

Historical preservation pays, part 3

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 Latest in a series of posts on new development 

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ref: [Historical preservation pays, part 1](#)

ref: [Historical preservation pays, part 2](#)

Part 3 “Older, Smaller Better”

Did I hear someone say “More evidence, please?” Coming right up! Last installment I introduced a plethora of studies which provide evidence that historic preservation and compatible new development can be a significant economic driver for cities. Now it's time to get more specific . . .

I offer up one study that seems particularly applicable to our current development climate. Comprehensive, yet succinct, the 2014 study by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Greenlab, **“Older, Smaller, Better: Measuring how the character of buildings and blocks influences urban vitality”** focuses on Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. But as the authors note, there are some general principles that can be extrapolated for cities of any size. Hang in there, I'll get to those.

First a few of the “key findings” from the Executive Summary found on pages 3-4, with many more details found elsewhere in the study.

From the Executive Summary:

“This study demonstrates the unique and valuable role that older, smaller buildings play in the development of sustainable cities. Based upon statistical analysis of the built fabric of three major American cities,

this research finds that established neighborhoods with a mix of older, smaller buildings perform better than districts with larger, newer structures when tested against a range of economic, social, and environmental outcome measures.”

Key Findings:

- Older, mixed-use neighborhoods are more walkable.
- Young people love old buildings.
- Nightlife tends to flourish in areas with a mix of building ages that provide character to the area.
- Older business districts provide affordable, flexible space for entrepreneurs from all backgrounds.
- The creative economy thrives in older, mixed-use neighborhoods where there is “a smaller-scaled historic fabric.”
- Older, smaller buildings provide space for a strong local economy (i.e., small local businesses).
- Older commercial and mixed-use districts contain hidden density (both business and residential).

But how do we employ this as we contemplate new development in our city?

In the section “Principles for Other Cities” on pages 5-7 of the Executive Summary, the authors cite some key ideas that cities of any size could follow (with my italics in some sections):

- **Realize the efficiencies of older buildings and blocks**

“smaller buildings and blocks ‘punch above their weight class’ when considering a full spectrum of outcomes on a per-square-foot basis—from the number of jobs and businesses to the vitality of nightlife and presence of young residents.” [And the author provides more specifics on what else this includes: see p.5]

- **Fit new and old together at a human scale**

“mixing buildings from different vintages—including modern buildings—supports social and cultural activity in commercial and mixed-use zones.

Many of the most thriving blocks in the study cities scored high on the diversity of building-age measures. *Scale also played an important role.* Grid squares with smaller lots and more human-scaled buildings generally scored higher on the performance measures than squares characterized by larger lots and structures. *These results support the concept of adding new infill projects of **compatible size** alongside older buildings.”*

- **Support neighborhood evolution, not revolution.**

“While this research indicates that successful commercial and mixed-use districts benefit from new construction, these changes should be gradual. The rate of change is important. *The higher performance of areas containing small-scale buildings of mixed vintage suggests that successful districts evolve over time, adding and subtracting buildings incrementally, rather than comprehensively and all at once.*”

- **Steward the streetcar legacy**

That is, “As cities seek to re-establish transit corridors and foster mixed-use development, the armature of streetcar-era commercial districts provides a head start.” [Bethlehem’s two downtowns are, in fact, built along these transit corridors from the past]

- **Make room for the new and local economy**

“[Our] research confirms . . . a correlation between a higher concentration of creative jobs and older, *smaller-scaled buildings and blocks.* These areas also *support higher levels of small businesses and non-chain business, helping to keep dollars in the local economy, and providing more resilience against future economic storms.*”

- **Make it easier to reuse small buildings**

“[Our] research illustrates the value of keeping older, smaller, diverse-age buildings viable and in full use. In some cities, however, older commercial buildings languish, with empty upper floors or vacant storefronts. Cities can help unlock the potential of these spaces by removing barriers, such as outdated zoning codes and parking requirements, and streamlining permitting and approval processes.”

Yes, “Older, Smaller, Better” is just one study, but it is one of many from 1999 to 2019 that have looked at the efficacy and economic impact of promoting and supporting the historic look and feel of cities with compatible, complementary new development. And it provides strong evidence and clear, specific recommendations for cities of any size. Historic preservation clearly *pays*, both economically, and in terms of quality of life, making cities attractive and resilient.

Third in a series . . .