

THE SETTING AND THE STAGE: A CHRONICLE OF THREE AMERICAN CITIES REQUESTING WORLD HERITAGE DESIGNATION

Fleming Ronald Lee / USA

President of TheTownscape Institute

Nomination to World Heritage Status

All three cities have worked or are in the process of working on nominations to the World Heritage List. In June 1994, a federal inter-agency panel put Savannah's city plan for public spaces and monuments into nomination. Several years ago Annapolis' woman mayor also made a less formal effort to nominate Annapolis with its classic baroque plan of circles and streets radiating from the hilltop. Most recently, Newport, working through Senator Chafee's office, has assembled all of the preservation "players" to endorse a thematic nomination centered on Newport as a center for religious freedom as well as being the epic watering spot of the Gilded Age. With a congressional amendment in 1980, the United States Congress created a special hurdle when requiring unanimous consent for private property owners in any nomination for World Heritage status. Newport now seeks to avoid that hurdle by serially nominating a group of properties which have already accepted a conservation easement through the state preservation office. There are also some efforts underway to modify the national legislation which created this hurdle. To date, no American city has achieved world heritage status and the majority of the twenty heritage sites are individual entities like Monticello and the Taos Pueblo or elements of the National Park system like Mesa Verde, where no non- governmental consent is required.

Legal Systems of Protection

In each of the three cities private organizations led the way in the preservation fight. This happened early in the 1950s when key private entities saved buildings that then inspired further institutional growth of the preservation groups. The Preservation Society of Newport County saved the colonial Hunter House on the waterfront and The Newport Restoration Foundation, funded by tobacco heiress Doris Duke, purchased and restored eighty seven colonial houses. Historic Savannah saved the Davenport House on one of the early squares and Historic Annapolis and its antecedent, saved several Georgian mansions and the old market. In each case women were the core leadership of these efforts and they continue to be a major force in all

three organizations. The early efforts in Newport were led by Mrs. George Warren, in Savannah by Anna Colquitt Hunter and, in Annapolis, by Mrs. St. Clair Wright, all formidable grand dames with a capability to deal confidently with power structures. Doris Duke was reported to have run into Mrs. Warren at a cocktail party in New York City and said "I'll take care of the 18th century Newport, if you will do the 19th."

Interestingly, all three cities managed to secure an historic preservation ordinance at about the same time – 1968-1969 which was partially based on a tragic loss or the destruction of the old market in Savannah for a parking garage, the destruction of several houses on Bellevue Avenue in Newport including the Villa Rosa and the threatened destruction of the great mansion in Louis XV style, The Elms, which stands adjacent to the condominiums where the Villa Rosa stood! In Annapolis there was the threatened destruction of the colonial market, the Paca House, and the rise of a seven story Hilton Hotel on the waterfront. In each case it was the shock of demolition, threatened demolition, or out of scale development which generated momentum for an ordinance.

In the cases of Savannah and Annapolis, those ordinances have gone through several iterations and have matured. In both Annapolis and Savannah there were efforts at defining design standards which went beyond the Secretary of Interior's Standards and Guidelines while in Newport the Secretary of the Interior's standards are still deployed. In Annapolis and Savannah, the definition of design standards may well be a function of the integration of the private preservation leadership into city staff positions as "preservation officers." However, political conflicts with city councils to insure implementation of standards have continued in all three cities.

The private leadership in Savannah and Annapolis, although sometimes bickering among themselves over development issues and questions of who should carry on the mantle of leadership, were able to integrate their forces, at least at the staff level, into city government. Newport with three public private interest organizations largely stayed

Section II: Vulnerabilities within the settings of monuments and sites:
understanding the threats and defining appropriate responses

Section II : Identifier la vulnérabilité du cadre des monuments et des sites – Menaces et outils de prévention

aloof from the fray. The Newport Restoration Foundation with the colonial houses, the Newport Historical Society which looked after several key buildings in the downtown including the old market and the Preservation Society of Newport County, the proud possessor of almost a score of great mansions, have taken a side role in the city. The preservation ordinance in Newport allows these organizations to advise the city on appointments to the Preservation Commission but these organizations have generally not been involved although the Preservation Society of Newport County pays \$50,000 in lieu of taxes which is supposed to support the comparatively small (4) planning staff in the city. The maintenance of property and the business of tourist visitation triumphed over civic policy considerations.

