

THE TOP TEN MYTHS ABOUT HISTORIC PRESERVATION BY KEN BERNSTEIN

Myth #1: If a property gets designated as a historic landmark, it's 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. Although demolition of a designated landmark may require additional preparation 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 design and the creation of historic districts actually increase 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 property buyers 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 property without fear that their neighborhood will undermine this investment with a new "monster building" or inappropriate 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 look like a museum."

Fact: Owners of designed 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 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 additions to the historic property are allowed, but should be compatible with the site's historic architecture. The Standards are guidelines that urge the repair of deteriorated historic features, but do allow for replacement where 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. Preservation today also focuses not just on grandiose architectural landmarks, but on more modest sites of social and cultural value.

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 Pike Place Market in Seattle to the French Quarter in New Orleans or the traditional southern cities such as Charleston and Savannah or Skagway, Alaska to the recent boom in heritage tourism, today's economic development strategies no longer see preservation and business development as competing values.

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

Fact: While it can be true at times, 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 costs 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 now spending \$2.5 billion to upgrade facilities, bare-bones new construction is costing \$155 per square foot – but renovation is costing just \$130.

Myth #7: “If I buy a historic property, there’s a lot of government available to help me fix it up.”

Fact: While it doesn’t necessarily cost more to renovate a historic structure than to build anew, few large government or foundation grants are available to private property owners of historic properties, and 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% offset for the cost of rehabilitation. National Register properties are also eligible to benefit from “conservation easements” – binding legal agreements with preservation organizations that can allow owners to claim charitable deduction on their Federal income taxes. Other than this, having this property designation while applying for private construction loans ensures the lender a safe return on investment.

Myth #8: “Old buildings are less safe.”

Fact: 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, they just don’t build ‘em like they used to.

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

Fact: Historic preservation laws no more infringe on property rights than do many other laws and private rules that Americans have long accepted. Though everyone likes to believe my home is my castle and I can do whatever I want, this statement doesn’t reflect reality. Zoning laws prevent you from replacing your single-family home with an apartment building or a five-story vertical mansion. We should all be happy that such laws prevent our neighbor from putting a landfill or skyscraper behind our back fence.

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

Fact: 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 out 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.