Saving Historic Neighborhood Schools

by Richard Moe, President
National Trust for Historic Preservation

In June 2000, the National Trust for Historic Preservation added historic neighborhood schools to its annual list of America’s Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places. In so doing, the National Trust sought to alert the public to various threats to these irreplaceable community landmarks:

• lack of money for needed repairs;
• an assumption that old is automatically bad and new is automatically good;
• public policies that discourage the maintenance of existing schools; and
• “mega-school sprawl” - the construction of giant educational facilities in remote, middle-of-nowhere locations that rule out the possibility of anyone’s walking to school.

In putting historic neighborhood schools on its “endangered list,” the National Trust was responding to requests for help from grassroots groups from Maine to Montana fighting to save schools that have long served as neighborhood anchors and that could continue to provide a good education for young people.

It would be absurd to argue that every historic neighborhood school can or even should be saved. But it is equally absurd to argue that a school’s age automatically means it cannot be preserved and adapted to meet modern educational program needs. One finds eloquent rebuttals to this all-too-common argument in such places as Spokane, Wash.; Hibbing, Minn.; Boise, Idaho; Manitowoc, Wis.; and Miami, Fla., where school boards have worked collaboratively with the community and outfitted historic schools with the very latest in computer technology, life-safety techniques, handicapped-accessibility, and educational program features.

Schools were once thought of as important civic landmarks built to last a century. They represented community investments that inspired civic pride and participation in public life. Many of today’s newer schools resemble big-box warehouses. Their architecture reflects little pride and they sometimes have an expected life-span of a mere 30 years.

With unprecedented amounts of public money about to flow into school construction programs as a result of pending legislation and recent court orders in such states as Ohio and New Jersey, it’s time to reexamine public policies that affect the neighborhoods in which schools function and the ability of communities to save still serviceable, landmark schools - as schools. The National Trust and its quarter-million members have five decades of experience in preserving and revitalizing older neighborhoods, and neighborhoods are akin to the proverbial village it takes to raise a child. To the extent that the quality of the community affects the mindset that students bring to school, to the extent that a strong and cohesive neighborhood can provide a safety net and positive outlets for young people, and to the extent that schools serve as community anchors, the interests of historic preservationists, parents, children, and educators converge.
Larry Lusardi and I sit in his corner office on Hudson Street in Hartford where I learn how this native New Yorker and former budget analyst for the state of Connecticut eventually became Executive Director of the Customer and Program Services Division at Connecticut’s Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD). “I began working for the Department of Housing in 1980. It was about this time that I learned of the Main Street program from my colleagues in the Council of State Community Development Agencies (CSCDA).” When asked what he feels passionate about, he replies: “Helping communities and residents most in need: homeownership for first time homeowners; assisting very small communities; establishing Senior Centers - especially in towns with little space for seniors. These are all very satisfying achievements in my two decades of service to the state.”

With degrees in Political Science and Urban and Policy Sciences, Larry can be particularly proud of his role in designing the CT Small Cities Community Development Block Grant Program, a federally funded program that provides grants annually (on a competitive basis) to eligible municipalities for economic development, affordable housing, community facilities and services and revitalization or development projects. Honored twice for Community Development Service by the Connecticut Community Development Association (CCDA), Larry described the structure of DECD and how it has dramatically changed in recent years.

In 1996, Governor Rowland and the Connecticut General Assembly created the DECD by strategically merging two separate agencies: the Department of Economic Development (DED) and the Department of Housing (DOH). This streamlined new agency was designed to address economic, housing and community development issues more effectively, use staff talent and tax dollars efficiently, respond quickly to customer needs, measure performance and track results and involve the customer in its operations, policies and decision-making. The restructuring is quite meaningful to Lusardi: “With my background in community development, this merger provides a full marriage of housing and economic development which allows this department to address community development issues in a more comprehensive manner.”

One look at DECD’s website (www.decd.org) shows the department’s...
Meet Our Main Street Program Managers

A graduate of Central Connecticut State University, Katie Breen is a former Regional Land Use Planner with the Central Connecticut Regional Planning Agency, where she worked on zoning issues, economic development, CDBG grants and more. Her position soon expanded to include the role of Paratransit Manager where she worked to create the first regional public transportation system for people with disabilities in the Bristol/New Britain area. After the system was successfully operational, she moved to Waterbury to serve as the Director of the Greater Waterbury Transit District. While there, she worked to establish Connecticut’s first public transportation brokerage system and a new regional welfare to work transportation program. In addition, she tested for and was granted admission to the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP).

