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Marc Goldmon

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MARC GOLDMON

An Overview of Historic Preservation

Historic preservation is one of those elusive terms that can mean different things to different people. In the United States, historic preservation has its roots in programs such as the Historic America Building Survey (HABS), developed during the Great Depression to put unemployed architects, photographers and draftsmen to work documenting 18th-century and early-19th-century buildings and recording their histories. Early preservation efforts focused on stately homes, typically those associated with historic persons or early presidents; however, a shift occurred in 1966 with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, which called for a national program to include preservation of all cultural properties. This act provided for the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register lists properties having national, state or local significance. Listings on the National Register can be individual buildings, structures, objects, archaeological sites, or districts. In Huntsville, the Twickenham Historic District, the Old Town Historic District, and Alabama A&M University are listed on the National Register.

In the present context, however, historic preservation is the act of preserving and maintaining a recognized historic building, structure, complex, or district in an attempt to learn about and keep a physical historical record for generations to come. Historic properties provide a reference to time and place that no longer exist, and the elements of historic significance may show evidence of ideas, people, values, and a specific sense of place or community that cannot be replicated.

Historic preservation projects can vary significantly in scope. These different applications can be clearly defined and are often combined in most modern projects to some degree. Each structure or building may have varying degrees of deterioration or have few original elements intact. **Although the structure or building may be in poor condition, rarely is an historic structure a total loss.** A careful evaluation by

a reputable building professional, an architect or contractor experienced in issues related to historic preservation, should be done before any material is removed from the site.

Terms and applications of historic preservation reference include the following.

RESTORATION RESTORES AND MAINTAINS ALL OR MOST OF THE ORIGINAL HISTORIC ELEMENTS.

Replacement of any material is limited and is made to match original materials. In some instances, restoration can be done to preserve a particular period, style or material to museum quality.

REHABILITATION RESTORES MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS AND RENOVATES BY CAREFULLY ALTERING OR ADDING TO THE ORIGINAL HISTORIC FABRIC OF THE STRUCTURE.

New construction and alteration work is limited and primarily done to meet current uses, needs or codes.

RENOVATION GENERALLY INVOLVES THE REMOVAL OF SOME ORIGINAL ELEMENTS OF A STRUCTURE AND MAKING ALTERATIONS AND/OR ADDITIONS TO MEET CURRENT USES, NEEDS OR CODES.

In severe cases after renovation, very little is retained that is historic, and usually only the facades (outside walls) and necessary structure are all that are retained. While it may look like an old structure, it's really a new building inside the old building.

The type of preservation effort made on a particular property depends on the present condition of the structure. If the structure has deteriorated because of neglect, a more aggressive approach might be needed because very little of the original structure is available to preserve, and any effort is better than the total loss of the historic structure. But most successful projects employ one or all of these applications in a balanced way to preserve and maintain the historic integrity of the structure, provide necessary modern conveniences, adhere to current building codes,

and allow for maximum use by present and future owners. As long as there are people living in an historic structure and it is being maintained properly it is being preserved for future generations.

They really “don’t build them like they used to” because the handmade craftsmanship characteristic of historic property is either no longer available or is prohibitively expensive. Moreover, the old-growth forests that produced a durable wood species used to make construction materials no longer exist. Heart pine flooring, for example, was the cheapest floor material 120 years ago, but it’s quite expensive today because it is only available through salvage.

Historic preservation also protects the environment. Restoration uses as much of the original materials as possible. Old irreplaceable wood and building materials aren’t carted off to decompose in a landfill, but whenever possible are restored and used again in the house undergoing restoration. Making a once uninhabitable old house habitable is an important form of recycling.

Historic preservation can lead to local historic district designation status, which protects and enhances property values. Historic districts protect historic properties through local ordinances that require approval of renovations, additions or alterations. A governing body reviews proposed alterations and determines whether changes to the property are in keeping with the historic fabric of the neighborhood and district. These ordinances provide protections similar to those used in new housing developments to limit inappropriate additions to the neighborhood (bad color choices, wrong architectural style combinations, bad details) or intrusive additions that overwhelm a site or historic building.

Historic preservation offers many benefits to our neighborhoods and communities. In our increasingly mass-produced, disposable culture, the materials and craftsmanship found in many older buildings are sometimes literally irreplaceable.