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Forum Journal, Volume 29, Number 3, Spring 2015, pp. 7-16 (Article)

Published by National Trust for Historic Preservation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fmj.2015.a579565>



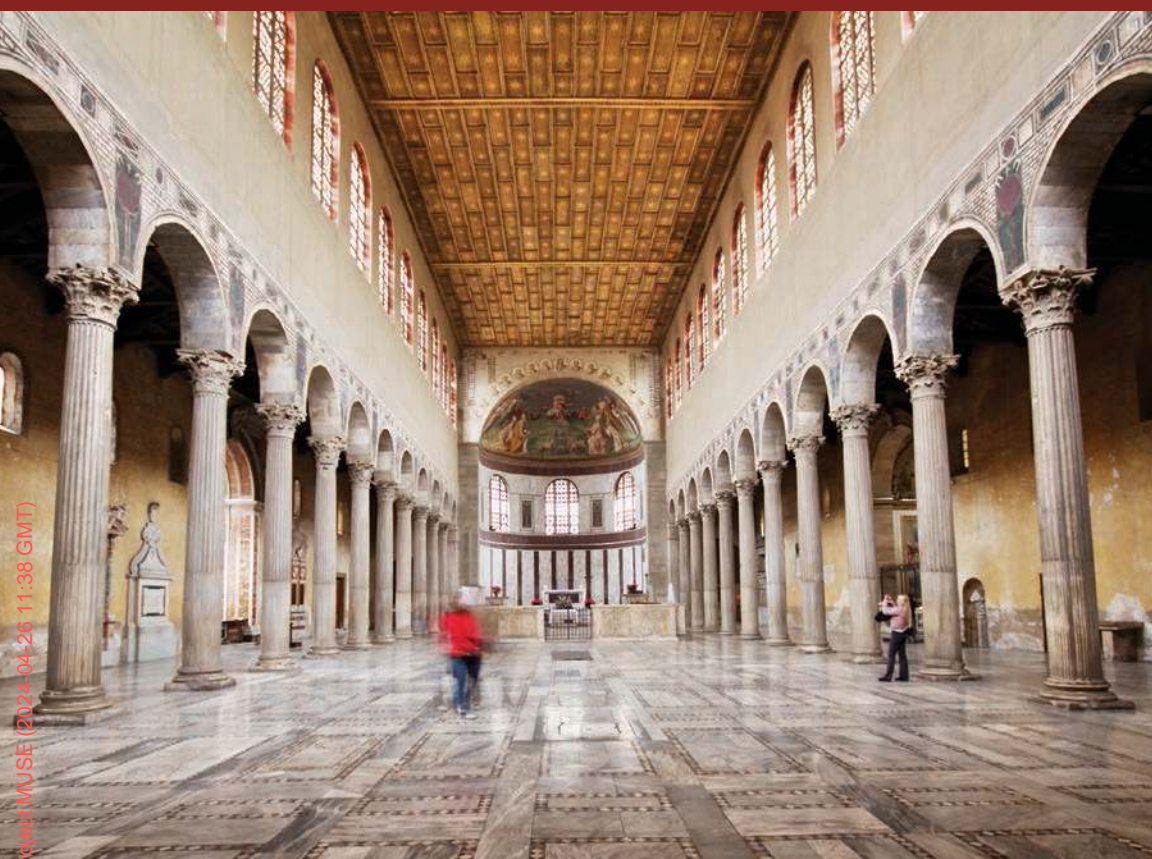
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# ForumJournal

SPRING 2015 | VOL. 29 NO. 3

## Why Do Old Places Matter?



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation  
Leadership Forum**

# Introduction: Why Do Old Places Matter?

THOMPSON MAYES

Why do old places matter? More than a year ago, I embarked on a journey both literal and figural. Thanks to support from the American Academy in Rome and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I moved to Rome for six months so that I could investigate questions I had hoped to study for more than a decade: Why do old places matter? What difference does it make to people if we save, reuse or simply continue to use (or don't) old places? Do old places make people's lives better and, if so, how? While exploring Rome, and the many layers of history embedded in that astonishing palimpsest of an old city, I finally had the great gift of time to try to understand why old places matter.

Why did I embark on this journey? Aren't the reasons obvious? As someone recently posted on Facebook in response to one of my essays, "kinda crazy that the question of why do old places matter even has to be asked." I was motivated to explore this topic because of my sense (based on decades of teaching, training and working in preservation) that people like me who care about old places—many of whom may not even be conscious that they care until something is threatened or lost—didn't have ready words to express why old places make a difference to them and to their communities, even though many of us feel the importance intuitively—and often very deeply. In addition, it seemed to me that the reasons we most frequently cite in our practice didn't fully capture—or fulfill—that key idea from *With Heritage So Rich*<sup>1</sup> and the National Historic Preservation Act that old places provide people with a "sense of orientation." How could we more fully express this idea of a "sense of orientation?" What exactly is that "sense of orientation?"