Katie returned to her hometown of Windsor in March 2000 to serve as the executive director of First Town Downtown. Since her arrival in Windsor, Katie has helped to continue the existing projects started by her predecessor John Simone, such as the Discover Windsor Bike Tour and the Windsor Center Corridor Enhancement Study. Business recruitment and retention has been a high priority for Katie. She has worked very hard to know the business owners in town and offer assistance where needed. She is very proud of one relationship in which she and the economic development director helped an owner who had decided to close her business, to change her mind and expand and relocate her business in the center, rather than closing the doors forever.

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MacDonough Elementary School, Middletown, Connecticut

AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE: POLICY REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS
If it’s time to bring back smaller, community-centered schools, as many educators believe, it’s also time to stop destroying such schools where they already exist. Many historic neighborhood schools embody the very benefits seen in smaller, community-centered schools.

It’s also time to give kids the option of walking to school and to free families from the burden of financing a third or fourth car in order to give young people the independence they should have. It’s time to preserve - and upgrade, when necessary - historic schools whose architecture inspires civic pride. When such schools cannot be preserved, communities should have the choice of replacing them on the same site with well-designed new schools that can continue to provide the “glue” that older neighborhoods need. The recommendations below are offered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to move these goals forward.

Top Twelve Policy Recommendations

1. Put historic neighborhood schools on a level playing field with new schools. Eliminate funding biases that favor new construction over school renovation and good stewardship.

2. Eliminate arbitrary acreage standards that undermine the ability of established communities to retain and upgrade (or replace on the same site, when necessary) historic and older schools that could continue to serve as centers of community.

3. Avoid “mega-school sprawl” - massive schools in remote locations that stimulate sprawl development and are accessible only by car or bus.

4. Develop procedures for accepting land donated by developers for new schools. Land in “sprawl locations” that are inappropriate for schools should be rejected.

5. Encourage school districts to cooperate with other institutions - e.g., government agencies, non-profits, churches, and private businesses — to share playgrounds, ball fields, and parking as well as to provide transit services, when appropriate.

6. Establish guidelines, training programs, and funding mechanisms to ensure adequate school building maintenance. Create disincentives for school districts to defer needed maintenance and allow buildings to fall into disrepair.

7. Require feasibility studies comparing the costs of new schools with those of renovating existing schools before new schools are built and existing ones abandoned. Hire only architects with experience in rehabilitation work to conduct such studies. These studies should also consider the impact of a school’s closing on existing neighborhoods, long-term transportation costs, and municipal service burdens. Finally, these studies must be presented to the public for comment before projects move forward. If they are presented only to the superintendent and school facilities committee, their use is limited.

8. Reexamine exemptions given to local school districts from local planning, zoning, and growth management laws.

9. Work to ensure that a minimum of 50% of the students can walk or bike to school in cities, towns, and suburbs. Promote safe-routes-to-school legislation in the states.

10. When a historic school cannot be preserved and reused, school districts and/or local governments should implement plans for the building’s adaptive use or replacement so that it does not become a source of blight in the neighborhood.

11. Promote “smart codes” legislation to encourage the rehabilitation and modernization of historic schools as well as other still serviceable buildings.

12. Provide education and training in school renovation techniques and options for school facility planners, contractors, private consultants, architects, school board members, municipal officials and others.

Schools teach values as well as technical and academic skills. Not the least of such values is the importance of environmental stewardship. No class of people stands to lose more from the degradation of the environment than young people, who face the prospect of paying heavily to clean up a degraded environment. The irony of teaching children to recycle paper and cans while treating older school buildings like Kleenex is captured by Dan Becker, a parent trying to save his daughter’s school in Raleigh, North Carolina: “They have recycling bins in the cafeteria, and yet they were planning to cart the whole school off to the landfill.”

Reprinted with permission from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The above sections were reprinted from the full report “Historic Neighborhood Schools in the Age of Sprawl: Why Johnny Can’t Walk to School” by Constance E. Beaumont with Elizabeth G. Pianco, made possible by the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training. This project was also sponsored by the Turner Foundation and the Clayton Fund. We encourage you to read the full report via the National Trust’s website at www.nthp.org or from Preservation Books for a fee.
What began as a window replacement project has become a virtual “Treasure Hunt” of history in Vernon, Connecticut. Current Vernon Mayor, Stephen Marcham, Town Administrator Laurence Shaffer, local citizens and the Vernon Town Council took up the mantle of responsibility two years ago to see the restoration of the town-owned Memorial Building to fruition. This circa 1889 building serves as Vernon Town Hall and is home to the New England Civil War Museum and a continually operated G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) Hall.

