Historic Preservation and Buildings
A Brief History of Historic Preservation

The historic preservation movement began with the goal of maintaining a tangible past for present and future generations to learn and understand the country's history.\(^1\) Although not fully instituted in government until 1966, many citizen groups were formed before that time demonstrating the public concern for the nation's heritage. In 1853 Ann Pamela Cunningham formed the Mt. Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union to save George Washington's home. The society still maintains the house today.\(^2\) Historic preservation has grown since that time into a diverse group of individuals wanting to maintain and improve the existing environment for many different reasons.

Through the years preservationists have realized saving buildings and other historic places can have positive impacts on communities and the environment in general. In a letter to President Ronald Reagan in 1982, Alan S. Boyd, then Chairman of the National Trust for Historic Preservation wrote:

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\text{Preservation is not a luxury to be discarded in the hard economic times; it is part of the solution to the problem of unemployment, poor housing, blighted and depressed inner cities, declining small towns and energy conservation.}^{3}\]

The Main Street program, established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1980, is one example of how preservation has helped many towns across the country create a positive image of a declining urban environment. The program assists communities in revitalizing their downtowns. Initiated by community volunteers, the program works by doing such things as helping to organize the people needed to make the process successful and giving design advice.\(^4\)

The Main Street program is just one example of how the preservation movement has matured. Citizens coming together to save the hearts of their communities, just as Ann Pamela Cunningham and her cohorts did to save the home of George Washington, demonstrates the continued and well-established public desire to preserve our heritage.
Relevant Issues

The question of which buildings should be saved has been a long running debate among preservationists. The federal and local governments have typically established that any structure of architectural, cultural, or historical significance can be designated to a historic register. However, often it has been argued that every building is worth saving, but at the same time realized this may not be practical or even physically possible. J.W. MacNeill, former Secretary of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, recognized the threat to the urban environment in Canada in his book Environmental Management. This also applies to the United States.

Congestion and blight also threaten sites of historical and cultural value. The history of Canada is reflected in the older buildings and neighborhoods located in or near the downtown core of our cities. These old buildings and neighborhoods, in addition to their functional and social importance to the people who use and live in them, often comprise irreplaceable and outstanding symbols of our nation's history and heritage. Some may be of national significance, others provincial, others local. Some sites and buildings of historical and cultural value have been saved, but more have been lost. With higher education levels, rising incomes and greater leisure time, the importance of these areas could increase in future years enriching the lives of residents and nonresidents alike. Yet many sites are threatened by the encroachment of blight and well intentioned 'raze and rebuild' renewal programs designed to eradicate it.5

The 1982 Report to the President and Congress of the United States by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation stated all old buildings have "heritage," value in some way.6 More recently in a 1994 issue of Architectural Record the following statement was in an article about preservation and its growing popularity: "a vast stock of underutilized buildings that, distinguished or plain, is increasingly seen as having more potential than new development sites."7 There are many good buildings standing abandoned by their occupants just waiting to be useful.
Realizing the usefulness of existing buildings, we must understand how to use the buildings without destroying them physically or destroying their integrity. Historic preservationists have been doing this for many years. So, understanding the issues they hold important is an essential step to maintaining our environment.

Existing buildings should be respected for what they have contributed to their cities and for the many years they have survived. Irreversibly changing a building could be a mistake not realized until completed. We have seen this happen to many beautiful buildings throughout the country. When reading historic preservation literature, the preservation of the character of a place is often presented as the foremost goal of preservationists. The philosophy presented by Ann Falkner in her book *Without Our Past?: a handbook for the preservation of Canada's architectural heritage* well represents the philosophy of historic preservation. She first states this rule:

...do not diminish architectural detail or humiliate the original principle or character of the building; do not destroy its integrity; do not alter, modernize, or add discordant details to the facade of the structure."^{8}

This belief to preserve a building in its entirety with no changes is realized to be impractical in the "concept." She states:

The present-day reuse of heritage building must of necessity employ a great deal of imagination and a degree of new thinking about the use of space. Just as architects and designers are defining spatial dimensions and proportions in new buildings, so we must convert earlier space to contemporary requirements. Since a new structure is not being created for a specific purpose, it may be necessary either to create a use that fits the specific structure, or to reevaluate the interior space to accommodate a new use.^{9}

This also relates to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, in the realization of what will make preservation projects feasible and logical.

