

Historic Preservation in Detroit February 23, 2006

“Obsolescence,” said Henry Ford the Second in 1955, “is the very hallmark of progress.” As Thomas Sugrue notes, on this occasion, Mr. Ford was speaking not only about the planned obsolescence that drives the automobile market but also about the auto industry’s decisions to abandon older factories in favor of new buildings in new locations. His statement neatly encapsulates the logic that has governed industrial relations with Detroit and other communities around the country, since it defines *progress* as constant, unencumbered change based only on considerations of short-term private-sector profits.

But this false connection between obsolescence and progress does not take into account the social, cultural, and environmental costs that come from rushing to tear down and rebuild. Moreover, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of a building’s obsolescence are often greatly exaggerated. During the ten years my associates and I spent attempting to keep the Detroit Tigers playing in Tiger Stadium, I was amazed at the eagerness of our opponents to declare it structurally unsound, even though three well-known structural engineers had testified to its strength and durability. When the fallacy of obsolescence is trotted out, people fall into the trap of believing what some real estate developers, politicians, and interested parties want them to believe -- that tearing down and starting all over is the only way to improve the urban landscape. This false logic has been applied not only to buildings, but to entire cities and, most tragically, to the people who live within them. More and more money and energy are invested in new buildings and infrastructure, consuming more land and resources. Sometimes this happens within central cities, but usually it takes place further and further from them, leaving diminished resources for maintenance of existing infrastructure and historic buildings, many of which are irreplaceably wonderful and still eminently useful.

Cities like Detroit have a major unheralded asset in an architectural legacy that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Too often we fail to recognize or to value this distinctive resource, and development decisions are made based on the false logic of obsolescence. And yet, making wise use of what we have inherited from the past is a strategy that can work.

- In redeveloping downtown, Detroit has an opportunity, like few other places on the planet, to account for and incorporate a fabulous collection of pre-Depression skyscrapers, a collection surpassed only by those of New York and Chicago.
- In planning new neighborhoods, Detroit and its older suburbs should consider carefully the public costs of allowing developers simply to install more and more suburban style subdivisions—complete with McMansions—in the midst of distinctively urban districts with a healthy diversity of historic home sizes and styles.
- And in maintaining our housing stock, owners of historic residences must be encouraged to restore their wonderfully distinctive features—like casement windows—instead of replacing them.

Other cities have profited from preservation, restoration, and re-use of their distinctive architectural legacy. Reinvesting in and reusing our historic downtown buildings, our churches, hotels, theatres, libraries, stores, schools, homes, and parks, our

stadium and our aquarium—and the infrastructure that supports them—is a cost-effective, responsible way to assert metropolitan Detroit’s aesthetic identity, and it is one very intelligent way to address the social and environmental problems caused by urban sprawl and the abandonment of cities and people.

Fortunately, both nationally and locally, people have joined together and are working hard to call attention to the problems caused by the logic of obsolescence. We have three representatives of such groups with us this evening.

Our first speaker is **Royce A. Yeater**. Mr. Yeater is Midwest Director for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. An architect who has a Master’s degree in historic preservation., he left his private architectural firm in 2001 to head the National Trust's Midwest office in Chicago where he focuses on building the capacity of state and local preservation organizations and develops strategies to confront new and emerging threats to historic resources in eight Midwestern states. We are very grateful that he is able to be with us this evening. Please welcome Royce A. Yeater.

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Francis Grunow, Executive Director of Preservation Wayne, is a native Detroiter, who returned in 2001 after a ten-year stint in New York City where he studied at Columbia, worked as a city planner, and, as he says, “fell in love with all things urban.” He is a co-founder of Detroit Synergy and is on the board of the Cass Tech Alumni Association, Friends of the Book Cadillac, and Transportation Riders United. I’ve known him for several years, and I’ve been impressed with his knowledge of cities and understanding of preservation. Mr. Grunow will discuss “Preserving Downtown: The Politics of Perseverance.” Here is Francis Grunow.

Our final panelist, **James A. Turner** is a State of Michigan Advisor for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. An alumnus of Marygrove College and the University of Detroit Mercy, he serves on the Boards of the Michigan Preservation Network and Preservation Wayne. He is also in the preservation business. As principal of Turner Restoration, Mr. Turner applies preservation techniques and procedures in practical ways to restore commercial and residential buildings. He knows as much about restoring Detroit’s historic homes as anyone I know, and I think of him a thoughtful urban philosopher with persuasive ideas about cities and neighborhoods. He has recently returned from two trips to New Orleans where he analyzed for the National Trust some of the historic homes and buildings damaged in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I am very happy to welcome Jim Turner back to his alma mater.

--*Frank D. Rashid*