Both Savannah and Annapolis have city staff, specifically designated “preservation officers,” who work with the Preservation Commission appointed by the mayors to review building decisions in the historic districts. Although some ten years ago, Newport had a planner assigned to this function, today the Board of the Historic District Commission only has a liaison position with the city’s chief zoning officer who is not a preservationist. As a result, Newport has the weakest presence of preservation interests within the city government. This may soon change as recent advocacy from the three preservation groups and promises of support from foundations are finally yielding a city budget line item for a preservation officer.

As the vice chairman of the Commission, Dr. James Garman noted when posed with the Xi’an question on the impact of people on historic resources, “ Newport’s community chamber of commerce and visitors bureau absolutely flogs the historic nature of the city, absolutely whores the city on its reputation, on its historicity, and then doesn’t support it in any way, and in fact in other cases, tries to disengage the city from preservation ...there’s no planning because there’s no one to do planning and no one to take responsibility for planning.”

The boards of both Savannah and Annapolis have generally been more skilled, meaning that there are more people on these boards with professional backgrounds related to planning, architecture, preservation and landscape design than there are in Newport where an interior decorator runs the commission with an iron hand supported by a Professor of Archeology at Salve Regina University.

Both Savannah and Annapolis have strong sections of their ordinances that address the concept of a public

viewshed as being a major focus of design review action. This puts the focus on the view from the street. Newport has shied away from addressing the public view and therefore the bulk of the review actions address private property owners and deal with issues like additions and private decks as people try to maximize their recreational space in a resort area. Because there is no one on the staff to translate between the board and the applicants, inquiries are often drawn out through several sessions and involve considerable expense and acrimony as architects, lawyers and property owners seek to divine the intentions of the board.

Savannah developed an early and innovative set of design review standards which involved a point system. If one achieved a certain number of points based on some eighteen different criteria, one passed the review. Unfortunately, this system failed because it became increasingly clear that some design factors, such as height, were much more important than others and that one could make it through a set of design criteria, violate only one, and still have a monstrosity of a building if the scale was wrong. That problem was subsequently then addressed with a new set of standards which took some seven years to get through the city council. They are combined with the urban design technique of height build out zones that define height boundaries for the denser areas along the waterfront and in the downtown as part of a form based urban design plan. Savannah finally closed a one year demolition delay provision this year which had turned into a loophole allowing demolition.

Annapolis, where forty percent of the property is owned by institutions and government and therefore partially exempted from design review, has fought some contentious battles over state expansion. Early battles over scale on the waterfront were successfully resolved with maritime conservation districting whereas in Newport, massive new hotel and condominium development and a massive hotel on the Savannah riverfront demonstrated that the preservation forces were politically weak. In Newport, by concentrating on maintaining mansions and restoring 18th century houses, the preservation forces remained preoccupied and essentially aloof from the questions of real estate development on the waterfront. In Savannah, the question of a brutalist out of scale new Hyatt Hotel on the waterfront created a breach in the leadership with Leopold Adler II, the long time head of Historic Savannah, pitted in battle with some former board members who had business interests favoring the development.

Interpretation and Place Making

Section II: Vulnerabilities within the settings of monuments and sites:
understanding the threats and defining appropriate responses

Section II : Identifier la vulnérabilité du cadre des monuments et des sites – Menaces et outils de prévention

The early efforts of the private sector preservationists were to identify and preserve historic houses and consequently, the Newport Restoration Foundation marked each of its eighty seven historic properties and Historic Savannah and Historic Annapolis were successful in identifying and listing historic houses in the core of both of these cities. The more innovative challenge of interpreting civic space, with public markers and the evolution of commerce and development, has proceeded slowly. The Newport Historical Society took the lead with markers on the sidewalk in the downtown area and now, the Preservation Society of Newport County is about to continue this system with markers that will identify each block of houses along Bellevue Avenue, the main residential street (including the cautionary tale of lost houses.)

In Annapolis sophisticated markers with complex graphics identify changes in the downtown waterfront area. The writer, Alex Haley's chronicle of his slave ancestor Kunte Kinte became the basis for his foundation's commission of a sculptural grouping on the waterfront which the preservation office reviewed. This is the only public art place making urban design in the three cities. One could posit that the development of a sophisticated marker system only comes after there is some agreement on larger urban design objectives which can then allow a story to be told. In this regard, Annapolis leads the way.

