

Historic preservation boosts Colorado's economy

www.bizjournals.com/denver/blog/broadway_17th/2013/03/historic-preservation-boosts.html

Many people are passionate about the history of Denver, particularly as seen at some of its architecturally magnificent and enduring structures.

When you walk through LoDo, it's easy not only to see what was, but also what is. Several of Denver's great neighborhoods are thriving because of historic preservation. Most cities – Denver included – are full of architectural and decorative treasures that would be lost forever if not properly preserved.



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Rhonda Maas

Here's why you should be passionate, too. Repairing and maintaining the city's historic structures preserves Denver's history, increases property values and creates a vibrant downtown culture. It's also smart and sustainable to adapt and repurpose old buildings. Restoration is the ultimate green practice, reducing consumption of new resources, re-using existing structures and recycling materials.

We live in a transient society, so preserving our history through its structures helps to anchor us, providing a distinct sense of place for Denver's citizens and historical context for our children. Through our connections to a well-preserved past, we can appreciate the craftsmanship of a bygone era.

Many architects draw on historic buildings for inspiration in constructing new ones. As [Mark Twain](#) declared, there is no such thing as a new idea.

Boosting the economy

Historic preservation and restoration also fuels our economy. Historic-preservation projects have created nearly 35,000 jobs in Colorado, generating \$2.5 billion in economic impact, according to The Economic Power of Heritage and Place, a 2011 report commissioned by The Colorado Historical Foundation. This includes 34,398 jobs, \$843 million in household earnings, \$6.5 million in business income taxes, \$17.5 million in personal income taxes and \$49.1 million in Colorado sales taxes.

The report also confirmed that property values for all areas examined increased at least twofold after receiving historic designation. If doubling property values doesn't contribute to a vibrant and economically healthy downtown, I don't know what does.

For 30 years, we have witnessed the transformation of Lower Downtown, which in the 1980s had a vacancy rate of nearly 40 percent and was peppered with foreclosed properties. In 1988, the city council passed the Lower Downtown Historic District ordinance, opening the door for widespread rehabilitation of the district's old structures, many of which had fallen into disrepair. Office, galleries, restaurants, bars and shops began inhabiting the newly restored spaces, and young residents began relocating to LoDo's converted warehouse lofts.

After receiving historic designation, housing stock in LoDo grew from 89 units to more than 600 within eight years, according to an article by [Edward T. McMahon](#) in Urbanland, titled "From Skid Row to LoDo." The last foreclosed property was sold to a private developer in 1993, and by 1995, the area was home to 55 restaurants and clubs, 30 art galleries and 650 residences.

A lure for tourists

Historic preservation also is a key driver behind tourism. In 2008, heritage tourism in Colorado generated \$244 million in visitor spending. Heritage tourists are seeking places and activities that authentically represent the stories of the past.

"Colorado's heritage tourists rank the preservation of historic areas, historic towns, locally owned and unique shops, fairs or events, and cultural sites as the most important features that would make a place enjoyable to visit," according to the Colorado Historical Foundation report. Heritage tourists typically spend more money, are more likely than other visitors to come from out of state and stay longer than other tourists.

Properly preserving our historic structures also is the ultimate green practice. Proper renovation doesn't just rescue buildings of the past for present use; it ensures the longevity and structural integrity of the structure for years to come. In contrast, neglected maintenance or bad repairs can hasten a building's demise.

Razing a historic structure wastes energy, and any new structure built in its place likely would be far less energy-efficient. While drafty old buildings waste a lot of energy, restoring stone walls and mortar joints properly with compatible materials can make the buildings airtight so they can be heated and cooled as efficiently as new buildings. Steel and plastic – common new building materials – consume far more energy to produce than brick, plaster and concrete, the stuff of which historic buildings are constructed.

The unique, rehabilitated neighborhoods of Denver – Curtis Park, LoDo, Highlands, Platte Valley, to name a few – have created a thriving downtown full of culture and character. And the evidence proves it; caring for the historic structures properly benefits all who live, work and play in Denver.

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