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Closing presentation: Heritage and Sustainability – Lessons Learned in America

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Donovan Rypkema began by noting that at the recent World Urban Forum in Spain he found that much of the world has begun to recognize the inter-relationship and inter-dependency between sustainable development and heritage conservation, but North America lags behind. Also, although his presentation was titled *Heritage and Sustainability: Lessons Learned in America*, he said he is not sure people have really learned those lessons.

Many advocates in the United States define sustainable development too narrowly. It is not only about environmental sustainability, but also economic and cultural sustainability. To be viable, liveable, and equitable, a community must link environmental responsibility and economic responsibility. The role of heritage conservation becomes much clearer when it is considered in that broader context.

North American planners, architects, landscape architects, and developers are moving away from building endless sprawl, towards building better cities. The movement incorporates some common principles:

- mixed use
- community interaction
- transportation and walkability
- tree-lined streets
- open space
- efficient use of infrastructure
- houses close to the street
- diverse housing
- high density
- reduced land consumption
- links to adjacent communities
- enhances surrounding communities
- pedestrian friendly

The principles are exactly what historic neighbourhoods currently provide—they just need protection. It is also important to have effective programs of centre-city revitalization. It is hard to find a single example of successful downtown revitalization strategy where historic building conservation was not key.

Heritage conservation's contribution to the environmental area of sustainable development takes the form of "embodied energy," or the total expenditure of energy involved in the creation of a building and its constituent materials. When a heritage building is lost this energy is thrown away. It is often replaced with new materials that have consumed vastly more energy.

Smart Growth is a broad-based sustainable development movement in the United States, which enjoys widespread support across political, ideological and geographical boundaries. It has a clear set of principles:

- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.
- Create walkable neighbourhoods.
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration.
- Foster distinctive, attractive places with a sense of place.
- Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost-effective.
- Mix land uses.
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
- Provide a variety of transportation choices.
- Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities.
- Take advantage of compact building design.

If a community did nothing but protect its historic neighbourhoods, it would have met every Smart Growth principle.

A frequently under-appreciated benefit of historic buildings is their role as natural incubators for small business—firms employing fewer than 20 people create 85% of all net-new jobs. New construction uses 50% labour and 50% materials, while rehabilitation uses 60 to 70% labour. It is usually local, while materials are often produced far away.

If a city could establish a program to rehabilitate as little as 3% of its building stock per year it would have perpetual employment in the building trades. Mr. Rypkema compared the economic benefit of highway construction, building construction, and historic building rehabilitation:

- \$1 million highway expenditure might create 32 jobs, \$1.2 million in household income, \$100,000 in state taxes, and \$85,000 in local taxes;
- \$1 million new building expenditure might create 36 jobs, \$1.2 million in household income, \$103,000 in state taxes, and \$86,000 in local taxes;
- \$1 million expenditure on historic building rehabilitation might create 38 jobs, \$1.3 million in household income, \$110,000 in state taxes, and \$92,000 in local taxes.

Heritage tourism is another area that consistently emerges as a major component of preservation's economic impact. In Virginia a study concluded that heritage tourists stay longer, visit twice as many places, and spend 2.5 times as much money on a per-trip basis. Other studies show similar trends.

Research also finds that local historic districts do affect property values. Properties within local designated historic districts appreciate at rates greater than other local areas, and faster than in similar, non-designated areas. The worst-case scenario has been an equivalent rate of appreciation for historic district property.

In a globalized world it is necessary to be economically competitive, so a community must position itself to compete worldwide. A large measure of that competitiveness will be quality of life, and built heritage is a major factor. In reality, there are two globalizations taking place: economic and cultural. The assumption that cultural globalization is unavoidable has not been challenged. Economic globalization has widespread positive impacts—cultural globalization ultimately diminishes everyone. A community can participate in the positive benefits of economic globalization through the adaptive re-use of heritage buildings, while simultaneously mitigating the negative impacts of cultural globalization.

In the long run the matter of cultural and social responsibility may be the most important. Very expensive solutions are being proposed to the current U.S. housing crisis, but the most obvious is barely on the radar screen: stop tearing-down older historic housing. In the last 30 years the US has lost 6.3 million year-round housing units from the inventory of older homes, and more than 80% were single-family residences. As a result millions of American families are currently paying for newer housing that they cannot afford. When cities implement policies to preserve older housing stock, they are meeting the social responsibility part of sustainable development.

Economic integration is as important as affordability. America is not nearly as diverse on a neighbourhood level as it is nationally. The exception exists only in historic neighbourhoods, which have rich and poor, Asian and Hispanic, college graduates and high school dropouts being neighbours in the truest sense of the word. Cities need this kind of economic integration.

Not only is labour-intensive historic preservation work an economic benefit; it is also a social benefit because of the relatively high-paying work for those without advanced education. Historic preservation and downtown revitalization are forms of economic development that are also community development, and ultimately part of social responsibility.

“There can be no significance without memory,” said Mr. Rypkema, and a city’s historic buildings are indeed its memory.

In conclusion, Mr. Rypkema said any claim for rights that is not balanced with responsibilities makes civilization less civil, results in an entitlement mentality, and makes for a nation of mere consumers of public services rather than of citizens. Heritage conservation is a “responsibility movement” rather than a “rights movement” that urges people toward the responsibility of stewardship not merely the right to ownership. Sustainability means stewardship and there can be no sustainable development without a central role for heritage conservation.

