

# Donovan's Lists: Twenty Reasons why Historic Preservation is Smart Growth

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### ABSTRACT

This month, Don Rypkema takes a look at the connection between historic preservation and the Smart Growth movement. Whether it's called "smart growth," "anti-sprawl," or "livable communities," this movement reflects increasing concern on the state and local level about out-of-control, helter-skelter development. Advocates of smart growth seek to balance quality of life with development practices and patterns to achieve livable communities. Preserving open space, easing traffic congestion, redirecting growth toward city centers, and encouraging community participation in planning decisions are a few of the principles of the smart growth movement. Where does historic preservation fit in? At a smart growth conference in New York last spring, Don explained why historic preservation is an essential tool for any community hoping to grow smart and live better. Here, in our second installment of Donovan's Lists are...

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### Twenty Reasons Why Historic Preservation Is Smart Growth

1. Municipalities need financial resources if they are going to grow smart. Vacant, unused, and underused historic buildings that are brought back to life come back as tax-generating assets for a community.
2. New activities--residential, retail, office, manufacturing--in historic buildings reinforce the viability of public transportation.

3. Almost without exception, historic buildings are located where public infrastructure already exists. No new water lines, streets, curbs, or gutters required.
4. If citizens are expected to use their cars less and their feet more, then the physical environment in which they live, work, shop, and play needs to have a pedestrian rather than a vehicular orientation. One of the predominant characteristics of historic areas is their pedestrian accessibility.
5. Another element in the drive to encourage human movement by some other means than the automobile is the interconnection of uses. Since World War II, planning and development practices have resulted in the sharp separation of uses, a direct contrast to historic neighborhoods, which were built from the beginning with a mix of uses in close proximity. Cities with the foresight to readjust their zoning ordinances to encourage the integration of uses are seeing that interconnectivity reemerge in historic areas.
6. Growth isn't smart--regardless of how well it is physically planned--if it encourages the abandonment of existing assets. Reinvestment in historic areas, in and of itself, revitalizes the nearby existing investment of both the public and private sector.
7. Across America, people are moving "back to the city." But almost nowhere is it back to the city in general; in nearly every instance, it's back to the historic neighborhoods and historic buildings within the city. People moving back to the core of a town or city of any size have a positive impact on a whole range of environmental goals.
8. Smart Growth implies not just physical growth, but economic growth. And economic growth means new jobs. But who is creating the net new jobs in America? Not General Motors, not IBM, not Kodak. Eighty-five percent of the net new jobs in America are created by small businesses. While there may be few costs that small businesses can control, there is one--occupancy. Barring massive public subsidies, you cannot build new and rent cheap. Historic and older buildings frequently offer the affordable rent that enables small businesses to get started.
9. Commercial districts are sustainable and successful when they have a diversity of businesses. And that diverse business mix requires a diverse range of rental rates. Only downtowns and older neighborhoods offer such a diversity. Try finding any rental rate diversity in the regional shopping center or the so-called office park. There "ain't" none. Older business districts with their diverse rents are Smart Growth.
10. Smart Growth should also be about construction jobs. Let's distinguish new construction from rehabilitation in terms of creating jobs. As a general rule, new construction is 50 percent labor and 50 percent materials. Rehabilitation, on the other hand, is 60 to 70 percent labor. We may buy a HVAC system from Ohio, sheetrock from Texas, and timber from Oregon, but we also buy the services of the carpenter and plumber, painter and electrician from across the street. They subsequently spend that paycheck for a haircut, membership in the local Y, or a new car, producing a significantly greater economic impact dollar for dollar than new construction. The rehabilitation of older structures is Smart Growth.

11. Solid-waste landfill is increasingly expensive in terms of both dollars and environmental quality. Construction debris makes up 24 percent of most landfill sites, and much of that waste comes from the razing of existing structures. Preserving instead of demolishing our inventory of historic buildings reduces that construction waste. Preserving our inventory of historic buildings is Smart Growth.
12. While New Urbanist development is fully compatible with the goals of Smart Growth, the principles it advocates have already been at work for a century or more in our historic neighborhoods. The sensitive renewal of those neighborhoods is Smart Growth.
13. Smart Growth advocates a density of uses. Historic residential and commercial neighborhoods are built to accommodate that density.
14. Vacant or underused historic buildings are not the liabilities that those favoring demolition claim; they are assets that have not yet returned to productive use.
15. The rehabilitation of older and historic neighborhoods puts jobs where workers already are.
16. Historic preservation is the one form of economic development that is simultaneously community development.
17. Reinvigorating historic neighborhoods reinforces existing schools and allows them to reclaim their important educational, social, and cultural role.
18. No new land is consumed when rehabilitating a historic building.
19. The diverse size, quality, style, and other characteristics of historic neighborhoods stand in sharp contrast to the monotonous character of current subdivisions. The diversity of housing options in a historic neighborhood means that a diversity of human beings can live there.
20. Historic preservation constitutes a demand-side approach to Smart Growth. While the acquisition of greenbelts around cities or the development rights to agricultural properties are important tools in a comprehensive Smart Growth strategy, they do not address the demand for the use of that land. The conversion of a historic warehouse into 40 residential units reduces the demand for 10 acres of farm land; the economic revitalization of a main street reduces the demand for another strip center; the restoration of an empty 1920s skyscraper reduces the demand for another glass and chrome building at the office park.