In a publication by the National Park Service, *Preservation Brief 17, "Architectural Character: Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Pre-
serving Their Character,” three steps are established for examining the character of a building. The information in these three steps together constitutes the visual character of a building:

- Overall Aspects
- Close Range Details
- Interior Features

These three aspects will be used in the case studies in Chapter 5. Below is a description of what each area of information includes.

**Overall Aspects**

The overall visual aspects of a building include the basic characteristics of the building, or what can be seen from a short distance away. This includes:

- shape,
- fenestration patterns,
- recesses or projections,
- setting, and
- roof features.

Changing any of these aspects of a building would make a dramatic difference in its overall appearance.

For example, in figure 1 the semicircular projections are important parts of the character; without them the building would appear much different. In figure 2, the pattern of the windows plays an important role in the character of the building.
Close Range Details

The second category of information includes:

- materials
- craft details.

Together these two aspects make up the details of the exterior. What materials were used to construct a building can tell as much about it as the overall design.

In an article published in The British Journal of Aesthetics titled "The Identity of a Work of Architecture," an argument comparing architectural design to a musical score is discussed. The comparison in the original article being that both can be interpreted differently depending on who is doing the interpreting. An argument is made in this article that a work of architecture derives its identity from its design and its materials together. A piece of music only lasts while the notes are sounding, and the notes are not in existence except during the performance. The materials of a building, however, were in existence before the construction of the building. If either the design or the materials are taken from the structure, it is no longer the same work. Therefore, after a historic building has been repaired to a certain point and so many materials have been replaced, it is no longer an old building with repairs. It becomes a new building with an old building incorporated into it.11

What a building is constructed of and by what means tells a lot about it. The
history of the building is embodied in the materials and craftsmanship. An old brick looks different than a new brick. While sometimes it may not be feasible to use the original material or methods for repairs or replacements, it should always be considered first before resorting to an alternative.

To remove existing materials which are important to the character of the building is an important decision. The decision must be made with the reasons why it should be changed. If this is not well thought through, mistakes in removing precious materials may not be able to be reversed.

**Interior Features**

The last aspect covered here is the interior. This can include:

- spaces/sequence of spaces,
- character defining features,
- surface finishes and materials, and
- exposed structure.

Together these issues of a building describe its character on the interior. Spaces of importance, such as entrance halls, may give a certain impression of the building, which if changed would create an entirely different feeling. Many different interior features can be important to the identity of the building, such as fireplaces, wood trim, stair cases, arched doorways, and so on. Also, the finishes on the walls, ceiling, and floors can be important to the buildings visual character.
Summary

These three building aspects just describe together constitute the visual identity of a building. Often these aspects, along with a few others, are what make a building interesting, a desirable place to be. Considering the visual character of a building is very important to maintaining it and the place it creates. In the case studies, the consideration of the character of the building will be examined using the three issues just described.
Government Regulations

In 1966 the National Historic Preservation Act was passed in order to establish a national preservation program. The program set up the following under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior:

- National Register of Historic Places
- program of matching grant-in-aid to states for preservation projects
- matching grant-in-aid program for the National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to advise the President and the Congress

This act was one of the most important pieces of legislation for the historic preservation movement. It established a solid program in the national government system. This basis of the program which developed from the 1966 act is explained in this passage from With Heritage So Rich published in 1983:

The pace of urbanization is accelerating and the threat to our environmental heritage is mounting; it will take more than the sounding of periodic alarms to stem the tide.

The United States is a nation and a people on the move. It is in an era of mobility and change. Every year 20 percent of the population moves from its place of residence. The result is a feeling of rootlessness combined with a longing for those landmarks of the past which give us a sense of stability and belonging.

