Fort Stephen A. Douglas: Adaptive Re-use for a Community of Scholars

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Introduction

This paper explores the stewardship aspects of rehabilitating the built environment. The University of Utah's award-winning re-use project at Fort Stephen A. Douglas in Salt Lake City will be used to illustrate good practices in stewardship of the built environment. It also demonstrates how historic buildings can be revitalized to promote a positive perception of urban renewal in the built environment.

The fort is on the east bench in the foothills immediately adjacent to the University of Utah at the eastern periphery of Salt Lake City. Fort Stephen A. Douglas was originally established in 1862 as Camp Stephen A. Douglas to protect the Overland Mail Route from attack by hostile Indians. The original commander, Colonel Patrick E. Connor, also felt a duty to "keep an eye on the Mormons" whose loyalty to the Union at the time was considered suspect (Peterson 2002). Consolidation of military activities led to the designation of the camp as Fort Stephen A. Douglas in 1878. The fort continued to grow throughout the 19th century and reached its zenith during World War II. The post-war period saw a long slow decline in the fort and eventually it was reduced to a reserve center headquarters (Stock 1996). The historic core of the fort was designated as a national historic landmark in 1970. Most of its original 10,525 acres have already been ceded to the University of Utah for academic, administrative, and residential facilities built in the latter part of the 20th century. Significant other portions have been transferred to the National Guard, Veterans Administration, and the U.S. Forest Service. Approximately 58 acres remain in use by the military (University of Utah Department of Facilities Planning 2000). With the designation of Salt Lake City as host of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games, the university had an opportunity to host the Olympic Athletes' Village while resolving a shortfall in its student residential accommodations. Thus began the stewardship process described herein.

Defining Stewardship of the Built Environment

The short-term gains of expanding the built environment have long been viewed as financially attractive despite the resultant and unfortunate long-term degradation of the natural environment that has been taken for granted. The resultant landscape of both environments reveals that the overwhelming majority favors an extraction and depletion philosophy. Although this degradation has been mostly ignored in the last five centuries, the past century or so has seen a growing number of individuals and groups who have been outspoken in defending the natural environment. What affects the built environment affects the natural environment. Conversely, what affects the natural environment affects the sustainability of the built environment. By understanding the closed system of forces that affect both landscapes it is possible to adopt a stewardship approach wherein the effects of change are taken in the context of the whole rather than individually. As this concept has become widely recognized, stewardship of the built environment has increasingly become a goal of many.

An increasing amount of the built environment lays underused throughout the country. Stewardship explores how changes in the natural and built environments interact with one another. Therefore, by extension, the intrinsic philosophy of the stewardship approach to growth is to reverse the current

outward flow of development back towards the central cities and to reconsolidate existing built environments that have declined due social and political trends.

Stewardship Transforms Urban Renewal into Urban Revitalization

"Urban renewal" evokes many images. For those who experienced it in the early second half of the 20th century, it meant razing older buildings and replacing them. However, when conservation and stewardship of the environment are added, "urban renewal" is transformed into "urban revitalization." Instead of losing the historical continuity and community that older neighborhoods and built landscapes can provide, the more appropriate concept of urban revitalization adapts existing buildings to accept the modern amenities and building code interventions necessary for their continued operation and use in the 21st century. Urban revitalization is the culmination of responses to how American politics have addressed the built environment. Prior to the 1949 creation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, preservation was largely seen as the work undertaken by a few "wealthy" or "devoted" individuals to save only the finest examples of historic buildings. However, prosperity after World War II led to a burgeoning suburban housing market surrounding many urban centers and thus started an exodus to the suburbs that subsequently led to the deterioration of many inner-city neighborhoods and the creation of urban renewal programs across the country. Those unable to leave had little political wherewithal and the resultant renewal programs designed to remove "urban blight" across America left their mark on the built landscape. These programs were also fueled by the National Highway Transportation Act of 1956 that at the initial stages of the Cold War responded to the perceived need for emergency evacuation routes during a nuclear attack. While those attacks have not materialized, the "evacuation" did occur, albeit at a multi-decade pace. Fostered by the newly opened access to hitherto remote environments, suburban sprawl evolved and formed an even greater demand for movement of vehicles to and from the suburbs. The optimism of the era led to the "Great Society" programs of the 1960s, including the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 that made the federal government responsible for mitigating the loss of historically significant properties through the section 106 review process.

