

Why Old Places Matter

Smart Growth Network

Tom Mayes
June 9, 2015



Smart Growth Principles



Why Old Places Matter --

Why Do Old Places Matter? An Introduction

Posted on: November 13th, 2013 by Tom Mayes | [11 Comments](#)

The Eternal City—what better place to find answers to the question: Why do old places matter? Tom Mayes, a 2013 Rome Prize winner in Historic Preservation from the American Academy, is in Rome these days and is contributing a series of posts about his experiences and research. Join us for his periodic essays and add your thoughts to the discussion.

People like old places. They like to live in places like Ghent, in Norfolk, Va., and Logan Circle in Washington, D.C. They like to live in old houses—in white farmhouses in Vermont, brick mansions in Virginia, and in Arts and Crafts bungalows in Los Angeles. People like to visit old cities for vacation. They like Santa Fe, Provincetown, Mendocino, and Saugatuck. They like Rome, New York, Paris, and Kyoto. They like Brooklyn and Charleston and thousands of towns and cities and countrysides across America and throughout the world.



Sula School in Montana | Credit: Carroll Van West

They like ancient troglodytic hotels (Matera, Italy), and Greek Revival houses (Athens, Ga.). They like adobe houses in New Mexico, farmhouses in Ohio, and townhouses in Philadelphia.

Why? Why do people like old places? And why do old places matter to people? Do old places make people's lives better, and if so, how?

This series of essays will explore the reasons that old places are good for people. It begins with what I consider the main reason—that old places are important for people to define who they are through memory, continuity, and identity—that “sense of orientation” referred to in *With Heritage So Rich*.



