yielded practical techniques and personal comfort.

The Center City district recognizes that, in order to entice families to return to living downtown, there has to be an interesting mix of new and old and large and small buildings. Sufficient retail, recreation, residential and parking must also be provided.

To save precious energy and to avoid tearing down and rebuilding viable older properties, new business can be gainfully housed in them. By way of example, Bloomingdales' renovated an old Masonic temple in Chicago, and it was so successful that they recently revived a cast-iron building in New York's Soho neighborhood. One needn't even leave town to see similar examples: A beautiful Coach store rose phoenix-like almost overnight from an abandoned structure on Walnut Street. It's just good business.

Those who say it can't be done either don't know how or simply don't want to give it a shot. If some imagination and basic knowledge of earlier construction techniques and materials are employed, historic building stock can be incorporated into modern design to enhance the entire project and increase productivity.

Despite those benefits, the CCPA panel discussion revealed a malaise in the city administration when it comes to valuing this type of preservation. Each city commission involved in the process has too narrow a perspective. What is needed is a holistic approach that considers broader problems. Coupled with economic incentives, building codes that are geared for the different needs of pre-1940 structures would benefit both the public and entrepreneurs.

The crux of the dilemma is the awful precedent of allowing unnecessary demolition of still-usable historic buildings. Foreign countries do not destroy their heritage. They know how to profit from it. Needless demolition is against the public interest and actually causes it economic hardship in eliminating affordable rents for goods and services. Everyone's quality of life is adversely affected when it comes to mass transit, environment, traffic and walkability. Small business is especially impacted when major thoroughfares are disrupted for long periods of time and are not coordinated by the city.



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own area is fine, but only if adequate basic education is provided on systems to satisfy building codes and current occupants' needs. Only t be taken so organizations purporting to represent the public are not who have an inherent conflict of interest.

In addition, our historical commission must be given greater city support. It is understaffed—ours has eight people on staff; Chicago's, 56—and overworked.

Arbitrarily tearing down contributing structures to erect skyscrapers disregards the practical option of simply incorporating the endangered properties into the project. Moreover, the current shortage of union construction workers and the granting of 10-year tax abatements negates the excuse of tearing down solely "to provide jobs and taxes."

When all's said and done, Philadelphia is missing the boat on retaining residents and tourists. We have gone from the second-largest English-speaking city in the world (during the 18th century) to fifth-largest. We must use every means—including a move toward protecting older buildings—to stop this needless attrition. Without gleaning useful knowledge from past construction, future generations will be doomed to hinder progress rather than make it.



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