As a result of this exploration, I wrote several essays, meant as conversation starters, on "Why Do Old Places Matter?" which were posted on the [Preservation Leadership Forum blog](#) of the National Trust. The purposes I wrote about—continuity, memory, individual

identity, civic identity, beauty, history, architecture, learning, sacredness, creativity, ancestry, sustainability, community and economics—are the purposes I heard most frequently as I talked to hundreds of people about old places, but other words could have been chosen as well—stability, belonging, commemoration or revitalization, for example.<sup>2</sup> I'm not sure that there are a finite number of reasons, nor are they universal. Reasons overlap. Many are present at some places but not at others. Some reasons resonate with some people at some places, but not with other people, nor at other places.

To set the context for this journal, here are quick one-line summaries of each of the reasons:

- **Continuity**: Old places create a sense of continuity that helps people feel more balanced, stable and healthy.
- **Memory**: Old places help us remember.
- **Individual Identity**: Old places embody our identity.
- **Civic Identity**: Old places embody our civic, state, national and universal identity.
- **Beauty**: Old places are beautiful, and beauty is profoundly beneficial.
- **History**: Old places give us an understanding of history no other evidence possibly can.
- **Architecture**: Old buildings are part of the history of civilization, and they place us on the continuum of time.
- **Learning**: Old places teach us about the past and give us perspective on the present in a way nothing else can do.
- **Sacredness**: Sacred old places provide deep spiritual and psychological benefits of peace, serenity and inspiration.
- **Creativity**: Old places inspire creativity and entrepreneurship.
- **Ancestors**: Old places connect us to our ancestors, giving us a sense of identity and belonging.
- **Sustainability**: Old places—through their embedded energy, the avoided impacts of demolition and new construction, use of traditional design features compatible with local climates, and locations close to existing infrastructure—are inherently “green.”
- **Community**: Old places give people a shared sense of community.
- **Economics**: Old places foster a sustainable and equitable economy.



**(Left)** Old places, such as Antietam battlefield, help people remember the past, build civic identity by representing a community's shared history and connect people to their ancestors. **(Right)** Old places foster creativity. Novelist Peter Bognanni recalls that when he participated in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, held in the 1847 Dey House, the historic setting enhanced the experience and helped to inspire his work.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

In starting this conversation, I hope many people will read the blog essays and these journal articles, think about what needs further exploration and about what has been missed, and continue to explore these ideas. My goal is for everyone who cares about old places to have a source for words and language to help them express why old places matter, to be able to articulate in their own way what they think and feel about old places. I want to begin to make these reasons more openly and widely expressed in society at large. I'd like for these ideas to filter into all aspects of our society, from made-for-TV Hallmark movies<sup>3</sup> to Boston Symphony performances<sup>4</sup> to discussions in town councils and statehouses.

The articles in this issue of *Forum Journal* take a deeper look at some aspects of why old places matter. I'm particularly grateful to the contributors for their thoughtful essays. National Trust President Stephanie Meeks, in her foreword, explores the very personal meaning of a place where her ancestors homesteaded in Kansas, then concludes with something fundamentally important to everyone: the sense of belonging that old places can provide. Juhani Pallasmaa, the internationally known architect and architectural theorist, writes about time, place and architecture, noting how architecture not only enriches our individual experience of place but also strengthens "our sense of rootedness, belonging and





**Old places, such as farmers markets, promote a sense of community by providing settings where great varieties of people can meet and gather on common ground.**

PHOTO BY DONNA LANGLEY, BALTIMORE MAIN STREETS

citizenship.” Max Page, Professor of Architecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, writes about the capacity of old places with difficult histories to serve as focal points for advocating for social justice. Ben Folds, the songwriter and performer, and Eric Nathan, the composer and performer, share thoughts about the way old places inspire creativity. Jeremy Wells, from Roger Williams University, reviews key social science studies relating to people and old places, and makes the case that conducting and applying more such empirical research would better equip preservationists to communicate with and engage stakeholders.

I’m thankful to Germonique Ulmer, the National Trust’s vice president for communications, and her team, who have developed a communications toolbox for how the [“Why Do Old Places Matter?”](#) essays can be used. As you read these *Forum Journal* articles, as well as the “Why Do Old Places Matter?” blog essays, I invite you to ask yourself: Why do old places matter to me? What words and phrases would I use to tell others why old places matter? These articles and interviews are united by the fact that each explores how old places fulfill human needs—that it is not the old places themselves that are important but their role in making people’s lives better.

I said at the beginning that this was a journey. Like all journeys, there were surprises along the way. I’d like to share with you some of the key things I learned in my journey to try to capture the reasons why old places matter to people.



