

Facing a Crucial Choice

Carl Abbott

Reprinted from the Denver Post—"Point of View"—of July 7, 1981, by kind permission from author Carl Abbott. A companion piece by F. Ross Holland, Jr. follows, with his comments concerning Abbott's article.

Historic preservation has had a remarkable decade. Ten years ago it was an attractive idea sustained by a small federal program. In 1981 it is a movement with a growing cadre of full-time professionals and broad support in state and local legislation. Its constituency has widened far beyond the popular image of ancestor-worshippers to include real estate promoters, neighborhood activists and consulting firms.

Historic preservation also faces a crucial choice about its future.

For the past year, the theme in preservation meetings around the country has been the pull-back of federal commitment. Congress was reluctant to renew basic federal preservation legislation, and President Carter cut the federal grant funds channeled through state historic preservation offices.

President Reagan has made the trend into a painful and probably permanent reality. He has frozen further federal grants for activities of state historic preservation offices during the current fiscal year. His proposed budget for 1982 contains no financial support for state-level preservation and no money for individual pass-through grants.

Curtailment of federal support can be an opportunity as well as a problem.

As in other fields, preservationists have allowed federal

funding to define their own priorities. To its short-term benefit and its long-term detriment, historic preservation has emphasized buildings rather than communities. Preservationists have organized architectural surveys to identify worthy old buildings. They have used federal grants for acquisition and restoration. They have rehabilitated and reused outmoded commercial structures that are eligible for tax write-offs.

The time has come for preservation to grow beyond its focus on buildings and to assume a more central function in our cities. Historic preservation is potentially an integral part of community conservation and housing strategies for the 1980s.

We don't need restoration of more monuments or creation of more local landmark commissions. We do need to maintain and expand the knowledge of the vernacular architecture, industrial design and everyday environments of our past that has been developed by state and federal preservation agencies. A federal funding level adequate for this is a must.

In turn, this knowledge must be focused on the rehabilitation of streets and districts that play a role in the normal daily lives of their communities. We need neighborhood and community development programs that understand and make use of the opportunities offered by old buildings. We need to integrate consideration of historic values

into the land-use planning process through conscious rezoning, conservation districts and overlay zones.

One of the great advantages of such an emphasis will be its price tag, for land-use planning tools are essentially free to the preservation effort. Planning commissions and planning department staffs are already available to assist the work of preservation if they are given specific tasks. Every city of significant size also has a redevelopment agency eagerly looking for programs that promise both public support and a chance of success. In addition, preservation has a wide potential appeal to neighborhood organizations whose basic goal is usually the conservation of community values and environment.

There is already a long list of possible models that illustrate the integration of historic preservation into the larger urban planning process.

Under the supervision of a Land Conservation and Development Commission, Oregon requires every local jurisdiction to prepare a comprehensive plan in accordance with a set

of statewide goals.

In cities as dissimilar as Cincinnati and Jacksonville, preservation efforts have been a tool for neighborhood organizing and have been integrated into larger community conservation strategies in cooperation with city agencies.

The "Main Street" project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation has shown that preservation can be a method for revitalizing downtown commercial districts in small cities and towns, making the everyday environment of past generations useful for the present.

The preservation movement in recent years has been criticized for blurring the distinction between buildings that are old and buildings that are historic. In fact, it is a distinction that we can live without.

The social value of historic preservation is to assist in the conservation of our towns and cities, including both their stock of housing and their sense of community. If the movement is a true success by 1990, we won't be able to tell where historic preservation stops and planning or neighborhood renewal starts. □

COMMENTS ON CARL ABBOTT'S ARTICLE

F. Ross Holland, Jr.

I don't think any preservationists would quarrel with Mr. Abbott's proposal that historic preservation shift emphasis away from single historic structures and think broader—in terms of districts, streets, and complexes of buildings. Certainly, if historic preservation is to be used as a catalyst to revitalize cities, preservationists must think broader than indi-

vidual structures.

Actually, in his article Mr. Abbott articulates the current direction of historic preservation today. There are a large number of examples around the country that inspire people to think revitalization of a city through historic preservation.

Savannah, Georgia, for example, has long been acclaimed