PRESERVATION PLANNING IN AMERICAN CITIES

By Randall F. Mason

Many American cities have developed a thriving historic preservation infrastructure that includes historic preservation policies, a variety of organizations and agencies working to advance preservation, and any number of successful restoration projects and historic districts. And in many cities historic preservation is recognized as a key ingredient of a successful city plan. Too often, however, historic preservation planning is pursued as a separate activity, not linked to core planning and development functions, and relegated as an adjunct to urban planning policies dominated by economic development concerns. Distinct, freestanding preservation plans are rare.

In 2007 faculty and students from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate Program in Historic Preservation surveyed patterns and trends in preservation planning at the citywide scale in U.S. cities. Surveyors collected data through online searches, reviews of current literature, and interviews with a variety of city staff and consultants, to identify cities undertaking citywide preservation planning efforts. This study was commissioned by the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia (with financial assistance from the National Trust) as part of the initial stages of launching a citywide preservation plan for Philadelphia.

They began by looking at the 100 largest U.S. cities. (A few Canadian cities were included, despite the different governmental structure and planning traditions in Canada.) Among the cities sampled, Charleston, S.C.; Los Angeles; San Francisco; Fort Worth; Phoenix; Kansas City, Mo.; Seattle; and Salt Lake City stood out. But the surveyors found that in nearly every large city, basic historic preservation functions are in place: a local preservation ordinance, district and landmark listings, an appointed commission with some staff, some survey of historic resources, some integration of preservation into master plans. In a few cities, strategic plans with a strong base of knowledge and data have yielded much stronger results than a mere collection of individual preservation activities would bring.

THE IDEAL

The ideal citywide preservation plan should include an up-to-date physical survey backed up by contextual historical research to provide a knowledge base about resources to preserve. It should also include a range of preservation planning and policy options to support such activities as historic designation, design guidelines, and financial incentives for rehabilitation. Further, a preservation plan should relate to the overarching planning, zoning, economic development, and other built-environment functions of the city government.

Surveyors found that there are several obstacles to achieving all these goals. It is difficult to marshal enough resources to build a strong base of information about the city's historic resources as well as support a strategic planning process among the many partners contributing to a city's preservation infrastructure. People, time, money, and influence

need to be dedicated to the purpose. Preservation planning is not simply about documenting historic resources, nor is historic designation and protection an end in itself, yet surveys and historical research provide an essential base for any policies or decisions. Surveys are time- and resource-intensive, and seldom keep up with the demand for information. At the same time, changing historical canons, public awareness levels, and historic preservation methods highlight the need to make surveying and historical research an ongoing process—not a one-time product.

Another challenge for preservation planning at the citywide scale is making connections between preservation and economic development, zoning, and community development. Historic preservation is often viewed as being marginal and separated from the planning mainstream. The goal of citywide planning should be to draw in new partners. Preservation planning driven by surveys alone or focused on isolated monuments or districts—without being connected to overall decision-making about a city's economic development, public investment, and urban form—is ineffective and won't bring the desired results. Instead preservation planning should be connected to the mainstreams of development and planning policy.

A preservation plan is not a document merely arguing that preservation is a good idea and listing the sites to be preserved. It should articulate a vision for the role of historic preservation in a city's future and elaborate on strategies for achieving this vision. Preservation plans may take on the additional challenges of confronting trade-offs between economic development, community desires, environmental sensitivities, and other public benefits. Preservation plans should help reconcile conflicting processes and integrate the work of preservation with the other planning measures necessary for urban growth and change. Such plans may simply advocate for preservation or they may go beyond advocacy to specify modes and means of realistic implementation. They should also abide by the basic city-planning tenets of basing decisions on research and analysis of options, and recognizing that public engagement results in better decisions.

WHAT KINDS OF PLANS ARE BEING DONE?

Surveyors found that, in general, cities have one of the following types of preservation plans in place: a free-standing plan, a chapter in a larger comprehensive plan, an effort organized around neighborhood- or area-planning, or a survey-driven plan. Some cities refer collectively to a variety of preservation efforts—surveys, histories, regulatory efforts, commissions, incentives—as "historic preservation plans." Even more narrowly, some cities publish a catalog of surveyed buildings and call this a plan. This article does not focus on such planning efforts, instead dwelling on more deliberate, forward-looking efforts.

