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“Preservation Today—Why Does it Matter?”

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As we think about the work of housing, land conservation, historic preservation, and recreation accomplished through the Community Preservation Act, plus the practicalities of operating a community preservation committee, it is important to take a few minutes to think about the “why” of what we are doing in Massachusetts through this act and through the work CPA supporters are doing in communities across the Commonwealth.

It is appropriate to begin with the “why” for many reasons, not least of which is because of the many challenges we face to preservation, conservation and community enrichment today. It is no secret that the current adult generations—Baby Boomers and GenXers—are charged with being self-centered, too “me” focused, unwilling to invest in community rather than for personal gain. We learned in Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* about what he called the decline in social capital, a decline in American citizens’ interest in participating in all kinds of group activities, especially in those that are community focused. How often do we see evidence of this in the decline of community organizations like historical societies or in the unwillingness of citizens to serve at Town Meeting or in other responsibilities of government, even of voting? While we face this charge of not investing in our own communities, we also see ahead of us potential challenges that may further reduce willingness to contribute to the common good. As we conclude 2012, Congress and the president are debating whether to reduce tax deductibility of donations to non-profit organizations, with unknown impacts on the work that we do collectively for our communities.

In a different realm, we have charges against the value of conservation and preservation, suggestions that these efforts are not really good for our communities. Such charges today go beyond the usual libertarian arguments of “it’s a free country and I can do what I want to with my building/property,” to more reasoned and thus more threatening attacks, perhaps best exemplified by the 2011 exhibition presented by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas in New York. Koolhaas says: Koolhaas claimed that twelve percent of the Earth’s landmass is untouchable, whether as U.N. World Heritage site, a plush nature preserve or a lowly landmarked brownstone. “Architects are running out of room...” he complains. He went on say “I think that preservation has become a default position, if you don’t know what to do, preserve it. Bureaucrats and planners are suffering, because they don’t know what else to do. That is where some kind of charter of destruction is needed.”

Many disagree with Koolhaas’ assessment of the current state of preservation and conservation, and we in New England know that we have examples every single day of loss of open space, destruction of old buildings that could otherwise be repurposed, elimination of sound or reclaimable housing stock, and deterioration of public recreational facilities. We can readily show that there is plenty of new construction going on, even in these recent years of a declining

economy, and that changes in our built environment are indeed threatening the very character of our communities in ways that require remedial action on our part. So, is Koolhaas right? Do preservation, conservation and activities such as those supported by the CPA stultify our communities, or are there different forces at work that he fails to recognize? Does preservation matter today, and if so how? While it is likely that we are preaching to the converted among visitors to this website, friends of CPA all have to make the case for the continuation of the act in your communities and need to justify how you use the public funds that are received through the act, so it is good to pause to ask that question, does preservation still matter?

Let's explore then what is called "place making," which is all those factors that go in to making a livable and desirable community. The *Project for Public Spaces* tells us that "Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Put simply, it involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover their needs and aspirations. This information is then used to create a common vision for that place. The vision can evolve quickly into an implementation strategy, beginning with small-scale, do-able improvements that can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them." That's a pretty good definition of what we seek to do in our preservation, conservation, recreation and housing efforts. Community preservation committees are successful when their work includes "asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover their needs and aspirations." This requires us to think about people first, community next, what scale we want, what amenities, what factors that contribute to livability. It raised discussion of walkability, access to stores and government, transportation networks, churches and cultural institutions, and even factors like the diversity we would like to see in our neighborhoods, racial, ethnic and economic; all of which define "our needs and aspirations."

All of us become place makers in our preservation and conservation efforts, and must think about the qualities that we want to see in our communities. I had the opportunity in October 2012 to visit Buenos Aires, Argentina, and to meet with some of the most prominent preservation architects, architectural photographers, and cultural leaders in that city. It is largely a 20th century city, with most of its construction focused between 1910 and 1990. For the last five years a new movement has been growing there called *Basta de Demoler*, "Don't Tear It Down." They are facing the loss of beautiful and historic buildings, changes in the scale of residential neighborhoods, lack of government commitment to care of parks and public amenities. Does this sound familiar? Such challenges are arising even in a city where many of the cultural and historic resources seem relatively recent to those of us who deal regularly with 17th and 18th century buildings. The Argentines were remarkably anxious to talk to people from Greater Boston because they believe that we have created the kinds of tools needed to provide heritage preservation and to nurture a sense of place that infuses a community. They believe that the actions we take, through governmental regulation, through voluntary organizations, through our protection of historic sites and historic buildings, and through a collective commitment to heritage preservation, are models of place making that they want to emulate. Are the Argentines correct? Do we truly do these things well in our communities?

