HISTORIC PRESERVATION CO-EXISTS WITH NEW TECHNOLOGY, AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND MAKES THEM ALL BETTER.

By Russ Carnahan

Mr. Appelbaum of the New York Times Editorial Board argues in his opinion piece January 26, 2020 that historic preservation hurts cities, obstructs change like rooftop solar and has therefore run amok. Respectfully, he's got it wrong.

Ironically, he lives in the Capitol Hill Historic District in the heart of Washington DC. I live in the Compton Heights Historic District in the heart of St. Louis. People choose to live in historic homes and districts for many reasons: history, culture, architecture, charm and uniqueness are among reasons often cited. We protect these parts of our history because they are important and have unique value to our communities and citizens. They also are economic engines for small business, re-development, tourism, and living classrooms for education. This is not just my opinion. There are multiple studies from PlaceEconomics and the National Trust for Historic Preservation Research and Policy Lab that clearly show how historic preservation helps cities. First, historic districts often cover very little of a city’s land area, on average 5%. These areas also tend to be the densest parts of the city from a population and housing unit standpoint. The buildings in historic districts need repair from time to time and rehabilitation work offers more jobs per dollar than new construction. Small businesses, start up businesses, and women-and-minority-owned businesses disproportionately choose to locate in historic buildings for their size, charm, and affordability. When visitors tour Spokane, San Antonio, Savannah or any other city, they see the revitalized downtown and historic neighborhoods not the stripmall.

To boil it down, Mr. Appelbaum's two big beefs are that preservation “madness” is:

1. preventing change to new energy efficient upgrades like rooftop solar and
2. contributing to homelessness and unaffordable housing.

Neither of these claims are supported by the facts. Buildings are constantly changing, and it is commonplace for any neighborhood, historic or not, to have zoning, regulations and standards established by the local community. Historic districts promote and protect what is unique and has value while incorporating change. If historic buildings didn't change with times and technology, they would still have outhouses, no indoor plumbing, and no AC. Historic buildings are constantly balancing historic features and modern improvements like better insulation, tighter building envelop, efficient lighting with timers, storm window inserts, high efficiency HVAC available with small diameter ductwork to minimize disturbing historic features. And what is often missed and worth a reminder here--the greenest building is the one that’s already built because of the embodied energy and carbon that was devoted to produce them.

The National Trust’s Preservation Green Lab, the Urban Land Institute, the Green Building Council, Smart Growth America, and others have documented well the reasons that keeping and reusing old buildings and communities is “green.”

As you can have your cake and eat it too, you can have your historic house and energy efficiency modern upgrades too.
Let’s consider the specific argument about solar panels. As is most often the case, his neighbor and the historic district came to an accommodation and figured out how to get the solar project done. People who believe in the value of historic preservation are in my experience wildly pragmatic. Successful co-existence between preservation and the constant beat of new technology takes a combination of respect for history, creativity, and common sense.

New technology creates new solutions--like the indoor plumbing craze of earlier times. Today we have solar roof shingles that look like regular shingles, transparent glass panes are being developed that are solar enabled, and a host of other technologies deployed and in development. So, I'm confident that historic preservation and new technology will be living happily ever after.

The last thing I'd like to address is the unfair and incorrect information about Affordable Housing. Let's be clear Historic Preservation contributes to Affordable Housing and has been and continues to be part of the solution. On January 31st, Preservation Action submitted a Comment Letter to HUD in response to the request for information from the White House Council on Eliminating Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing. We acknowledge there is clearly an affordable housing crisis, but historic buildings have been a primary source for such needed housing. Keeping our older housing maintained and occupied, both in historic districts and elsewhere, needs to be a central strategy for housing affordability. Again, this is not just my opinion it is a demonstrable fact.

According to data from the American Housing Survey, the housing costs for older housing is less. Additionally, historic preservation has been used as one of the tools for communities to stabilize neighborhoods and spur economic development. Historic preservation leads to increased revenue from property taxes, creation of new businesses and, since historic preservation is more labor intensive than new construction, more job creation. Utilization of the Federal Historic Tax Credits (HTC) to spur local economic development has been well documented. The HTC is often used in combination with the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC). In fact, according to the National Park Service’s 2018 Historic Tax Credit Annual Report, the HTC has produced over 166,000 Low- and Moderate-income affordable housing units.

I hope Mr. Appelbaum will enjoy his historic neighborhood even more after reading this. Our history and technology are gifts that keep on giving and adapting from generation to generation.

(Russ Carnahan is President of Preservation Action (preservationaction.org) a 501(c)4 non-profit organization created in 1974 to serve as the national grassroots lobby for historic preservation. He served in the U.S. Congress from Missouri, 2005-2013, and Co-Chaired both the Historic Preservation Caucus and the High Performance Building Caucus)