Free-standing Plans

Only a few of the larger cities surveyed have undertaken freestanding citywide preservation plans. Surveyors identified less than a dozen examples, including Charleston S.C.; Los Angeles; Fort Worth; and Salt Lake City. A few smaller cities have commissioned freestanding preservation plans, including Waterloo, Iowa; Franklin, Tenn.; and Abingdon, Va. A number of small cities in California and Texas have also formulated preservation plans, thanks to state-level funding programs for these activities. The plans in these cities tend to be straight-

Heritage areas provide another model of citywide preservation planning. Heritage areas do not rely on public ownership or regulation; rather, they are entrepreneurial, partnership-based strategies for integrating development and preservation efforts (often across political jurisdictions) to broaden public access to historic and natural resources. The Baltimore City Heritage Area, created in 2001 by the Mayor's Office, complements the traditional preservation activities carried out by the Commission for Historical & Architectural Preservation, the City's lead preservation agency. Photo by Byrd Wood.

forward summaries of local history, historic preservation tools, and existing policies.

Stand-alone plans demonstrate a high level of commitment to preservation as part of a city's approach to planning and development. Strongly motivated, politically influential preservation constituencies are usually the driving forces behind such plans. These plans increasingly are designed to be strategic—that is, setting out a number of goals beyond survey and regulation, aimed at better integrating preservation into broader planning frameworks and development activities. The cities undertaking these plans generally have widely recognized historic resources and a long tradition of preservation.

Comprehensive Plan "Chapters"

The majority of cities undertaking preservation planning pursue it as part of a larger comprehensive plan. Preservation planning takes the form of a "chapter" of the comprehensive plan. In some cases this is because political or planning authorities recognize that addressing historic resources is a significant aspect of planning and built environment issues; in other cases, it is because of state-level legal and policy requirements.

This approach to preservation planning, however, has pros and cons. On the pro side, it is better to have historic preservation included in comprehensive planning than excluded. When historic preservation plans are simply folded into comprehensive planning efforts, it is easy to under-value and undermine the contributions preservation makes to urban development. Even though a range of tools are available and a modest level of surveying and designation have been carried out, preservation sometimes remains on the sideline of debates over—and efforts to actively shape—the character of the city. Preservation runs the danger of warranting only pro forma mention, regarded as an optional "amenity," getting reduced to regulation, or traded off against other aspects of the plan.

Neighborhood-driven or Area-planning Approaches

Surveyors found that some cities approach

preservation planning in a piecemeal manner—neighborhood by neighborhood. In many instances, the choice of which neighborhoods get preservation planning attention is fairly ad hoc—chosen opportunistically rather than according to strict criteria. Surveying historic properties and writing context statements are regarded, in these cases, as part of a strategy to help frame community goals and vision. In cities pursuing this model—examples include Seattle, San Francisco, Phoenix, and Indianapolis—somewhat decentralized, neighborhood-level preservation plans are used to gradually extend the reach of preservation across the city. These plans may lack an explicit strategic, citywide vision, but such efforts seem well suited to solving more immediate threats to historic communities. This represents a pragmatic approach to preservation planning, particularly in a time when resources to mount preservation planning efforts are scarce.

Survey-driven Plans

Traditional preservation plans, driven by survey not strategy, are used less frequently these days—partly because surveys can be expensive and time-consuming to do and partly because preservation advocates are more attuned to making an impact on the entire city (not just those precincts deemed "historic" by consensus), which requires a strategic approach (revolving around a future-oriented vision of the city and the role historic buildings/places are desired to play in that future). The use of digital tools to capture and manage survey data (GIS, digital photography, database software) is transforming the way surveying is done, although it remains a big undertaking. However, even in the most strategy-oriented plans, survey data still serves as a critical foundation for planning decisions. Some cities focus their efforts on expanding surveys—or revising criteria for surveying and listing—because it is simply easier politically, pragmatically, and legally to build on well-established tools, policies, and institutions.

