

# PRESERVING NORTH CAROLINA'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE:

## Why It Matters

By Myrick Howard

Historic preservation makes for strange bedfellows. Under the same tent, one can find Colonial Dames, environmental activists, Civil War re-enactors, downtown advocates, artists, city planners, African-Americans, gays, ardent conservatives, and more. That's because historic preservation makes sense for a wide variety of reasons.

Preservation can be about preserving a community's architectural legacy. Whether a fine Classical Revival courthouse, a 1920s storefront, an early Federal farmhouse, a modest Craftsman bungalow or an inventive 1950s Modernist home, Architecture is the most public form of Art. Older buildings bring beauty, variety, continuity, and richness to a community.

A community's historic architecture helps give it a unique identity. The older areas of Southern Pines, Pinehurst, Carthage and Aberdeen are each quite distinctive; their newer developments are not. Many of the world's most loved cities are treasured for their architectural richness. Simply being there and looking around is reward enough.

History is another reason for preservation. However, when historical significance has to stand on its own without architectural merit, making the case for preservation can be challenging. Only with heritage education is a citizen likely to be inspired by a modest or architecturally undistinguished building significant solely because of its connection to a person, event or time.

Quantifiably, historic preservation is a good tool for encouraging community reinvestment. Revitalization is contagious. One renovation project sparks another, which in turn leads to more. Rehabilitation creates significantly more jobs than new construction, an important factor in today's economy.

Years ago, preservation broadened beyond just individual buildings to encompass historic neighborhoods and downtown areas. There are numerous success stories about neighborhood and downtown revitalization, both in North Carolina and elsewhere. Nearly every city and town in North Carolina has at least one historic downtown neighborhood that has blossomed from being a slum in the 1970s to becoming a community showplace. Most of North Carolina's Main Streets are in far better condition than they were two decades ago.

Revitalized downtowns and historic neighborhoods are a blessing for local governments. Unlike new development on the edge of town, increases in property values of existing neighborhoods come with few expenses for infrastructure. New roads, sewer lines, schools and firehouses aren't needed. And because older neighborhoods are often denser than their new counterparts, the infrastructure is less spread out. Political leaders have learned that historic preservation can provide a powerful platform for fiscal responsibility.

Preservation makes environmental sense. "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" (the mantra of environmentalists) would be a sensible tagline for preservationists. Preservation is "the ultimate recycling." The vast amount of energy and nonrenewable materials consumed in the construction of a new building should give any citizen pause, in addition to the loss of farmlands and forests as sprawl advances. Preservation can rightfully be called "smarter growth," since it doesn't substitute one kind of suburban sprawl for another.

Preserving a community's historic resources is highly sustainable. No matter how "green" a new building is, its construction is energy-intensive. Generally it takes about 50 times more energy to build a building than it does to operate it for a year. So a "green" building really becomes sustainable on its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. And if the

“green” building resulted in demolition, it becomes sustainable only at the end of its first century, since a vast amount of embodied energy is wasted.

North Carolina communities are increasingly challenged by having insufficient landfill capacity. One of the main culprits is the amount of waste generated by construction activities. Demolition compounds this mounting problem.

Studies have repeatedly shown that older buildings are generally more energy efficient than their modern counterparts after they have been appropriately retrofitted. These buildings were built to be comfortable without mechanical equipment, and when they are properly renovated, they are quite affordable operationally. When people ask whether my home’s high ceilings are expensive to heat, I remind them that most North Carolinians pay substantially more for air-conditioning than for heat. My home is quite comfortable for nearly six months out of the year without heating or cooling. When it was built, attention was given to how the house was sited, where windows were placed, and where porches were positioned.

There’s a lot of truth to the old saying: “they don’t build them the way they used to.” Our ancestors built with the expectation that their children and grandchildren would continue to benefit from their efforts. Anyone who’s owned a historic house for several years can attest to how quickly modern materials fail, especially in comparison with older materials. A recent syndicated column recounted the life expectancies for various building components: twenty years for roofs, fifteen years for windows, ten years for certain siding products and mechanical systems, and much less for electronic gadgetry. It is sad to think that we are leaving future generations with such a flimsy inheritance.