The economic upheavals of the 1970s, including a recession and two energy crises, temporarily tempered expansion into the suburbs as soaring fuel costs provided a wake-up call for a re-evaluation of transportation systems and the economics of expanded suburban markets. While not a complete reversal, by the 1980s socioeconomic awareness fomented a new concept of "urban revitalization" in lieu of the earlier urban renewal. This period started the initial developments in both the inner city and suburban markets of what has become known as "New Urbanism." While the concepts forming these philosophical approaches borrow directly from buildings of earlier eras, their manifestation has largely been in the suburbs where land prices and a perceived high level of consumer demand provide more favorable market conditions. While expansion into the suburbs resumed in this period, preservation tax credits demonstrated that revitalization could be done at a large scale. Widespread investment propelled a previously small market segment into prominence, and this period saw the re-invigoration and expansion of the need for skills and products that became commonplace in the historic preservation and conservation sector. Unfortunately, the Tax Act of 1986 cut investment interest in many of these programs short.

Thus, the echoes of political climate of the 1950s reverberated throughout the societal climate of the 1960s and were tempered by the economic crises of the 1970s. These then were fueled by the proven merits for revitalization in the 1980s and 1990s that still hold resonance. The combination of the market development from the 1980s and the growing recognition of the value of the older or historic built environment has enabled large property owners to enhance livability and hence the revitalization of communities.

An Opportunity for Large-Scale Stewardship of the Built Environment

In recent decades, numerous buildings have been left vacant, underused, or simply abandoned. The cause can largely be accounted for within the economic framework of the sociopolitical system. Recently many domestic industries have been down-sized due to offshore competition, leaving numerous buildings—and, by extension, the residential and commercial districts supporting them—vulnerable to accelerated decline. However this tends to occur in a more discrete and segmented fashion over an extended time frame. Up until the recent war on terrorism, one recurring opportunity in the post-Cold War era has been the consolidation of military operations that has provided a multitude of simultaneous adaptive re-use opportunities for many older and historic buildings at a single location and at one time. The Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRACC) was formed so that decommissioned military facilities could be transferred to the public sector and re-used. Two notable examples are the Presidio in San Francisco, California, which has become a major incubator for small business and non-profit institutions, and Fort Ord near Monterey, California, which has been converted into the Monterey Bay Community College. Both underwent significant planning periods to enable potential users to fully comprehend the demands that such a conversion requires.

In Salt Lake City, a similar transformation has occurred at Fort Stephen A. Douglas. The University of Utah has envisioned re-using the fort buildings for its Fort Douglas Heritage Commons program in which existing residential and administrative aspects of the fort would be converted to student housing and small classroom spaces. The project encompasses more than 40 buildings and is expected to cost $44 million (Wolf 1998:16–22). Prior work had included converting several small housing units on "Officer's Circle" into housing for students in a scholarship program. However, the university had a larger goal to use the entire fort as a residential/scholastic environment that moves students and the academic environment closer together. In preparation for the 2002 Winter Olympic games, Fort Douglas was selected as the site for the athletic village housing. The university used this opportunity to expand its deficient housing while meeting the need for accommodations for 2,500 athletes.

