

CHAPTER 1

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

New ideas require old buildings.

Jane Jacobs¹

This book describes the relationship between *livable cities* and *historic preservation*. For many people, including some planning and preservation professionals, historic preservation and livable cities have no relationship. This book will demonstrate to you that they *do* have a relationship—an important one—and that the two fields, far from being incompatible or in opposition, can be used together to create and maintain cities people *want* to live in.

This, more than any time before, is the Age of Cities. Although cities have been the centers of civilization for millennia, the United Nations reported in 2008 that, for the first time in history, more than half of humanity lived in cities. Our ability to create cities that are not only comfortable, *but also inspire us and connect us with*

our history and our future, is important to more than *3 billion people now living in cities*. This number is estimated to grow to 5 billion by 2030. The Millennium Project, sponsored by the World Federation of UN Associates, lists “making cities more livable” as one of the top ten goals rated high in “importance, acceptability, and possibility” for the year 2050.²

Historic preservation can play a key role in this challenging but “doable” project.

Planners often divide cities into two categories: growing cities and shrinking cities. Growing cities have vibrant economies and people want to live in them. Shrinking cities have stagnant, dying economies and hemorrhage people.

Detroit, which once had a population of 2 million, now has just over 900,000. It loses 10,000 people a year on average, and over half the building lots within the

THE ECONOMIST'S TEN TOP LIVABLE CITIES IN 2010*

City	Country	Rating
1 Vancouver	Canada	98.0
2 Vienna	Austria	97.9
3 Melbourne	Australia	97.5
4 Toronto	Canada	97.2
5 Calgary	Canada	96.6
6 Helsinki	Finland	96.2
7 Sydney	Australia	96.1
8 Perth	Australia	95.9
9 Adelaide	Australia	95.9
10 Auckland	New Zealand	95.7

*http://www.economist.com/blogs/gulliver/2010/02/liveability_rankings

city limits are listed as vacant or empty—either an abandoned house or a lot that used to have a house. An enterprising farmer grows hay on what was once a residential street not far from downtown.

Detroit's problems are the consequence of the move to the suburbs that began after World War II and the loss of the major manufacturing enterprises, especially automotive, which supported its economy. Other cities, though, have suffered suburban flight—led declines in population and the loss of major industries and yet have recovered or minimized the damage. The studies of why some cities win and some lose have led to the concept of livable cities. Our understanding of what makes a city survive reflects what should always have been obvious: People tend to live in cities that attract them and not in cities that don't.

EXAMPLES OF CRITERIA FOR LIVABLE CITIES

	The Economist	The LivCom Awards	New Urbanism	Partners for Livable Communities	Smart Growth	True Urbanism
Community	Stability	Community Healthy lifestyles	Diversity Quality of life Human development		Community and stakeholder collaboration Support existing communities	
Economy			Creative financing Public-private partnerships	The New Economy Technology Global connections		

	The Economist	The LivCom Awards	New Urbanism	Partners for Livable Communities	Smart Growth	True Urbanism
Environment and Sustainability	Environment	Sustainability Environmentally sensitive practices Enhance the landscape	Sustainability	Sustainable development High quality environment	Preserve critical environmental areas Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty	
Governance and Services	Healthcare Education Infrastructure	Planning for the future	Regionalism	Inclusive, collaborative leadership	Development decisions predictable, fair, cost-effective	
Historic Preservation		Heritage management				
Mixed Use			Mixed use Mixed housing	Affordable housing Live/work spaces Multiple options	Wide range of housing choice Mixed land uses	Mixed-use shops and houses
Scale			Traditional neighborhood structure Increased density	Neighborhoods for young and old	Use compact building design	Human scale architecture Compact urban fabric

It's not just the economy. It's a whole range of factors. Often, as Richard Florida has shown, it's the people who bring in the economy, including attracting or starting new businesses, rather than the reverse.³

According to MAPI,⁴ in 2006 manufacturing accounted for 13 percent of the U.S. economy, down 9 percent since 1995, part of a continuing decline from the peak in the early 1950s. The shift to services from



Silicon Valley thrives because it is a place that people who can work almost anywhere want to work.



The Orpheum Theater in San Francisco is both a cultural and historical resource.

Photo Credit: Brian Wolf

manufacturing has also led to a shift in the nature of many jobs. At one time, people moved to where the jobs were. Many of those were in industrial cities with huge factory complexes. Today, the reverse is often true: Companies move to places where the people live who have the skills they need. More and more often this means places that are livable, for example Silicon Valley, or Austin, Texas, or Portland, Oregon.

One common factor in livable cities is culture. It's no coincidence that many of the smaller cities that score high in livability are college towns. Colleges often provide theater, orchestras, and other cultural activities. It's been said that people like to live in cities with opera houses not because they want to go to the opera but because they like the cachet of living in a town with an opera house. Supporting the arts, whether it's a performing arts center in San Francisco or the downtown music scene in Austin, Texas appears to be critical to perceptions of livability. It is in this realm of culture that historic preservation makes its contributions to livability.