Rehabilitating a building that’s in good structural condition is generally going to be less expensive than constructing a new building of similar size and quality. When I’m told that rehabilitation is going to be more expensive than new construction, I have questions. Are the contractor and architect experienced in renovation? Just as you don’t hire a brain surgeon to do open-heart surgery, you don’t want to entrust a historic rehabilitation project to professionals whose primary business is new construction. It’s a different set of skills.

Is plaster being torn out for replacement with sheetrock? If so, is it necessary? After all, plaster is superior to sheetrock in many ways. Is the contractor just being “lazy” by not finding the craftsmen who can repair the plaster at considerably less expense?

Are the windows and doors being replaced? If so, why? In North Carolina, replacing windows has an energy pay-back period of about 35 years, but many new windows have a life expectancy of 15 years or less. That makes no sense. The vacuum seals on double-glazed windows often fail after less than ten years, thereby eliminating their energy advantage. It’s better and more cost effective to simply retrofit historic windows with storm windows.

Spending too much on rehabilitation is usually a sign that too much is being done to the building, often stripping away the historic building’s integrity and character.

Preservation can be powerful as a tool for building community. Preservation brings a diverse crowd together under the same tent, at a time when our society is increasingly segmented. Preservation is common ground. African-Americans and conservative whites can come together in the preservation of a landmark that tells powerful stories about both cultures. Gays and straights can work side-by-side to preserve a neighborhood. Management and labor can advocate for the preservation of a factory where their parents each worked. Wealthy and poor can both benefit from living in historic environs.

Many older neighborhoods are now concerned about the damage being done by teardowns to make way for “McMansions.” Recently a Raleigh developer claimed that his new 4,752 square foot home would be a “good fit” in a historic neighborhood of much smaller homes. That statement reminded me of seeing giant SUV’s

straddling two “Compact Only” spaces in a parking garage. Not only were they hogging two spaces each, they were making parking more difficult for the rest of us: blocking the field of vision for adjacent drivers, sticking out into the line of traffic, and eliciting moments of “road rage.”

Are these big new houses just one more symptom of our throw-away society? Will they stand the test of time? Or, will they be a liability for the next generation? The materials that are being used in many of these homes have surprisingly short expected lives. Vinyl, fast-grown pine, waferboard, and glued-up moldings just don't last.

Teardowns in existing neighborhoods for oversized replacements financially benefit a few and spoil the quality of life for many. Often major trees are being cut down, and no new trees can replace them because the new houses take up every inch of the “building envelope.”

These large houses are often being built with little respect for the neighbors' views and their yards. A new house may present a lot-long, two-story blank wall to its neighbors. How un-neighborly! Where will runoff go? Into the neighbors' back yards and their basements? And, will the neighbors never again be able to enjoy direct sunlight in their home and yard?

These new oversized houses may drive up the land values, but they also make selling neighboring houses harder. In Raleigh, we've seen existing houses next to new “McMansions” sell for considerably lower prices than one might otherwise expect. Who wants to live next door to a house that turns its back on its neighbors?

These big new houses, by driving up the land values, reduce any chance of having economic diversity in the neighborhood. The small houses that until recently made up the lower end of the market are now increasingly valuable only as lots for big houses. When those big houses are built, the lower end of the market is out of reach for all but the wealthiest.

Historic preservation makes sense for many reasons. When you save a historic resource, its stories can still be told. The cultural and economic benefits of preservation can be enjoyed. But, if the resource is destroyed, its place in history will eventually be lost. Its value as a trigger for economic development and community revitalization will have been squandered. Where historic buildings survive, so does a community's sense of history and identity. One might even say that these buildings constitute the heart and soul of a community.

The political and community leaders in North Carolina's cities and towns need to weigh the long-term and short-term effects of their policies for neighborhoods and downtown areas. Usually they are asked to evaluate projects motivated by short-term financial gain. Profit is fine. The history of Sandhills communities is punctuated with the names of developers and community leaders who profited handsomely from their work. But, those respected individuals developed communities that incorporate superb planning, fine building materials, and respect for their surroundings. They built for the long term, and their developments have stood the test of time. Will today's projects do as well?

We have an obligation to future generations to consider the legacy that we are leaving them. Let's preserve our rich architectural heritage and make sure that the new buildings that we leave behind will also stand the test of time.