As a national historic landmark, Fort Douglas is protected by the strictest preservation regulations. This factor led the university to undertake a planning study to ensure that infill buildings would not adversely affect the composition and form of the fort and its environment. Overall, and in the larger context, this housing master plan process was conducted as part of developing and refining a long-range development plan (LRDP) for the entire university. In this light, a planning consultant was hired and spent two years convening numerous meetings to coordinate the needs of the university with the demands of the Salt Lake Olympic Committee (SLOC) and the requirements of the Secretary of Interior's Standards as overseen by the Utah state historic preservation officer. Anne Racer, the university's director of facilities planning, specifically describes the philosophy of collaborative participation as "unique" and further states that "we approached the project with the idea that people who are actively involved in developing a plan are more likely to accept it, adopt it, and use it" (Racer 2002:4). Similarly, the university had to reach a decision regarding the continued use of its existing residential facilities, which had become seriously outdated (University of Utah Alumni Association 2001). The process was composed of these phases:

1. *Programming and need assessment.* The planning consultant interviewed and coordinated the information flow between all concerned parties. Preliminary visual studies were made to educate these parties as to the potential impacts of their needs, and housing and operational support requirements were identified.
2. *Identification and physical exploration of*

existing facilities. A local architectural firm was hired to investigate the physical condition of the buildings affected by the proposed project. The historic aspects of the buildings (in part and as a whole) were identified to establish a baseline for the historic rehabilitation work. A cost estimate for rehabilitation was prepared for each building, infrastructure modification and extension costs were calculated, and an overall cost estimate was prepared.

3. *Schematic design development.* Significant buildings and those spaces where infill buildings could be built were identified. Several schematic designs were developed using a materials palette based on existing elements at the fort. Resource allocations were coordinated with a budget developed concurrently with this process.
4. *Schematic design review/modification.* The alternatives were reviewed by the interested parties and a final design was selected based on modifications to get the project within the $120 million budgetary constraints established by the state legislature.
5. *Construction document development.* The project plans were developed into construction documents.
6. *Bid submission and contractor selections.* The project was sent out to bids and the contractors were selected.
7. *Construction.* The construction period took approximately two years.
8. *Occupation.* The SLOC required that the buildings be in operation for at least twelve months prior to the 2002 games so that operational problems could be detected and remedied. As part of a commissioning process, this phase enabled plant operations to engage in the use and maintenance of the buildings prior to the Olympics.

During this process, several notable activities on site occurred. First, buildings not considered historically contributing were removed to allow new buildings to be built without destroying the view corridors defined by the protective covenants. Second, one contributing structure was physically moved to allow for the construction of a commons building. The adverse effect of the move was mitigated by the structure's careful relocation within the immediate vicinity. Third, proposed materials were reviewed to complement the existing material palette of the fort. Fourth, significant buildings not used as dormitory spaces were restored for ancillary uses. These included the chapel, theater, officer's club, and base commandant's quarters. Finally, other buildings not re-used for the Olympics were mothballed and await programming for later re-use.

As a result, the project was recognized in 1999 as an official Save America's Treasures project. Subsequent honors and awards continued to arrive. In 2001 this designation was followed by an honor award from the Society of College and University Planners Association and the American Institute of Architects, and culminated with a preservation award in October 2001 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP). In presenting the award, Richard Moe, president of the NTHP, stated that the student housing project was "one of the most significant restoration projects in America" (Racer 2002:9–10). Most recently, the restorations of the post chapel, post theater, commander's house, and the officer's club were each individually recognized in 2002 with preservation awards by the Utah Heritage Foundation, the statewide preservation advocacy organization.

Conclusion

The positive effects and outcomes from this process have been multifaceted. The athletes of the Olympics were housed in first-class facilities, and the university now has a revitalized residential community upon which to build its "Community of Scholars" programs. This project demonstrates that careful stewardship can result in the large-scale re-use of an underused set of buildings rather than their wholesale demolition. At the broad scale of the Fort Stephen A. Douglas revitalization, stewardship of the built environment is working—a prime example of urban revitalization. The ability of institutions and individuals to complete this project is a testament to the

ready opportunity to do so. Although complexities vary, the outcome is still the same: the re-use of the built environment that extends the sustainability and, perhaps most importantly, the vitality of the overall system of the total environment itself.

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