The story goes that in 1999 former Mayor Joseph Grabinski was having lunch with Lt. Gov. Jodi Rell at the Rockville Eatery, a small hometown café, just across the street from the massive, circa 1889 Richardsonian Romanesque style building. Rell and Grabinski could not avoid the ominous message that the building presented in its current state. Echoing this was the strongly held feeling in the community that if the town could not support the historic preservation and maintenance of its own buildings how could we expect property owners, residents, and investors to do the same. In essence...Grabinski knew Vernon had to practice what it was about to preach...invest in downtown, restore and protect our historic buildings and assets, and revitalize the city of Rockville Historic District which had been officially recognized on the National Register of Historic Places since 1984.

 Signs of the times

For the citizens of the town the condition of the building became an embarrassment, a harbinger that fate had been unkind to this aging downtown which once was full of retail stores, crowded sidewalks, vibrancy and affluence felt during the “mill days”. But rather than wallow in this self-pity the building has become a rallying point for everyone in Vernon and for those who work in the downtown.

Lt. Gov. Rell pledged to assist the town by way of matching the funds needed to replace and restore the majestic windows that had once been a beacon to Rockville and the surrounding communities. The Memorial Building itself is a monument. Built in 1889 the citizens of Rockville wanted to build a tribute to the sacrifices of its citizens during the civil war. A monument, statue, or park was not enough. Rockville was a thriving city. The industrial revolution had treated her well. Bustling mills along the Hockanum River, which flowed through the center of the City, was a wellspring of power. The technology and labor to harness that power produced some of the finest cloth in the world. Much of the wool used in the Union Soldiers uniforms came from Rockville.

“Built in 1889 the citizens of Rockville wanted to build a tribute to the sacrifices of its citizens during the civil war.”

Rockville boasted many of the regions most wealthiest business people. Signs of this affluence are still visible today in the magnificent Victorian homes that surround the hill section of Rockville overlooking downtown.
ongoing training and education is the hallmark of a strong Main Street program. This is true at all levels from the Connecticut Main Street Center (CMSC) staff’s own professional development, to the local program managers and local board and volunteers. Training becomes even more critical in a volunteer-driven program such as Main Street. The natural ebb and flow of involvement and turnover of volunteers demands that a high priority is given to ongoing and effective training and educational programs. CMSC held basic training programs last fall in the Main Street Four Point Approach to Downtown Revitalization™ and is now focusing on board training and work plan development.

This winter we brought in two experienced downtown revitalization professionals to work with two of our towns. Patricia Wilson Aden met with the board of the Upper Albany Main Street program in Hartford. Ms. Aden worked with the National Main Street Program focusing on urban programs and also was president of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia. She currently is a consultant working in historic preservation planning as well as downtown revitalization programs. Thom Guzman, the state coordinator for the Iowa Main Street Program, has been leading this very successful state program for 15 years. He came in to work with the board of First Town Downtown in Windsor.

Key information that came out of these two sessions:

**Board Orientation**

At the beginning of one session, meeting expectations were being put up on flip charts. One board member said “We have great enthusiasm, now we need the structure to get things done.” This pretty much hit the nail right on the head as to why CMSC was in town providing training. That structure begins with a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the board and program manager and how they interrelate.

Mr. Guzman presented a number of important rules for programs to follow. Here are a few examples:

**Rule #1:** Don’t ask or expect board members to wear more nor less than two hats!

**Rule #2:** It is not the program manager’s program!!!....Main Street is successful because it is all-inclusive and teaches local empowerment.

Which leads to:

**Rule #3:** Main Street is a volunteer driven program! It is not staff driven, rather staff managed; like the coach on a football team or the conductor of an orchestra.

Ms. Aden facilitated a session on “board norms” - the board’s code of behavior regarding how it will conduct meetings and interact with each other. According to Ms. Aden, “Clearly written board norms will serve as a guide during times of conflict and facilitate the integration of new board members.” Regarding the contribution of the board members during this session, Ms. Aden observed, “The standards of behavior expressed through the board norms were ‘text-book’ quality, generated without the benefit of textbook references.” Some of the standards that were identified include:

- Meetings need to be more than just information distribution - there needs to be discussion on the issues
- Leave every meeting with “to do assignments”
- He/she who speaks the most or loudest is not necessarily getting the most done

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