Developing historic context statements about the thematically important aspects of a place's narrative is an increasingly frequent practice. Developing a context statement should be a critical, early part of the survey process. Many surveys, it is acknowledged, are not representative (neglecting certain ethnic groups, historic periods, geographic areas of a city) and therefore in need of revision and updating. Carefully done context statements help reveal past biases and gaps. This approach aligns very clearly with the push for more strategic preservation plans: Context statements give preservation leaders and staff a solid base on which to make decisions on the allocation of scarce resources.

COMMON ELEMENTS OF CITY-WIDE PRESERVATION PLANS

Results of this survey showed that these different approaches to citywide planning share several common elements.

In most cases a basic historic preservation planning infrastructure was in place, including an ordinance and a few preservation organizations (public and nonprofit). Furthermore, some level of survey, historical context information, listing, and mechanisms for regulating listed properties existed.

Public involvement in preservation planning tended to take the form of public meetings and consultative committees drawn from civic leadership, political, and business circles. The urgent discussion about building a public constituency for historic preservation was too rarely heard or creatively approached.

Some preservation planning efforts were aimed at revising existing legislation, policies, or regulations. Plans also commonly endeavored to expand the kinds of resources considered for listing and protection—recent past resources and places associated with ethnic histories, for example.

More and more, planning efforts revolved around the economic benefits of historic preservation as part of the rationale for doing preservation planning. Sometimes plans stressed the need to protect assets important for heritage tourism, other plans cited evidence supporting the argument that historic preservation regulation increases property values. Planning efforts focused on making economic arguments for preservation often urged the use of financial incentives to encourage private investment in preservation projects.

KEY VARIABLES

Surveyors identified seven key variables among the plans they reviewed. These variables are not promoted here as essential ingredients for successful preservation plans, but rather as issues addressed in some way by most efforts.

Driving Issue

Preservation plans are usually motivated by a driving issue—sometimes reactive, sometimes proactive. This issue is sometimes the loss of an important resource (a common occurrence in the preservation history of many cities); more often, preservation plans are longer-term, thoughtfully designed responses to the lack of strategic vision for preservation in the broader scheme of a city's growth. Thus, the driving issue for many citywide preservation plans is a cumulative frustration with failure to include or support preservation in everyday planning decisions. In other cases, the opportunity presented by a pro-preservation political regime, a mandated periodic updating of the comprehensive planning, or a state program to enable municipal-scale preservation planning stimulates a planning effort.

The Driving Organization

While multi-sector partnerships are the norm in most planning and preservation efforts these days, one organization often takes the lead in citywide preservation plans. In most cases, this is an agency of the municipal government. In addition, other, somewhat independent centers of leadership in the preservation and civic communities play some role in most of the efforts (whether it is the leading nonprofit preservation group, a local foundation, downtown business/owners' group, or university). As with most preservation or planning efforts nowadays, partnership is the rule. Another common source of leadership is the nonprofit preservation community; or, more rarely, (regional) foundations.

Organizational Structure of the City's Preservation Community

In most cities, some government staff is devoted strictly to preservation. The historic preservation agency or dedicated staff is most often organized as a subgroup within the planning department, though there are many variations on this theme as well as a number of exceptions (in which case the preservation agency reports directly to the executive—the mayor or city manager).

Integration of Preservation with Other Planning/Development Processes

Whatever the institutional arrangements of a city's preservation agencies, a key variable—perhaps *the* key variable—affecting the

efficacy of preservation planning is how well it is integrated with broader urban planning, economic development, and political priorities and procedures. To the extent that historic preservation is isolated from these broader processes, it loses its potential to influence the city at large (though it may still be quite successful on certain sites or areas of the city). Sometimes the difficulties of integration are expressed in conflicts or contradictions between zoning and preservation regulations, lack of administrative collaboration between departments with related responsibilities (building inspection, zoning, economic development, and historic preservation, for instance), or competition over the emphasis of project plans or area/neighborhood plans (in which preservation often is pitted, rightly or wrongly, against development).