(Left) Places can become “old” in a generation or two, as people develop attachments to them and recall them as the settings for shared experiences.  
 (Right) Historic sacred places, such as Santuario de Chimayo in New Mexico, can move and inspire visitors and pilgrims alike—a reason for protecting them that is not often acknowledged in current preservation practice.

PHOTO BY [YU SUI KAO](#) VIA FLICKR UNDER [CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE](#)

**One: Old places are even more fundamentally important to people—and for more reasons—than I’d thought, and more important than our preservation policies and practices might suggest.**

Old places are fundamentally important to people. Old places support our psychological health by providing a sense of stability, continuity, belonging, memory and identity. Our sense of stability in our world is rooted in place, our memories are embedded in place, and our identity is defined by place. David Seamon wrote that place is “not a bit of space, nor another word for landscape or environment, it is not a figment of individual experience, nor a social construct....it is, instead, the foundation of being both human and nonhuman; experience, actions, and life itself begin and end with place.”<sup>5</sup>

The overlapping senses of stability, continuity, belonging, memory and identity provided by old places form a network of information consciously, unconsciously and continuously received by people that reinforces their sense of who they are. This, I think, is the essence of the “sense of orientation” referred to in *With Heritage So Rich*. The bottom line is that old places matter much more than we give them credit for, and for more reasons. Preservation of old places is not just something “nice” to do; it provides profound psychological, sociological and spiritual benefits for people.

**Two: Preservation is a much larger field than I had thought, and we should listen to both intentional and (to borrow a phrase from the [Fitch Forum](#)) “accidental” preservationists about why old places matter to them.**

Once I began to talk to people about why old places matter, I was struck by how pervasive the topic is, throughout the United States and the world, even though people don't always use the term “preservation.” Everyday people—mayors, brewers, philosophers, housing advocates, historians, planners, developers, architects, shop owners, politicians, environmentalists, sustainability experts, environmental psychologists, sociologists, neighborhood advocates, artists, writers, composers—all weigh in on why old places matter.

As preservation has become more professionalized we have developed our own language, practices, standards and professional organizations. While the professionalization is useful in many ways, it can also create an insularity that may impede our capacity to see what we have in common with others outside the field who also care about old places. And we may not recognize some of our own biases.

I came away from the project thinking that our field could become larger, more diverse, more influential and more responsive to the human needs that can be served by old places if we consistently listened to these other voices.

**Three: The two primary reasons most often used by our field to justify the preservation of places—their architecture and their history—while important, only support some of the most fundamental reasons why old places matter to people.**

Old places matter to people for a wide variety of reasons that overlap. Yet most of our preservation tools and policies primarily focus on just two of the reasons—history and architecture.

These reasons are important. Places that are significant because of history—history with a big H—present unparalleled opportunities for learning about the past in a vivid and irreplaceable way. These history places serve as commemorative sites, but also act as vortices for reinterpretation of history, for identification of difficult history, and for acknowledgement and, one hopes, (as Max Page explores in this journal) reconciliation and social justice. Old places that represent significant architecture are important





Old places can enable people to experience beauty. These two very different sites in Rome—the stairway at Casa della Gioventù, a rationalist building designed by Luigi Moretti in 1933, and Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, a baroque church by Francesco Borromini built in the 1640s—are both considered beautiful.



because of the primary role of architecture in our world—we all live and work in buildings every day—but also, as Juhani Pallasmaa explores in his article, because significant architecture positions us on the continuum of time.

But such places may be just as important to people because they provide a sense of continuity, memory, belonging and identity. And we may be failing to recognize countless other places that are not so architecturally or historically significant but that are also vitally important for people's psychological and social well-being. As Adele Chatfield-Taylor, former president of the American Academy in Rome and staff for many years to the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission,

told me, we hear at designation hearings how much people care about places, how the places ground their stories and memories. Yet the stories and memories—encapsulating this sense of identity—aren't necessarily relevant to the criteria that we use to designate and protect places. As a result, some of the key purposes of preservation are left unfulfilled, and the places people care about remain unprotected.

I urge the field to explore ways to preserve places for stability, continuity, memory and identity in a continuing effort to fulfill the broader and more inclusive promise embedded in the notion of a "sense of orientation."

#### **Four: Places may become "old" in only one generation.**

It's important to recognize that people can develop relationships with places—place attachment and place identity—within only a generation. That's why we're now starting to see people lament the passing of the malls that they knew growing up, the doctors' offices, strip malls and other resources that we may not yet think have architectural or historical significance.

If we begin to think of how our field of preservation can support a sense of continuity, stability and memory, it may change the way we view the National Register's so-called 50-year rule (limiting eligibility to properties that are at least 50 years old unless they are of "exceptional importance")<sup>6</sup> as well as the period of significance concept, and the idea of integrity. It may also suggest that we should be creative about coming up with other recognition tools.