Continuity



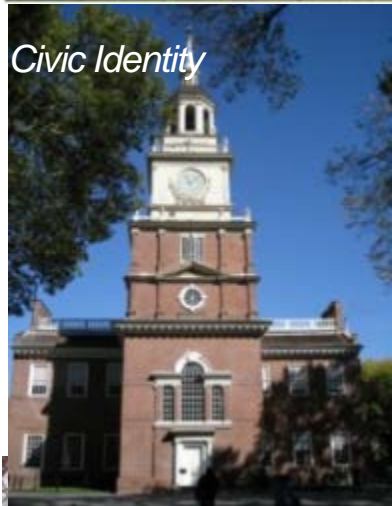
Memory



Collective Memory



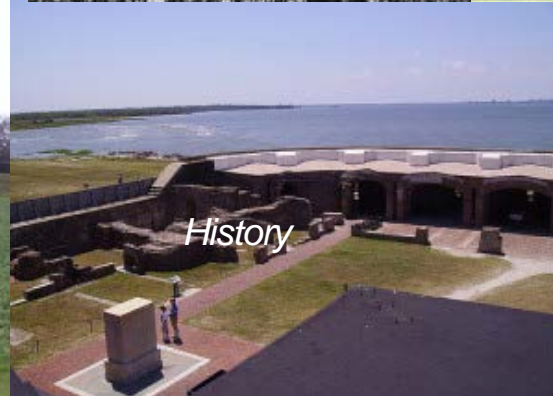
Individual Identity



Civic Identity



Architecture



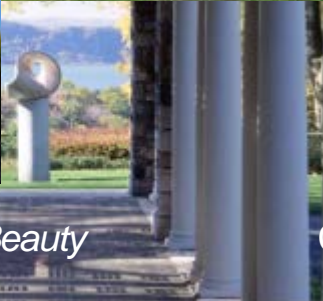
History



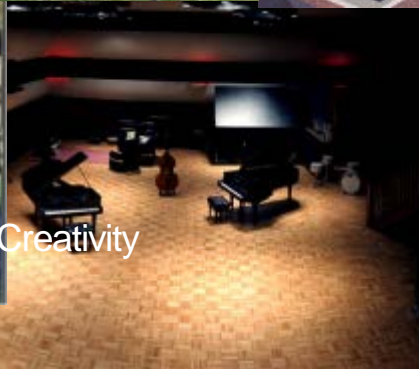
Learning



Sacredness



Beauty



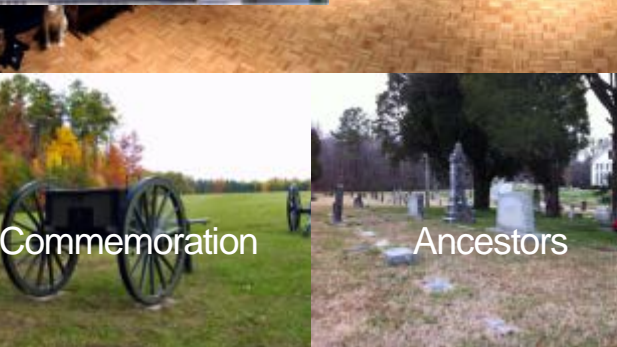
Creativity



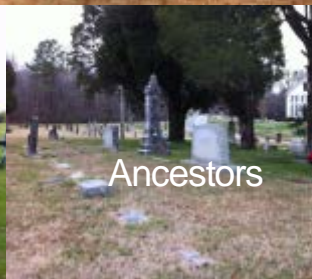
Sustainability



Economics



Commemoration



Ancestors

Continuity



Memory



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Learning



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Beauty



Sustainability



Realizing the Energy Efficiency Potential of Small Buildings

June 2013

existing old buildings and communities are green. But I also want to suggest that old green design initiatives be viewed as part of the ecology we hope to nurture.

There are quick answers of the present: the continued use of old buildings and communities is environmentally sound.

- **Avoided Impact.** Reusing old buildings avoids the environmental impacts of the extraction, processing and transportation of new materials and the construction processes. As a Preservation Green Lab report, *The Greener Building: Quantifying the Environmental Value of Building Reuse* states: "Building Reuse almost always yields lower environmental impacts than new construction when comparing buildings of similar size and footprint" and "...it takes up to the reason for a new building that is 30 percent more efficient than an average-performing existing building to overcome, through efficient operation, the negative climate-change impacts related to the construction process."

- **Land Conservation.** Continuing to use existing buildings and communities avoids or minimizes the use of forests, farms, wildlife habitat, and open space for new development. In *How Green is the Green Building?*, existing already-developed land "...provides open spaces that are homes to wildlife. Habitat loss is the main threat to 80% of the threatened and endangered species in the United States, but building within an existing community, rather than results of more on a wild greenfield, helps preserve wildlife habitat, protect air and water quality and foster the strong economic growth that's only possible in dense development."

- **Embodied Energy.** Old buildings and communities embody the energy and carbon that was devoted to produce them: the wood and steel used to form the frame, much of the tin, bricks for the walls, and so on. Although some critics argue that the concept of "embodied energy" doesn't result in any positive impacts today or in the future, it remains true that it would be terrible wasteful to discard these materials and their embodied energy, and lead them to a landfill, adding to the environmental impact of demolition.

- **Operating Energy.** Many old buildings, because of the way they are designed, already use less operating energy than new buildings. Again, from the Preservation Green Lab: "Building science, design, policy studies, and green-building reports often assume that it is preferable to build a new, energy-efficient building than to retrofit an older building to the same level of efficiency" and "...data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) demonstrates that commercial buildings constructed before 1950 use less energy, per square foot, than buildings from any other decade of construction." While this is not true for all older buildings, many old buildings are extremely green.

- **Passive Design.** Older buildings were often designed to take advantage of

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Continuity



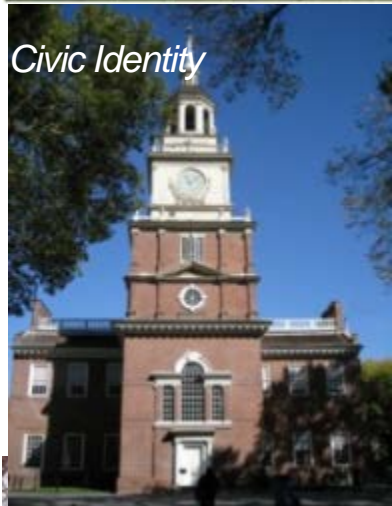
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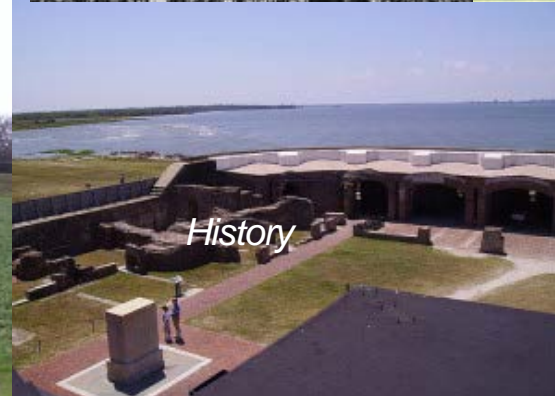
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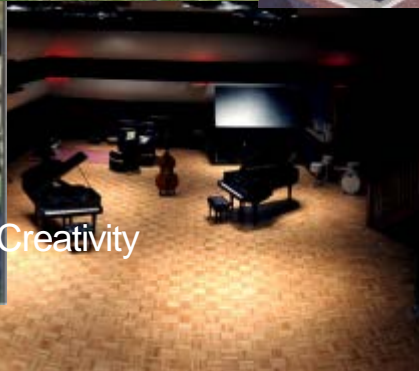
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Why do you think old places matter?

