

As we approach the future in Bethlehem, could we look to the value of the past?

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(4th in a 4-part series of posts on thoughtful planning by Kim Carrell-Smith)

Kim Carrell-Smith is a 31-year resident of Bethlehem's historic Southside, where she taught public history at Lehigh University for almost two decades. She is also an aspiring gadfly, buzzing in on issues of historic preservation, public education, city government, and other social justice issues. She tips her wings to the master gadflies who have served our community for so long!

Gadfly:

Part 4

So last time we looked at key findings from a study of three large cities, when it comes to **“Older, Smaller, Better: Measuring how the character of buildings and blocks influences urban vitality.”**

Those findings:

- Older, mixed-use neighborhoods are more walkable.
- Young people love old buildings.
- Older business districts provide affordable, flexible space for entrepreneurs from all backgrounds.
- The creative economy thrives in older, mixed-use neighborhoods.
- Older, smaller buildings provide space for a strong local economy.

- Older commercial and mixed-use districts contain hidden density

But how do we employ this knowledge? In the section “Principles for Other Cities,” the authors cite some key ideas any cities could follow:

- **Realize the efficiencies of older buildings and blocks**
- **Fit new and old together at a human scale**
- **Steward the streetcar legacy**

As cities seek to re-establish transit corridors and foster mixed-use development, the armature of streetcar-era commercial districts provides a head start

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

. . . 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**

It's the city's job to make this simpler. In the study the authors cite particular barriers, how to streamline some procedures, and some incentives cities can offer.

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. Historic preservation, and places that look and feel historical clearly *pay*, both economically, and in terms of quality of life, making cities attractive, sustainable, and resilient.

So as we approach the future in Bethlehem, could we look to the value of the past? Could we more intentionally blend our new buildings and development to harmonize with, and enhance, what is good for our economy –that which we possess in Bethlehem, which other cities may not? We have three centuries of historical architecture and building stock composed of diverse historical materials; we have great old storefronts, historical vistas, and a compelling industrial/urban vibe, thanks to the presence of the blast furnaces and older industrial buildings. Why use our mistakes of urban renewal –e.g., the Rooney Building, the City Hall complex, the One Broad Street Plaza building—as measuring sticks (literally and figuratively), when making choices for new design and construction? Why not embrace the ideas in "Older, Smaller, Better?" Upgrade, paint, and tweak the exteriors of older structures to enhance the historical vibe. And build new infill that is "context-sensitive."

With every development proposal, ask the questions: does it honor and complement the historical value that its proposed setting may already possess? How might we *blend in* the new with the old,

- *through compatible scale and massing*
- *by creating a complementary aesthetic*
- *using compatible materials*

We don't want to create copies of existing buildings or even keep every old building. But we definitely need to find ways that the new may peacefully and profitably coexist with the old, while maintaining Bethlehem's historical vibe.

SO MANY studies show that it's worth a try!

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