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Historic Resources

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In the thirty years since official recognition of the value of Portland's historic resources, literally hundreds of local buildings have been recognized as historic (either by designation as a national historic landmark, by listing on the National Register, or by listing as a Local Landmark).

Still, we have important historic buildings in the City which are not officially designated in any way and, therefore, not protected in any way whatsoever against loss.

But the simple act of adding to the list of buildings will only complicate a situation where there is little public money to preserve even a few of the many buildings currently on the list.

We don't need to add more buildings to an already long list, we need more protection of the few historic buildings that are truly important to this community.

The Perspective of an Outsider

In my version of a perfect world, the important historic buildings in the City of Portland would be designated by the City Council. Each of these historic buildings would have a plan for its future. This plan would be developed jointly by the Owner and the City of Portland. Over the years, the plan would be implemented, using the financial and other resources of the Owner and the City as they become available. The result at any time in the future is recognition of the important historical resources in the City and, in those instances where the Owner agrees and public funds are available, an ongoing effort to preserve them for future generations.

In our quest to preserve the City's architectural heritage for our descendants, I think we should start with a list of the historic resources the "community" feels is most worthy of preservation. Among these buildings, special attention should be paid to those buildings which are threatened by natural disasters or owner disinterest in preservation.

Starting at the top of that list, the City should work with the owners of those buildings to come to an agreement about what is needed to preserve that building (or other historic resource) for posterity.

Once that agreement is reached, the City and the Owner should proceed to a further agreement about how that preservation will be realized. (Note: Are there agreements of this kind in existence now?)

Finally, when those agreements are reached, the City and the Owner should work as 'partners' to see that the needed investments are made as agreed.

This strategy differs from the current accepted one: use public agreement on the general goal of historic preservation to produce a list of as many historic buildings as possible. Adopt regulations to force owners to maintain all of the buildings on the list.
as historic resources. Assist owners financially when funds are available, but expect to be woefully short of the financial resources needed. Suffer through a lot of conflict and disappointment over buildings where the owner disagrees with the goal of preservation, but the public cannot agree on the value of preserving the particular building in question—and no public agency has the resources to intervene anyway.

**[From here down, it is blather and bull. Some day I will be able to make sense of it all, but not today.]**

**The Perspective of the Owners**

It is hard to overstate the importance of the owner in the preservation of historic buildings. Ultimately they will decide the future of the building. Certainly, they can be persuaded by well-timed appeals or by financial incentives. They can be forced through regulation to submit their decisions to a public process. They can be influenced by the market. But ultimately they decide.

Which is why the preservation of historic buildings is so difficult. Each owner of each building must decide to invest in the preservation of that building. And as owners and circumstances change over time (hundreds of years, in some cases) investments in preservation must be continued.

*If an historic building is really important to a community, it will be placed in public or quasi-public ownership, put to some productive use, and gifted with a trust fund for operations and maintenance. A few of the historic buildings in Portland¹ enjoy this kind of protection.*

Owners of the historic buildings in Portland will have different goals for their property. Most will be attempting to gain some return on their investment—either monetary or other. Some may accept little return or a return substantially less than what they could get in the market. But it is probably safe to assume that none will be willing to suffer a loss on the building for any great length of time.

Further, even if the current owner is willing to accept a continuing loss, owners can change. The Father may be willing to forego income on an historic property, but will his Wife or Daughter upon his death?

Because the goals of the owner are paramount in his decisions to invest in preservation, they must be known before any intelligent attempts on the part of the public to preserve the historic building can begin.

Owners not only have different goals, they have different strategies for that property. These strategies may also change as owners and circumstances change. The range of options is limited:

1. maintain the property;

¹ City Hall, the church in Sellwood, the Old Church, etc.
2. rehabilitate and then maintain the property; or

Financial incentives (income tax credits, property tax exemptions, etc.) have been successful in achieving some preservation. Where these incentives have not been enough to offset the opportunity cost of maintaining the building, some owners have agreed to forego return on behalf of preservation. As ownership of the building changes hands this agreement is threatened.

3. demolish the building with the intent to redevelop the property.

In those cases where owners cannot be satisfied with a limited return from the existing building, the building faces demolition to permit new construction. As vacant parcels of land get scarce, particularly in expensive downtown locations, the risk of demolition of historic resources rises, as owners of downtown land search for space for their newer high-rise buildings. It is hard to imagine how an historic resource threatened this way could be preserved against the wishes of its owner short of public condemnation and purchase of the property. Even then, what would the public do with such a building?

Currently at issue in Portland is whether the owner of an historic property can be restricted in his options. Should the City delay issuance of a permit to demolish an historic building to afford time for a public review of alternatives; and, in some cases, deny the requested demolition permit?

So long as an historic building remains in sound structural condition, an owner has the option of finding productive uses for that building, i.e. uses that can support financially the rehabilitation and maintenance of the property into the future. Accomplishing that end, however, is not simple.

But in those cases where natural disasters (flood, fire, or earthquake, for example) threaten an historic building, public policy will not always help. We can ban demolition, but not earthquakes. Still, public policy could address the possibility of reducing the impact of natural disasters. A good example is, of course, efforts to reduce the threat of fire through fire and building codes. Another example are efforts to strengthen the resistance of buildings to earthquakes.

The Perspective of the Preservation Community