**Five: Some of the reasons listed below for why old places matter to people aren't talked about as much as they used to be (perhaps because we feel forced to justify saving places for economic reasons), yet they remain important and deeply meaningful to people.**

**Beauty.** Preservation regulation is sometimes referred to as aesthetic regulation, although rarely today do we justify our work by talking about beauty. Yet encountering beauty remains a fundamental and positive experience for people, an idea that is supported by social science studies.

**Sacredness.** Similarly, the idea of saving an old place because of its spiritual qualities and associations tends to be limited to certain situations in American preservation practice, such as the recognition of sites sacred to Native Americans. Yet the experience of sacredness found in old places is fundamentally positive for people.

**Ancestry.** At one time the preservation movement openly advocated for the saving of places because we could find ties to our ancestors (or at least some people's ancestors). More recently, conducting genealogy research has become widely popular across a broad spectrum of the population, and people are interested in visiting places where their ancestors lived, worked, fought, worshiped and were buried. In visiting these places, they find ties to identity and belonging that are important to their sense of who they are.

**Six: Other purposes that we haven't fully developed, such as the way old places spur creativity, may have great capacity to further preservation in the future.**

We've known for decades that there was a connection between old places and entrepreneurial activity. Jane Jacobs wrote about the need for cities to have smaller, older buildings.<sup>7</sup> Richard Florida



Old places, such as the historic RCA Studio A in Nashville, inspire and foster creativity through distinctive qualities—acoustics—and by channeling a legacy of artistic traditions.

PHOTO BY RICK SMITH

wrote about the way drivers of the creative economy are drawn to older places.<sup>8</sup> Now the work of the Preservation Green Lab



supports this idea with studies of

the important role that older, smaller buildings play in bolstering the creative economy.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, we see example after example of the way old places provide inspiration for creativity.

The interviews with Ben Folds and Eric Nathan in this journal explore ideas of inspiration provided by old places. We may need to more actively promote as a rationale for saving, using and reusing old places their role in fostering creativity.

**Seven: The sustainability rationale for retaining old buildings is likely to grow in importance, and has the capacity to fundamentally change historic preservation practice.**

One of the reasons old places matter is because reusing old places is good for the planet. The increasing recognition that the [reuse of old buildings, cities and communities](#) is green has the greatest potential, in my view, to change the paradigm of preservation policy and practice in the United States in a positive way. If our society increasingly recognizes the inherent environmental benefits of reusing existing buildings and communities, we are likely to save many more buildings than our current tools have the capacity to do. Yet that may also challenge us to embrace more broadly conceived reuse plans than those allowed by current preservation standards.

## CONCLUSION

These seven thoughts are my reactions, and others will surely react differently. I hope the articles in this journal and the blog essays on “Why Do Old Places Matter?” will spur others to think about why old places matter and the implications of these ideas for preservation policy and practice.

Now, why do old places matter to you? **FJ**

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THOMPSON MAYES is the deputy general counsel for the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

- <sup>1</sup> National Trust for Historic Preservation, *With Heritage So Rich* (Washington, DC: Preservation Books, 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> These essays were read by two preservation theory classes—Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll’s Historic Preservation: Principles and Practice offered at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro in Fall 2014 and Randall Mason’s Theories of Historic Preservation, University of Pennsylvania, Fall 2014—and the students suggested additional topics that should be considered, or urged deeper explorations of the listed topics.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.hallmarkchannel.com/the-thanksgiving-house>. Accessed 9 February 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> See Eric Nathan, “Why Old Places Matter.” [www.EricNathanMusic.com](http://www.EricNathanMusic.com). Accessed 9 February 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> David Seamon, “Place, Place Identity, and Phenomenology: A Triadic Interpretation Based on J.G. Bennett’s Systematics” in *The Role of Place Identity in the Perception, Understanding, and Design of Built Environments*, eds. Hernan Casakin and Fátima Bernardo (London: Bentham Science Publishers, 2012), 5.
- <sup>6</sup> For more on this see Elaine Stiles, “50 Years Reconsidered,” *Forum Journal* 24, no. 4 (Summer 2010). <http://www.preservationnation.org/forum/library/members-only/50-years-reconsidered.html#.VN4wlhbeNZg>. Accessed 15 February 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Florida. “What Draws Creative People? Quality of Place,” *Urban Land*, 11 October 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> National Trust for Historic Preservation, Preservation Green Lab, *Older, Smaller, Better: Measuring how the character of buildings and blocks influences urban vitality*, May 2014.



### VIDEO

To watch a video of “Why Do Old Places Matter?” with presenters Tom Mayes, Max Page and Jeremy Wells at the 2014 Past Forward conference in Savannah, Georgia, [click here](#).



### SLIDESHOW

To read all blog posts on “Why Do Old Places Matter?” by Tom Mayes, [click here](#)