

# Historic Preservation and Tourism

by ARTHUR  
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*Tourism does not go to a city that has lost its soul.*

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**H**aving devoted nearly 35 years to the industry of tourism, through incessant travel, visiting scores of nations and hundreds of cities, I can very easily utter what appears to me to be a commonplace: historic preservation attracts visitors to a community, and brings income to it, but not always without assistance from other areas.

Every study of travel motivations has shown that an interest in the achievements of the past is among the three major reasons why people travel. The other two are rest or recreation and the desire to view great natural sights.

Wholly apart from being lured by sea and sand, by lakes or ski slopes, people travel in almost the same numbers to view masterworks of art and architecture, or to visit the remains of previous societies or distinctive communities. They seek their roots in the broadest sense, and gain solace or inspiration or wisdom from a communion with the past. People travel to the continent of Europe almost solely to view achievements of the past, and only negligibly for sports or leisure or recreation, or even to deal with contemporary aspects of European life. They seek out the past.

Among cities with no particular recreational appeal, those that have substantially preserved their past continue to enjoy tourism. Those that haven't receive no tourism at all. It is as simple as that.

Preservation-minded Savannah, and Charleston are among our leading tourism destinations. Atlanta, which has obliterated its past, gets hardly any tourism at all, and instead relies on the notoriously fickle promoters of conventions and business meetings for its heavy-volume visitors to the city. When those convention organizers are someday lured to less expensive or more attractive cities — as must inevitably

occur — Atlanta will learn what happens, economically, to cities that destroy their past and offer nothing but sterile office towers in exchange.

I am not implying that cities tolerating the indiscriminate destruction of the past have no economic reason for doing so. But in exchange for immediate, short term benefits, they lose their tourism, and must face up to that consequence. Brussels, at the turn of this century, followed an utterly benighted policy of unplanned real estate activity, and did so again in the 1960s, becoming a touristic backwater. Milan adopted an ambiguous policy toward historic preservation and today receives little tourism. Most other great European cities did the opposite; they adopted draconian measures in support of historic preservation and protection and thereby cemented their status as the leading touristic destinations on earth.



Because of historic preservation, and only because of historic preservation, the travel industry is now the single largest industry in Europe, employing nearly 10 percent of the work force, and supplying the nations of Europe with a steady, stable source of income, impervious to the vagaries of other forms of commerce,

and unaffected by economic trends in other continents.

And benefits from tourism have been won without damage to other economic interests. Commercial progress has not ceased in London, Paris, Rome or Madrid, despite their reverence for the past. Construction of office buildings, continues, but away from historic districts.

Have Charleston or Savannah or New Orleans suffered because large districts have been set aside for historic preservation? Far from being damaged by the needs of tourism, the exact opposite has occurred: And if any of those cities are currently failing to thrive, it is for reasons wholly unrelated to historic preservation.

Little towns, too, have learned that preservation can create a thriving tourist industry and lend a wholesome economic underpinning to towns that might not otherwise survive. Madison, Indiana, halfway between Louisville and Cincinnati, was bypassed by 19th-century railroads and later by the interstates, and lapsed into economic torpor. Its wonderfully attractive downtown buildings of the 1870's and 1880s, fortunately survived. Now Madison enjoys flourishing tourist traffic, drawn from its big-city neighbors. Similar benefits could be enjoyed by other small and medium-size cities containing historic districts.

There is a problem, though in making too easy an association between historic preservation and increased tourism. The link occurs only when a community preserves entire districts, not just isolated structures. All over America we find cities that possess scattered historical structures, and yet they enjoy no tourism at all. Detroit possesses scattered landmarks: so do Houston

and Oklahoma City. But no one in his right mind would vacation there.

Tourism does not go to a city that has lost its soul. And that condi-



House on East Battery St.,  
Charleston, S.C.

tion—the absence of a soul or a theme—has been brought about by the decline and destruction of central, inner cities all over the country.

Tourism results from historic preservation only when the city's central, historic core—the vital, dynamic focus of community life is restored and enlivened. We need preservationists who work to preserve the center of our cities, through comprehensive planning and unshakable opposition to further skyscraper construction in downtown areas.

No one can view our major cities today without alarm. Even in the most prosperous sunbelt cities, the replacement of human-scale, period structures by high-rise office towers has created scenes of death and desolation where once there was life. Those cities no longer provide even the most elemental functions of community life.

We need the preservation movement to face up to political issues that it has never sufficiently explored. Only in cooperation with

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government can whole districts be saved.

We need to challenge the view of business that the marketplace alone must determine the fate of American cities. If preservation is to be effective, if the warp of our civilization is to be maintained, if even the goals of increased tourism are to be achieved, then we as a nation must step back from extreme marketplace theories. We cannot let the advocates of unrealistic and so-called libertarian theories destroy, in effect, our American cities.



*Metal front house in Madison, Ind., one of the first towns in the Trust's Main Street program.*

It may be, as Arthur Schlessinger, Jr., has recently argued, that the United States periodically goes through repetitive cycles of political thinking in which private greed is worshipped for a time as the highest value, to be followed once again by periods of social concern and efforts for the common good. There are indications that we may at last be emerging from the era of private greed, and returning to the finer

traditions of American Life: To the use of our democratic processes to achieve progress in our community life.

Preservationists should work to bring about that shift in political thinking, and if this requires participation in partisan politics, even presidential politics, then that should be considered.

For there is so much to be done. The great National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 badly needs strengthening, and only a shift in political thinking can bring that about. We need to resume the making of grants under that act, as seed money for preservation projects across the nation. We need to bring about the adoption of landmarks ordinances by those hundreds of American cities that lack them and put teeth into those ordinances we do have. Such cities as Houston and Atlanta are so lacking in legal powers as to be unable to prevent the most egregious excesses in development: They have thereby been stripped of their finest heritage.

If such a change in political thinking takes place, the future of American cities can again be promising, both in the quality of the life they afford their citizens and in their ability to attract visitors.

And a final prescription for the preservation movement: Adopt a more confrontational approach to real estate developers; enlist young lawyers serving the public good. Subordinate your normal tendency to gentility; it will not work. The developers are motivated by that most powerful of urges—short-term financial gain—a drive far stronger in most instances than the principled motives of preservation advocates.

Developers should be met with injunctions and orders to show cause, with summonses and motion papers. Then they will negotiate. If the historic preservation movement can adopt the stance of the conservationists—of the Sierra Club and other fierce groups—it will enjoy success beyond anything yet encountered.