If the preservation movement is to be successful, it must go beyond saving bricks and mortar. It must go beyond saving occasional historic house and opening museums. It must be more than a cult of antiquarians. It must do more than revere a few precious national shrines. It must attempt to give a sense of orientation to our society, using structures and objects of the past to establish values of time and place.

This means a reorientation of outlook and effort in several ways.

First, the preservation movement must recognize the importance of architecture, design and esthetics as well as historic and cultural values. Those who treasure a building for its pleasing appearance or local sentiment do not find it less important because it lacks "proper" historic credentials.

Second, the new preservation must look beyond the individual building and individual landmark and concern itself with the
historic and architecturally valued areas and districts which contain a special meaning for the community. A historic neighborhood, a fine old street of houses, a village green, a colorful marketplace, a courthouse square, an esthetic quality of the townscape—all must fall within the concern of the preservation movement. It makes little sense to fight for the preservation of a historic house set between two service stations, and at the same time to ignore an entire area of special charm or importance in the community which is being nibbled away by incompatible uses or slow decay.

Third, if the effort to preserve historic and architecturally significant areas as well as individual buildings is to succeed, intensive thought and study must be given to economic conditions and tax policies which will affect our efforts to preserve such areas as living parts of the community. In sum, if we wish to have a future with greater meaning, we must concern ourselves not only with the historic highlights, but we must be concerned with the total heritage of the nation and all that is worth preserving from our past as a living part of the present.¹²

A series of checks and balances has been maintained to help preserve the nation’s heritage. Along with this, state and municipal governments have also established regulations.

One project examined in Chapter 5 is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is on the local, state, and national registers of historic places, and applied for state and federal tax benefits; therefore, the Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission reviewed the project along with the representatives of the state and federal government. The Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission was established in 1981 and consists of nine unpaid citizens. This board recommends local historic places for designation to the register.¹³ A group such as this has better access to the local properties, so they have more control over what is happening to the historic properties in their area.

In order for a project to be eligible for tax credits, it must meet the following criteria:

(Federal 20% Rehabilitation Tax Credit plus Wisconsin 5% supplement)
- Property must be historic
- Minimum Investment
- Must comply with Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation
- Formal application is required
• Property must be a building
• Property must be income-producing
• All work on exterior or interior eligible for tax credits
• Cannot sell building or destroy its historical significance for five years
• May apply after work has begun to receive federal 20% credit; must apply before work begins to receive additional Wisconsin 5% credit

Wisconsin 25% Rehabilitation Tax Credit
• Property must be historic
• Minimum Investment
• Must comply with Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation
• Formal application is required
• Property must be an owner-occupied personal dwelling, or an outbuilding (such as a barn) that contributes to the historical significance of the property
• Property must be non-income producing
• Eligible work limited to exterior work, window rehabilitation, and electrical, mechanical, plumbing, and structural repairs. Architectural plans and state register nomination costs also eligible
• Cannot sell building or destroy its historical significance for five years
• Must apply in advance and receive approval before starting physical work

The Historic Preservation Act of 1966 fully established preservation in the government. Because of this, and the local commissions which oversee their communities, many buildings have been saved from demolition. Also, the federal, state, and local tax benefits have encouraged more people to become involved in preserving buildings. These regulations all played an important part in one of the case studies examined in Chapter 5.
Notes

3 United States.
4 Wisconsin Department of Development. "Wisconsin Main Street: A Traditional Business District Revitalization Program."
9 Falkner, p. 121.
13 Preservation Topics no. 1. Historic Preservation Commission, City of Milwaukee "The Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission"
14 rev. 5/16/94 Division of Historic Preservation. The state historical society of Wisconsin "Wisconsin Preservation Information: Wisconsin Historic Preservation Tax Credits"

Figures

1 Nelson, p. 5.
2 Nelson, p. 3.
3 Nelson, p. 7.
4 Nelson, p. 7.
5 Nelson, p. 9.
6 Nelson, p. 10.