To answer that question we need to look at some of the qualities that we should be successfully preserving if we are indeed fulfilling our roles as preservationists. I would say that examination

is on two levels: one is the personal and one the community. For our personal place making it really is about where and how we want to live. Some of it can be quantified; whether it's a quiet street, or the less busy side of a city street; a pleasant mix of housing types, and that probably means houses of different sizes and styles; tree-lined neighborhoods; open space nearby whether for recreational use or simple as relief from the built up areas; and a sense of place. We want to have something about the character of where we live that makes my neighborhood distinctive: different from the one next door or others in the state.

On the community level, that personal place of mine has to be supported by community-wide qualities. We need to be able to go to the store and the post office without driving for half an hour. We want our kids to be able to go to a neighborhood school that is not too far away, and preferably to walk there. We may need or prefer access to public transportation. I think our lives will be enriched by having high-quality institutions in proximity to our homes, with government and cultural buildings that work and are viewed as assets; places we want to show off when the in-laws come to town.

I had a chance to think more about this at the end of 2012 when I spent some time in Los Angeles where Historic New England presented a keynote address for an international meeting on historic house museums. The conference attendees were staying not far from The Getty Museum, in the Westwood neighborhood, right on Wilshire Blvd. In the morning each day, I walked out to find some breakfast. On one side of the boulevard, where the hotel was located, were largely high rises built in the last ten years. In the half mile I had to traverse in my search for tea, there was only one location for pedestrians to cross the seven-lane-wide street, even though there were side streets far more frequently than that. When I tried to cross to one of those side streets away from the one light, it was a real risk, even on a quiet Saturday morning. Once I got to the other side of the boulevard, however, there was an entirely different neighborhood. Low rise, 2-3 story buildings, some single family houses, some multi-family, mixed together, many built in the 1930s-1950s and some clearly newer; plus a mix of small stores steadily increasing in number as I got nearer to the "village." Westwood Village is pedestrian in scale, walkable with normal-width streets. It has some good restaurants, newsstand, a Starbucks, bus stops, benches, the Armand Hammer museum, and overall a very pleasant environment. While the most costly residences were probably those in the high rise buildings, I probably don't have to tell you that my experience was far better in neighborhood across the street. Importantly, on my walks I regularly encountered people out on the streets of the village, walking their dogs, going for coffee, chatting to neighbors on the low-rise side of the street; where the few people I encountered on the high-rise side, were people like me, travelers walking away from a hotel to get to a place that better met their needs for the day. It was a real study in contrasts; two sides of the same boulevard with two very different community environments.

I don't want to suggest that high-rise is the defining factor here, for some communities are making great successes of high-density high-rise communities, but I do suggest that carefully defining the characteristics we want in our communities: walkability, human scale, access to services, are all essential to making them livable places. A key part of livability is historic preservation. We need to ensure the preservation of some of the desirable characteristics of 18th to 19th century communities that developed on a very human scale in the ages before the automobile captured the preeminent role in community development. That includes preservation

of a mix of periods and styles that provide interesting and appealing backgrounds to our daily activities; preservation and conservation of open space; preservation of community amenities such the Chelmsford Center for the Arts, which hosted the 2012 CPC Conference; community amenities created by past generations and revitalized to serve our needs today.

You can see throughout my comments how the Community Preservation Act and the work done by community preservation committee members and friends fits perfectly my sense of what makes truly desirable and livable communities. While some of the qualities I've mentioned are perhaps subjective and intangible, and represent what a community "feels" like, many are actually quite tangible. Desirability and livability translate in very practical ways to economic benefits, for example. The most highly-dollar-valued residences in the Greater Boston suburbs are in communities that achieve the qualities described here. Community preservation clearly benefits homeowners in the return on investment they receive for their own properties and in lifting whole neighborhoods economically. Most of the highest property value communities in Massachusetts are CPA communities. Most of the communities that draw large numbers of tourists are CPA communities. Cultural tourism dollars flow into our best preservation communities to help support local businesses and the overall economy of the town, state and region. Heritage preservation, open space preservation, and recreational facilities all contribute to attraction of tourists, and an appropriate mix of housing also facilitates those who want to make a community their home.