In the area of public education, the Historic Savannah Foundation, with its educational center in a former Afro-American Massey School, has proved the most innovative. In Savannah, the National Register Historic Districts around the National Historic Landmark District are largely populated by Afro-Americans who are a majority population in the city. There is no local design review oversight. Consequently, the Massey School project is a principal effort of the Historic Foundation to educate a new future constituency about the preservation ethic. In Annapolis and Newport, with predominantly white populations, there has not been the same effort and indeed the principal activity of the Preservation Society of Newport County involves parties in the Gilded Age mansions which they protect. A public supplement in the *Newport Daily News* this year, for the 60th Anniversary represented a policy shift in which important facts about the Preservation Society's achievements were discussed in a series of articles. A public planting program at city entryways is being initiated this fall.

Indeed, the development of an active Public Policy Committee at the Preservation Society of Newport County has encouraged documentation about the Preservation

Society's activities. In the supplement in the *Newport Daily News*, one section identifies the benefits of the Preservation Society's efforts for the larger community including the use of its technical staff for various local preservation projects and, of course, the economic benefits of its presence in terms of the purchase of goods and services. Indeed, each of the preservation organizations in each of the three cities have sought to quantify economic benefits of historic preservation in those communities and, in the case of Newport, this becomes part of the interpretive message. Conversely, for the first time the Society has developed an exhibit on the "lost houses of Newport" which covers the forty or so large mansions which have been destroyed in the last forty years. The story of conservation requires a certain distance, perhaps, or else the determination of the founders to set their story straight. Lee and Emma Adler, who have been involved for decades in Historic Savannah's struggles, have told their view in *Savannah Renaissance*. There's not a similar publication in Newport or in Annapolis, though one is underway in the later.

Urban Design

All three cities succeeded at a residential level through successful real estate operations which restored and recycled historic properties. Savannah has been the most aggressive and achieved the most comprehensive results using a national conference in December 1977 to discuss the problems of deterioration and displacement that were occurring in inner city neighborhoods across the United States which had considerable architectural quality. Savannah Landmarks became a non-profit housing developer. It used federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsidies in the Victorian district. Despite some competition from the city, the success of this renovation encouraged more support from the Ford Foundation and eventually, some twenty percent of the housing stock in the Victorian District or 300 houses were part of the rehabilitation process. Despite the success on the residential level, where in total some 1,200 properties have been restored, in a city of 130,000, the downtown area continued to deteriorate in the 1970's and 1980's. Curiously, there were two unanticipated factors that have created additional vitality. One was an enormously popular book about the city and the other, the emergence of a new art school. The privately owned art school, the Savannah College of Art and Design, has proven to be most important new player since its founding in 1979. It has restored a number of key buildings including the Guard's Armory on Bow Street, an art deco theatre and abandoned school buildings – all in all some fifty restorations within the National Historic District. In the Adler's words, it put a floor into the downtown rental real

Section II: Vulnerabilities within the settings of monuments and sites:
understanding the threats and defining appropriate responses

Section II : Identifier la vulnérabilité du cadre des monuments et des sites – Menaces et outils de prévention

estate market and streets became safer with the student population moving around at all hours. The increased tourism supported an increase in hotels. A new supermarket in the Victorian District now echoes the forms of the lost city market destroyed at the beginning of the preservation battle.

Annapolis, with its proximity to Washington and Baltimore and the site of the expanding State capital never felt the decline. Newport, with its burgeoning waterfront has continued to attract more tourists, though numbers have fallen off recently at the Preservation mansions (they still remain among the five key attractions in New England.) However, in both Savannah and Newport the preservation forces have been largely unsuccessful in restraining the development of the waterfront. In Newport, four of the five working boat yards have now left and the fifth is now owned by a syndicate of public interested citizens. In Savannah, the huge Hyatt Hotel at one end of the river front and large, out of scale apartment buildings at the other, illustrate urban design failure and citizen compliance with the forces of mammon. Annapolis has been more successful in preserving the outline of the working waterfront which is adjacent to restored residential districts and subject to a maritime zoning requirement which preserves boatyards and insures that commercial development at least sells nautical goods.

Lessons Learned

Curiously, all key players in all three cities did not know about the efforts of the others to secure World Heritage nomination. In Newport and Savannah, preservationists saw the nomination as a way of bringing more attention to the importance of maintaining historic resources. In Annapolis, the move was from a pro preservation mayor rather than one of the preservation groups. In each of the cities, the forces that have been unleashed by tourism have had deleterious effects. Of the three, Annapolis appears to have been most effective in curtailing the scale changes. No great highway project bifurcates the waterfront as it does in Newport, the consequence of earlier urban renewal fortunately terminated. Annapolis has avoided most of the tawdriness of the tourist oriented shops that impact on Thames Street and in the wharf area of the Savannah waterfront. Annapolis appears to have wrestled with the issues of urban design more successfully. The integration of a new building, broken into smaller components on its main shopping street and efforts to infill new and old architecture are impressive, although some of the work in the 1970s now appears naïve but the state Preservation Office has supported beneficial land use changes and the State and City have spent seventeen million undergrounding wires on the principal streets and along the waterfront. This has not happened in Newport or Savannah.

