

The Top Ten Myths about Historic Preservation

By Ken Bernstein

It often surprises me how many misunderstandings abound concerning historic preservation –with some people closing their minds to preservation based on inaccurate information, and others clinging to unrealistic expectations about the impacts or benefits of preservation tools. As a starting point in clearing up these misconceptions, Ken Bernstein offers up a top ten list of the most prevalent myths about historic preservation.

Myth #1: If a property gets designated as a historic landmark, it is protected forever and can never be demolished.

Fact: Landmark designation ensures a more thorough review of demolition proposals but it does not prohibit demolition outright. In the City of Sacramento, designation as a City historic landmark or contributing resource to a historic district will allow the Preservation Commission to object to a demolition permit, subject to appeal to city council.

Many East Coast cities, including New York, do actually prohibit demolition of their landmarks, but these cities also leave an exception for cases of demonstrated economic hardships. Even listing in the National Register of Historic Places, which sounds more elevated than mere local listing, does not provide for more iron-clad protection. Although demolition of a designated landmark in California typically requires preparation of an Environmental Impact Report, pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, to assess the feasibility of alternatives to demolition, a truly determined property owner may be able to obtain approval to destroy even our most cherished landmarks.

Myth #2: Historic Designation will reduce my property values.

Fact: Study after study across the nation has conclusively demonstrated that historic designation and the creation of historic districts actually increases property values. Why? In part, historic designation gives a neighborhood or an individual historic site a cache that sets it apart from ordinary properties. Many buyers seek out the unique qualities and ambiance of a historic property. Historic district designation gives potential homebuyers two rare and economically valuable assurances: that the very qualities that attracted them to their neighborhood will actually endure over time, and that they can safely reinvest in sensitive improvements to their home without fear that their neighbor will undermine this investment with a new monster home of inappropriate new development.

Myth #3: If my property is designated as a historic site, I won't be able to change it in any way, and I don't want my property to become like a museum.

Fact: Owners of designated historic structures may make very significant changes to their structures. Historic preservation laws, at their essence, are not meant to prevent change but, rather, to manage change. The tool to manage change is typically the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, the nationally accepted benchmark for evaluating changes to historic structures.

The Standards don't require that every element of a historic site remain intact: you need not keep every doorknob! However, the most significant, or character-defining, historic elements of a property should be retained. New additional to the historic property are allowed, but should be compatible with the site's historic architecture. The Standards urge the repair of deteriorated historic features, but do allow for replacement where the severity of deterioration leaves no other option.

Myth #4: Preservation is only for the rich and elite, and for high-style buildings.

Fact: Historic preservation isn't just about house museums anymore. Today's preservation movement is increasingly diverse. Recently, the State Office of Historic Preservation published *Latinos in Twentieth Century California*, which makes it easier to nominate historic resources related to Latinos in California. In Sacramento, one of the more recent historic districts is Oak Park's Central Business District, an area that has long been associated with the city's African American community.

Preservation today also focuses not just on grandiose architectural landmarks, but on more modest sites of social and cultural significance. Just look at the small Takko Korean Barbeque restaurant located in a former service station and gas station at the corner of T Street and Alhambra that is listed on the Sacramento Register of Historic and Cultural Resources. Or, consider a current effort to preserve the New Helvetia low income housing development from demolition.

Myth #5: Historic Preservation is bad for business.

Fact: Historic Preservation is at the very heart of our nation's most vibrant economic development and business attraction programs. From Southern California Examples such as Old Pasadena or San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter, to Sacramento's own revival of Midtown in recent decades, or more recently the R Street Corridor. Today's economic development strategies no longer see historic preservation and business development as competing values.

The National Main Street Center, a program that uses historic preservation to revitalize town centers and neighborhoods commercial districts, has actually tracked economic results in 1,700 Main Street communities nationally. These preservation-based programs have created over 231,000 new jobs and resulted in over \$17 billion in reinvestment to date, with every dollar spent on a Main Street program yielding \$40 in economic reinvestment.

Myth #6: Preservation is more expensive than new construction.

This is certainly true at times, but, in fact, historic preservation is typically more cost effective than new construction. Why? Historic buildings certainly do sometimes need upgrades, but these are usually less expensive than the cost of building all-new foundations, structural systems, roofs and building finishes.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation reports that in Chicago, where the public school system is not spending \$2.5 billion to upgrade facilities, bare-bones new construction is costing \$155 per square foot—but renovation is costing just \$130.

The State of California learned the potential savings from historic preservation in comparing the construction of two State office buildings. The historic renovation not only reused and reinvigorated an important landmark from 1914, but it saved taxpayers money by delivering office space at about half the cost per square of the all-new office building just a few years before.

Myth #7: If I buy a historic property, there's lots of government money available to help me fix it up.

While it doesn't necessarily cost more to renovate a historic structure than to building a new one, few large government or foundation grants are available to owners of historic properties, and even those few typically limit eligibility to government agencies or non-profits.

What is available tends to be tax incentives for private owners of historic buildings. Owners of sites listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places may take advantage of a Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit that provides a 20% tax offset for the cost of rehabilitation. National Register properties are also eligible to benefit from conservation easements—binding legal agreements with preservation organizations such as Preservation Sacramento that can allow owners to claim a charitable deduction on their Federal income taxes. Finally, the State's Mills Act program, implemented by local governments throughout the State allows historic property owners to take often-significant property tax reductions. Sacramento is technically a Mills Act community, but hasn't entered into a Mills Act contract with a property owner in many years.

Myth #8: Old buildings are less safe.

Although historic structures do sometimes require structural retrofits or the addition of fire sprinklers to enhance their safety, historic buildings typically perform better than newer construction in earthquakes and other natural disasters. What determines the safety of buildings is the quality of construction, not age, and in many ways buildings just aren't built like they used to.

Los Angeles signature historic structures have survived every major earthquake of the past eight decades. Yet, in the 1994 Northridge earthquake, the most catastrophic damaged occurred not to historic buildings but to newer construction such as parking garages concrete tilt-up buildings, and newer apartments with tuck-under parking.

Myth #9: Preservation is an un-American violation of property rights.

Historic preservation laws no more infringe on property rights than do many other laws and private rules that Americans have long accepted. Through everyone likes to believe my

home is my castle and I can do whatever I want, this statement simply doesn't reflect reality. Zoning laws prevent you from replacing single-family home with an apartment building or a five-story vertical mansion. We should all be happy that such laws prevent our neighborhood from putting a landfill or skyscraper behind our back fence.

If you live in a condominium (or a Roseville gated community), your property rights are limited by Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC&Rs), document that can legally prevent you from owning a pet, washing a car in your driveway, or having a basketball hoop over the garage. CC&R restrictions are far more onerous than historic preservation laws, yet are commonly accepted even by vocal property rights advocates.

Myth #10: Preservationists are always fighting new development and only care about the past.

Historic preservationists do care deeply about the past—generally not just to wallow sentimentally in a bygone era, but as a way of anchoring ourselves as we move forward confidently into the future. Historic Preservation is not about stopping change and is certainly not about squeezing our creative and exciting new architecture and development. Preservation allows us to retain the best of shared heritage to preserve sites of unique quality and beauty, revitalize neighborhoods, spur economic revitalization, and quite simply, create better communities.

Source: <http://www.preservationsacramento.org/preservation-myths>