If we accept that historic preservation and land conservation do indeed contribute to desirability and livability, to the making of wonderful places, then we turn to the tools available to us to attain and sustain the qualities we need and aspire to. My organization, Historic New England, was founded in 1910 specifically to preserve the traditional character of New England. In the early years of the 20th century the only tool available to them was to make historic buildings into museums. By the 1940s the organization had moved into the creation of preservation easements, a tool that protects historic buildings or landscapes without bringing them into public ownership. Our easement program was revised and expanded in the early 1980s and today protects 83 privately-owned properties across New England. Historic districts or historic zoning overlays, and demolition delays are other tools that should be in place to support historic preservation efforts. After all, while museums such as those operated by Historic New England contribute to the qualities of outstanding communities, and can be models for preservation and anchor properties in the community (and are worthy of CPA support), we really need to work at preserving at both the personal and the community levels: private homes, whole neighborhoods, public buildings, as well as historic sites are all essential to creating the right mix for a truly desirable neighborhood. CPA itself is therefore a key tool, one that supports all of this: not only fostering thinking about community priorities and where best to spend resources to meet those priorities, but giving an extraordinary financial ability for Massachusetts communities to support projects that contribute to fulfilling our needs and aspirations, as our place making defines them at the local level. Local decision making is a key asset of the program. Finally the public voice is another very important tool. Speaking out in support of CPA in the community through local newspapers, online news sites, Twitter, Facebook, at public meetings and all other opportunities helps to build understanding and support for the program and for the community values it represents.

I will relate an early experience that was pivotal in my becoming involved in preservation, as I think it speaks to our topic of “preservation—does it matter.” I grew up in New York, on Long Island, where a centerpiece of our community was the Garden City Hotel, a great Georgian brick pile designed by McKim, Mead and White and opened in 1901. It had a wonderful Independence-Hall-like tower, with the cupola that was always lighted at night. Charles Lindbergh stayed there in 1927 on the night before he set off to Paris from nearby Roosevelt Field, and my parents stayed there on their wedding night. It was the site of political gatherings, and social events for luminaries from Long Island’s Gold Coast mansions, Big Band performances and community events of all types. It was a bit mysterious to me; I was never inside the building. During my high school years in the 1970s the hotel was no longer popular. It had reached that seventy year mark when we know that buildings are often the most threatened. At about that age buildings become dated and perhaps worn down, systems fail, their style is no longer in fashion; though they are not yet accepted as historic. The hotel closed, and various proposals to revitalize the vacant building went nowhere. Community preservationists, though we really didn’t call them that forty years ago, wrote letters, worked the newspapers, and were vocal with local government. Though I had never been in the building, it was always there; we passed it going to grandma’s house and we passed it often when we were heading home from nearly anywhere. I saw it all the time out the window of the station wagon. It was a part of my life. I read all the arguments on the hotel’s behalf in the local paper, a paper that used the tower and cupola of the hotel on its masthead as the symbol of the whole community. I didn’t drive yet, but when the time came for the building to come down, I rode my bicycle down to watch the wrecking ball doing its work...and I knew that something special had been lost.

Ten years later condos had been constructed on one half of the twenty-seven acre site, eliminating open space that although privately-owned had once enjoyed by all. A modern hotel was built on the rest of the acres, with an out-of-scale prefabricated little cupola mimicking that of the old hotel stuck incongruously on the top. I’ve stayed at the new hotel and it is fine, but it has no feeling of a distinctive place, no plaque for Lindbergh, and no sense that this was where mom and dad spent the first night of their marriage. It’s just a big box, with a silly cupola on top. On the avenue leading up to the hotel though, there is a house on a corner lot, and on that corner a little garden in which is mounted one of the white concrete urns that used to grace the parapets of the McKim, Mead and White building. Someone saved the urn from the wreckage. When I go back to Garden City, I pay no attention to the modern hotel, but I always look to see if the urn is still there. It is an authentic reminder of what this village once was, and of stories of its past, now probably recognized only by the few of us who became preservationists because we recognized that we need to pass on to future generations the distinctive qualities of the places we call home, and not allow them to be lost.

That is why we support preservation today, and that is what can be accomplished through the work of the Community Preservation Act: recognizing that we need to pass on to future generations the distinctive qualities of the places we call home, qualities that otherwise might be lost.