Franchise design is better regulated in Annapolis as well.

Savannah's squares are the great anchor of its urbanism and its return to residential vitality despite the diaspora of businesses to shopping centers on the fringe. Newport will host the US/ICOMOS conference next year. It will have some opportunity, at least with workshops, to address some of the urban design mistakes of the 1960s such as the Pier One building across the street from the Customs House, designed by America's first architect, Peter Harrison. Perhaps the charrettes will inspire effective new infill design. But such exercises take place within the framework of an essentially disinterested city council with a two year vision.

Preservation has succeeded in Annapolis, Newport and Savannah because of the tenacity and vision of a few. Its benefits are appreciated by the larger society and, to some extent, by the governments of these three cities but the victories remain fragile. The coalition formed to create the World Heritage nomination in Newport creates a new forum for conversation between the different preservation entities but has yet to demonstrate any long term effect on the quality of planning. However the increased coherence of this group may be one reason why the city has finally voted for a line item to hire a preservation planner. Savannah and Annapolis, with their stronger bureaucratic ties at the city level and, in Annapolis case, at the state level, with more civic investment appear to be in a better position to sustain the quality of life in these remarkable cities which should all have been successful World Heritage nominations years ago.

Abstract

This is a “tale of three cities:” Annapolis, Newport, and Savannah, early colonial capitals that have preservation protection systems of varied complexity and fragility. They have *settings* which are sometimes compromised by inappropriate tourist facilities, out of scale waterfront development, loss of “working” waterfront businesses and homogenizing corporate franchises which threaten the distinctive character at the urban edges.

This paper examines the impact and problems with design review systems in the historic districts, comparative strategies for interpretation of the cityscape, and new “place making” urban design opportunities. It is based on a thirty-five year period of observation and represents a measured look at civic achievements and failures over that period.

References

1. Adler, Lee and Adler, Emma, *Savannah Renaissance*, Wyrick & Company, Charleston, SC, 2003
2. Cheek, Richard, Thomas Gannon and Tom Gannon, *Newport Mansions: The Gilded Age*, The Preservation Society of Newport County, First Church Publishers, 1996.
3. Downing, Antoinette F., Vincent J. Scully, Jr. *Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island 1640-1915*, Bramhall House, New York, 1967
4. Evans, Philip, *Destination Annapolis: The Story Behind the Scenery*. Historic Annapolis Foundation, 1996.
5. Lewis, Rob and Young, Ryan A., *Newport Revisited*, Arcadia Publishing, 2001
6. Toledano, Roulhac, *The National Trust Guide to Savannah: Architectural & Cultural Treasures*, Preservation Press, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1997
7. *A Guide to Domestic & Commercial Architectural Styles in Annapolis*, Historic Annapolis, 1975
8. *Architectural Styles in Annapolis*, Historic Annapolis, 1975.

Section II: Vulnerabilities within the settings of monuments and sites:
 understanding the threats and defining appropriate responses

Section II : Identifier la vulnérabilité du cadre des monuments et des sites – Menaces et outils de prévention

THE SETTING AND THE STAGE: A CHRONICLE OF THREE AMERICAN CITIES REQUESTING WORLD HERITAGE DESIGNATION

Ronald Lee Fleming / USA

President of TheTownscape Institute

Historic District Boards

City	Number of Board Members	Number of Board Staff	Background of Board Members	Local Historic District Formed	Buildings Lost Since Historic District Formed
Newport (Pop. 28,000)	9	1 Guy Weston acts as liaison from Planning. No preservation planner currently staffs commission.	No Required Qualifications Educational Degrees are in American History, Engineering, Art History. Professional Experience: Geology/Biology, Renovation, Archeology, Engineering, Business, Medicine, Real Estate, Newport native or Property owner in Historic District.	1968	Houses outside the historic districts are elevated and disfigured
Annapolis (Pop. 35,000)	7	1 Donna Hole	Qualifications: Section 21. States Professional Requirements	1968	17
Savannah (Pop. 130,000)	10	2 Beth Reiter Lee Webb	No Required Qualifications Professional Experience: Retired licensed architect, Architectural Designer, Attorney(s); Commercial Real Estate Broker; retired Surgeon; retired History Professor; Neighborhood Activist/Business Owner; Investment Banker	1968	39