Historic preservation brings economic advantages that go beyond the often-mentioned tourism and these are discussed throughout this book.

There is also a psychological element as well. Just as livable cities need to be perceived as being safe, so also they need roots.

In *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It*, Mindy Fullilove talks about the lasting trauma in Brooklyn resulting from the move of the Dodgers baseball team to Los Angeles and the destruction of Ebbets Field three years later. "The loss of Ebbets Field," she writes, "was a tragedy that could not be repaired: it changed Brooklyn forever."⁵

She goes on to ask how Brooklyn, which would be the fourth largest city in the United States if it were still an independent municipality,⁶ could be so affected by a



It has been said that people like to live in places that have opera houses like the Orpheum Theater, even if they don't go to the opera.

Photo Credit: Brian Wolf

sports club moving and a quirky old stadium being demolished. It leads her to the conclusion that "places—buildings, neighborhoods, cities, nations—are not simply bricks and mortar that provide us with shelter . . . The cues from place dive under conscious thought."⁷

The idea is not new. Jane Jacobs, a long-time resident and advocate for her Greenwich Village neighborhood, was outraged as urban renewal wiped out parts of her community while plans envisioned even more destruction. Greenwich Village was, and is, one of the most storied historic neighborhoods in New York City. In her best-selling book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she pointed to the planning profession to account for destroying what it was supposed to be improving. Her point was that it was in the heart of the traditional neighborhoods of the city that what we now call livability was generated, and that the new modern "towers in the park" developments alienated people from each other rather than bringing humanity together.



Built in 1926, the Orpheum Theater has gone through two major renovations to restore it to its past glory. It is a San Francisco historical landmark.

Photo Credit: Brian Wolf

Six years after *Death and Life* was published, Greenwich Village was protected as an historic district.

The historic heritage of a city can also help define it. The historic architecture of San Francisco, for example, is iconic. It represents what San Francisco is as a city to tourist and resident alike. Historic preservation contributes to the city's idea of itself.

Many misconceptions persist about historic preservation: that it is a luxury, that it is elitist, that it causes gentrification and displacement. None of these beliefs is necessarily true.⁸ Even where gentrification takes place in older neighborhoods, whether designated as historic districts or not, planners, by coordinating their efforts with that of preservationists, can ensure amenities such



Ebbets Field was the home of the Brooklyn Dodgers. At the time it was torn down, it still looked much as it does in this 1913 photograph.

as affordable housing are included in plans for the protected areas.

As to preservationists being an elitist group unconcerned with the fate of neighborhoods, the truth is that those pursuing the protection of historic neighborhoods are most often the residents of those neighborhoods. While organizations like UNESCO and the World Monument Fund make headlines with preservation and conservation efforts at Angkor Wat in Cambodia or in

rebuilding the medieval city wall in Cairo, the mainstream of preservation is at a different scale: homeowners concerned about threats to the character of their neighborhoods or residents fighting to save a treasured historic high school in the face of federal school construction grant programs that will subsidize new construction but not conservation and restoration.

The day-to-day work that helps cities be livable is overwhelmingly grass roots: neighborhood activists,

homeowners, and community organizations assisted by preservation professionals. The locals who live there are almost always outspent by real estate interests and accused of being against needed economic development. Sadly, all too often, economic development means destroying the character of a neighborhood. In extreme cases, it means destroying the neighborhood itself.

A small plaque on these urban renewal apartments is the only reminder of a once-great ball field and a beloved team.



Jane Jacobs' work came from her experiences in her beloved Greenwich Village, now a New York City historic district.

Photo Credit: Tracy Marciano



Adaptive reuse of historic buildings like this nineteenth-century school can make use of energy-saving construction such as original foot-thick masonry walls.

Photo Credit: Melissa Umberger

Historic preservation can make major contributions to economic development and to more sustainability goals. This book shows that adaptive reuse and rehabilitation can produce more jobs and inject more money into the local economy than new construction. Preserving older buildings and neighborhoods can also be environmentally sound as well. Older buildings often have energy-saving features like the foot-thick masonry walls of many historic rowhouses that allow them to be brought to high standards of energy efficiency.

The truth is that historic preservation offers cities a major tool in working toward or maintaining livability. It can contribute to sustainability. It makes people want to live in cities where it is practiced. It fosters tourism and contributes to economic development. Like cities with an opera house, some people might prefer to live in sleek modern dwellings but they like having the historic buildings and neighborhoods nearby.

This book describes an important additional tool for the planner in the quest for livable cities. It offers preservationists a different way to see historic preservation that can lead to partnerships that will benefit all a city's residents and visitors.

This book shows how historic preservation contributes to making a city livable and how the reader can make it happen. It explains how to start and how to continue, what techniques are available and how to use them, and what the results can be. It uses case studies of successes and failures and adds tools to make the livable city a reality.