Survey vs. Strategy

The balance between emphasizing *survey* (gathering and organizing information) versus emphasizing *strategy* (influencing and shaping future decisions through analysis or through forming partnerships) is a key distinguishing factor between different types of plans.

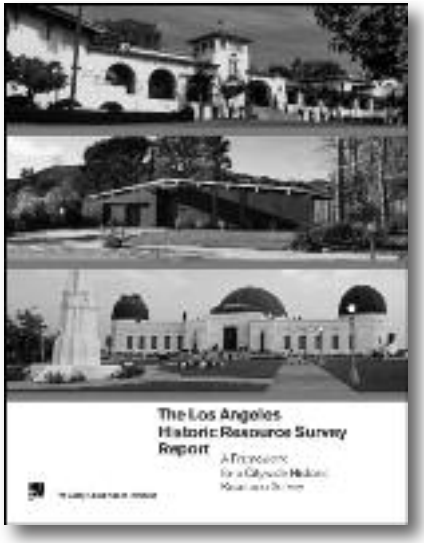
Good surveys are a foundation for good strategies and decision-making, but not a substitute for them. Conducting a survey is expensive and time-consuming, and the survey is (or should be) in a state of constant revision and addition. Collecting data is difficult in itself; making it useful and accessible requires great effort. Even the most exhaustive surveys rarely yield any sensible result to the public (Chicago's extensive survey, accessible online, is an exception); yet a reliable and reasonably comprehensive survey is an essential basis for policy and development decisions.

The Fort Worth Citywide Historic Preservation Plan, completed in 2003, is a notable example of a free-standing preservation plan. The plan analyzes existing surveys, historical research/context studies, and economic studies, and bases its recommendations on community input and visioning exercises as well as analysis of existing policies, tools, and data.

As a complement to the survey, strategy means shaping policy decisions, designing the processes of implementing and supporting preservation (politically, administratively, financially), and thinking about systemic change as well as project-, site-, or resource-specific outcomes. Both survey and strategy are essential to an effective preservation plan, though neither should be allowed to dominate the planning.

Funding Sources

Obtaining funds to do the planning itself is a necessary concern, of course. Money can come from many different sources. Funds from operating budgets rarely suffice to maintain a proactive survey at any level as well as conduct routine administration of preservation ordinance responsibilities.



Supported by the Getty Foundation, the City of Los Angeles has undertaken a massive survey effort—SurveyLA—to build understanding of the resources needing protection and to manage that information. Survey results are being used by the City to better integrate preservation into city planning and development decisions, and by the preservation community to advance advocacy goals. The survey is available online at getty.edu/conservation/publications/pdf_publications/lahrs_report.pdf.

Therefore bond issues, foundation grants, or other special sources of funding are used for preservation planning.

The second funding issue is securing financial support to carry out provisions of the plan and staff/monitor/implement the measures called for in it (i.e., additional surveying, research, design review). Better integration of preservation activities with mainstream planning and development processes (as opposed to sowing conflict between preservation and development) should increase the availability of implementation funds.

Constraints

Ambitious efforts like citywide preservation plans require risk-taking on the part of supporters and advocates. Framed another way, preservation planning faces a number of pragmatic obstacles and constraints alongside the strategic and intellectual challenges. Lack of political support both within the planning apparatus and more generally in the civic sector is a common obstacle. Closely related, weak public support for preservation—or rather, over-reliance on a small, highly committed cadre of preservation supporters—is a limiting factor in cities undertaking preservation plans.

CONCLUSION

Citywide preservation planning seems to be undergoing a mild boom. As historic preservation gains greater, gradual acceptance as a tool for urban development as well as a memorial and artistic activity, the perceived need for preservation planning increases. In varied forms, preservation planning is gaining acceptance as an essential function of city governance.

There is no one best model of preservation planning; it should respond to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats specific to each city. The best preservation plans expand on traditional preservation planning tools (survey, regulation, incentives) and work to transform the city's use of preservation to be more forward-looking, more publicly engaged, and integrated with other urban planning and development processes. The framework described here (key concepts and plan types) will ideally support critical thinking about doing more citywide preservation planning and doing it better.

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