

To Preserve or Demolish a Historic Structure – That is the Question

by Randy Jaye & David Churchman

Many can remember at least one historic structure that has been preserved or demolished in their home town or in a town they have lived or now live in. Most of us are happy to see a familiar historic structure preserved, repurposed or restored, and saddened when we see one demolished.

Perhaps the most historic structure in the United States to have been preserved is Independence Hall in Philadelphia. This iconic building is where both the United States Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were debated and adopted. It is now the nucleus of the Independence National Historical Park and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site as well. Many would likely be distraught at the thought of this building ever being demolished.

However, some historic structures do suffer demolition. Perhaps the most iconic historic structure to be demolished in the United States was the original Penn Station in New York City. It was considered a masterpiece of the Beaux-Arts architectural style, but nevertheless met the wrecking ball in 1963. Its demolition caused international outrage and sparked the modern historic preservation movement in the United States, which led to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

In fact, private individuals, non-governmental organizations, many towns, cities, counties, and all states and the federal government own historic structures, perhaps not as famous as those two but that sooner or later will require a decision as to whether they will be preserved or demolished. Many factors are, or should be, considered in determining whether or not a historic property should and will be preserved or demolished.

Preserved Historic Structures Can Attract Locals and Visitors

The materials and workmanship of historic structures have an alluring effect on many people that most newer structures do not. Many downtown districts around the country are reviving historic structures and bringing shopping, business and entertainment back to these areas. Many locals and visitors are attracted to these historic structures as they convey personality missing in many modern structures.

Historic Structures Maintain a Community's History

The preservation of historic structures reminds people of an area's past achievements and strengthens the sense of community. They represent the way our ancestors lived and provide cultural identity and heritage to the community.

Preserved Historic Structures Can Boost Property Values

The preservation of historic structures can assure that a neighborhood's character stays intact. Property owners and investors are more likely to invest in other structures in neighborhoods where active historic preservation is occurring. This collective effect often leads to higher property values for structures throughout the neighborhood.

Older Structures Can Contain Higher-Quality and Even Scarce Materials

Structures built before the mid-1940s tend to be more solidly constructed, and contain materials such as heart pine, mahogany and other woods that were harvested from old growth forests. In some cases, certain woods are now extinct or so scarce that they are no longer used as building materials. Additionally, characteristics such as intricately carved moldings, elaborate plasterwork, exquisite staircases and master craftsmanship add value to structures which can boost long-term investment possibilities.

Historic Structures Can Benefit Local Businesses

Historic buildings connect people to their history and promote a sense of belonging. Their charm can benefit local businesses. Smaller businesses might not have enough funds to purchase or build a new building, so repurposing an existing historic structure can add appeal and local character to the business model.

On the other hand, there sometimes are valid reasons for demolishing historic structures.

Beneficial Repurposing of the Land

Demolishing a building or structure of historic value can be a good thing if the land cleared is going to be used beneficially. If an owner would like to demolish an historic property and intends building a new structure on the same lot for the improvement of the community, local governments are likely to grant approval.

Beyond Economical Repair

Some historic buildings are in such a dilapidated condition that the cost of repair and renovation are simply not feasible. When buildings are beyond economic repair the owners are still obligated to pay taxes, insurance and mortgages, face building code violation fines and have liens placed against their

property. Also, the cost to renovate some old structures to current building codes far exceeds their market value. Many times these financial realities lead to the demolition of an historic structure.

Danger

If a historic building or structure poses a hazard such as fire, contamination from asbestos or the like, or collapse, it may be best to tear it down. No one wants to live in a neighborhood that has dangerous or decrepit looking properties rotting away and causing a public eyesore. Demolishing such a property, historic or otherwise, can actually benefit a community and add value to the properties that surround it.

Appalling History

With rare exceptions such as Pearl Harbor, we build monuments to heroes not villains, to victories not defeats, to great accomplishments not reprehensible ones. Structures associated with an uncharacteristic or shameful event often are demolished rather than left standing to remind people of a disreputable past.

Conclusion

The many reasons that affect the decision to preserve or demolish a historic structure can be far reaching and complicated. The final decision usually falls upon the owners, or in the case of governments, their elected officials, and whether they can be convinced that their historic structure is worth preserving. If the historic structure has the potential to be economically beneficial it usually stands a chance of surviving, but if it proves to be a liability with no feasible economic solution or benefit to the community it will most likely get demolished.

Historic structures can give the young a sense of what life once was like, and thus an appreciation of how much better it is now despite all the bad news. In older folks, they can promote meaningful connections to the larger community, giving a greater sense of meaning to life, increasing optimism, self-confidence, and creativity.

About the Authors

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