

HERITAGE CONSERVATION:

The real sustainable development

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As our world becomes increasingly global, achieving sustainable development has become a central goal for architects, city planners, elected officials and those whose work impacts the built environment. But the phrase “sustainable development” itself has become misunderstood and misused. It has been nearly three decades since the Brundtland Commission recognized the three co-equal components of sustainable development – environmental responsibility, social responsibility, and economic responsibility.

The so-called “green building” movement has myopically focused on the environmental third of the comprehensive sustainable development equation ignoring the equally important social and economic responsibility components. Using such scoring systems as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) buildings are rewarded for the technological approaches of “green gizmos” while giving virtually no consideration to the economic or social contributions of existing structures, particularly heritage buildings. In the US the LEED system, for example, gives the same number of points for preserving a heritage building as to providing a bicycle rack. Further, nearly all of the measurements focus on annual operating costs, with no consideration whatsoever of the energy required extracting raw materials, processing them into a product, transporting them to a job site, and installing them into a building. This is particularly absurd given that between 15 and 30 times as much energy is utilized in the construction of a building than its annual operation.

Even on the environmental side, the benefits of reusing existing historic resources have been largely ignored. Further, the vast majority of proposals and projects representing themselves to be sustainable development focus on new construction with little if any consideration given to resources – including buildings, infrastructure and open spaces – that already exist.

In recent years, however, scholars and practitioners have begun to generate measurements that identify

not just the environmental but also the social and economic contributions of heritage conservation to comprehensive sustainable development. On the environmental side, such measurements as embodied energy, life cycle costing, reduced infrastructure expenditure and reduced carbon foot print are being used to quantify the energy savings of reusing existing resources. These energy savings far outweigh relatively minor differences in annual energy use.



With between 25% and 33% of landfill being from construction debris, historic preservation can be advocated as the ultimate in recycling.

The social contribution of heritage buildings is generally well known, but is only recently been systematically measured. As cities around the world find it necessary to be competitive not just locally but globally, the role of “quality of life” has become recognized as a major variable, particularly for the attraction and retention of knowledge workers. The quality and character of historic buildings in cities is a significant contributor to quality of life criteria.

The economic contributions of heritage conservation policies can be measured in multiple ways, including: jobs and household income generated through the restoration process; small business incubation;

center city revitalization; positive impact on property values; economic integration on the neighborhood level; affordable housing; the enhanced incremental impact of heritage based tourism; and others.

This paper will discuss the current thinking and findings that demonstrate that heritage conservation may be, in fact, the single development strategy that simultaneously advances not only environmental, but also economic and social responsibility.