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Reviewer

Book Review
Reviewed Work:
*The Past and Future City*
by Stephanie Meeks, with Kevin C. Murphy

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The Past and Future City is a well-researched, heavily footnoted argument that convincingly makes the case for retaining fine-grained (small, densely-packed buildings), historic downtowns and neighbourhoods in America and around the world. As the president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the author, Stephanie Meeks, appreciates the triumphs and tragedies of historic downtowns across the United States. Preservationists have long made passionate arguments for saving historic places. Traditional arguments have been almost exclusively qualitative in nature. Meeks, and a growing number of preservationists, including most notably, Donovan Rypkema, are adding quantitative evidence to a field that has long clung to a familiar list of heritage attributes that are difficult, if not impossible, to measure.

Meeks opens this fact-filled, well-armed manifesto by establishing that each one of us has an inherently strong attachment to place. Place is our human compass; largely defined by our built environment. Preservation recognizes, esteems, and unlocks the “powers of place.” The author brings forth a litany of examples to support this idea. Urban scholar Ed McMahon characterizes it well when he notes, “Place is what makes your hometown different from my hometown … In the Old Economy, markets mattered. In the New
economy, place matters most … In a world where capital is footloose, if you can’t differentiate [your city] from any other place, you will have no competitive advantage. The same is true of a project or a community or a building” (p. 18). The author does not merely reprint convincing quotations, she employs statistics to support the statements. The numbers support McMahon’s conclusions as “two-thirds of college-educated millennials say they pick the city they want to live in first and then look for a job.”

In the 1960s, Jane Jacobs was a powerful force standing up against the wholesale razing and redevelopment of neighbourhoods. Jacobs was a prophet for preservation whose words remain powerful today. Perhaps her most famous slogan, “Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings - new ideas must use old buildings” is a shrewd assessment of the reality that for most new business ventures, new construction is both too expensive and too constraining – it is simply not an option. Destruction of downtown buildings is often initiated on the promise of revitalization, but if new businesses are unable to participate, then we stand to lose more than iconic buildings – we also gamble against the stable local businesses of the future. Again, the astute Jacobs notes that we will not be judged “by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed.” Meeks effectively collects and parades before the reader all of the classic Jacobs one-liners so that their truth might speak to a new generation of preservationists.

After trumpeting the sage arguments of Jacobs to establish what feels right about historic preservation, Meeks transitions to a quantitative analysis of the economic value of preservation. She presents data from the National Trust’s Green Lab – an arm of the Trust that crunches big data in support of what the lab terms “older, smaller, better” neighbourhoods. Graphs and charts are presented to illustrate the benefits of finely-grained, old neighbourhoods. The generally age-diverse buildings of these neighbourhoods are contrasted with newer, larger buildings in newly developed areas to show that the former support more jobs, more locally owned
businesses, and attract a greater diversity of people in a more walkable environment that is livelier for more hours during the day.

Making it clear that she is not stuck in the past, Meeks identifies ten steps outlining how communities can make their future cities more liveable. Infill is presented as an opportunity for new construction, but new buildings need to take lessons from old buildings in terms of being built with compatibility and adaptability in mind. Old buildings, Meeks points out, did not become old by being built with rigid frameworks and jarring aesthetics.

When discussing adaptability in greater depth, Meeks successfully conveys the marketing allure and delightful experience of converting old buildings for new uses. This is perhaps historic preservation’s greatest strength. People love to experience old buildings in new ways. The brewing industry has learned this truth, as have restaurants, publishing houses, professionals, and studios of all kinds. Even hipsters love converted lofts. The preservation movement has effectively moved beyond house museums. Similarly, Schools have discovered character places make for creative spaces. Perhaps there is no better example than the Savannah College of Art and Design where 102 of the school’s 110 buildings are examples of adaptive reuse. The book contains a liberal sprinkling of great quotes from notable people, meant to capture the essence of the subject. On revitalization, a former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil says, “There is nothing that flatters a neighbourhood – indeed, an entire community – more than the revival of such ‘lost’ spaces” (p. 161).

Meeks even addresses the criticisms of historic preservation. She acknowledges the imbalance reflected in our registry of historic places – places predominantly associated with wealthy, white males. She notes, with examples, that this is changing. The site of a former slave market, a community handball court, and purpose-built schools for black children in the South show how the scope of what ought to be registered is expanding. So is the way in which places are protected. Community land trusts have saved places like New York City’s
Chinatown, while unprotected ethnic neighbourhoods, like Little Italy, have essentially disappeared.

Gentrification, another criticism of historic preservation, is also explored. New York’s High Line (p. 204) is cited as a particularly stark example where property values doubled along the erstwhile elevated railway trestle in just eight years following its transformation into a 1.5 mile green belt. Meeks points out that more can be done to mitigate these jarring spikes during the planning stages of such projects but that the term “gentrification” is tossed about so frequently that we tend to think the reality of it is commonplace. Examples of true gentrification – where poor people of colour are displaced by well-off white people – Meeks claims, are actually quite rare and that the socio-economic status of most neighbourhoods is remarkably stable over time (p. 206).

Finally, Meeks delves into environmental factors. Our society is becoming increasingly trained to reduce, recycle, and reuse. “It simply does not make sense,” Meeks points out, “to recycle cans and newspapers to save energy and not recycle buildings” (p239). Preservationists have been spouting the mantra, “the Greenest Building is the one that’s already built,” since Carl Elefante first used the phrase in a 2009 essay. Indeed, it is widely accepted that in most cases building reuse produces less of an environmental impact than new construction. The comparison becomes even more skewed when one considers that many of our modern buildings are built with a life expectancy. Once again, Meeks produces data to back up key arguments.

Who is the intended audience of *The Past and Future City*? It doesn’t appear to be preservationists – unless it is Meeks’s intention to preach to the converted. No, the book is far too full of well-known accounts of Jane Jacobs, colourful but familiar preservation quips and arguments long employed by preservationists, to be targeted at those already in the proverbial trenches. Understanding the philosophy of preservation seems to be something that one either “gets”, or does not.
This book is an ideal read for those who are on the cusp of “getting it”. It is also a prod for those who are almost there or those who have just arrived and need the tools to articulate their new position. This book is for municipal decision makers and influencers – those planners and councillors, bloggers and talk-radio hosts who like to talk about how to make better cities. Yet, the concluding pages contain a couple of profound nuggets that are squarely directed at long-time heritage advocates. The first is a quote from W. Brown Murphy who states that preservation “is no longer perceived as preserving the past. It is more and more understood as wisely managing change.” The second is an acknowledgement of bad habits from which comes Meeks’s admonishment to preservationists for cultivating a movement of “no”. She encourages preservationists to break with the bad habits and become a movement of “yes”.

*The Past and Future City* is a nutshell of preservation arguments that thoroughly conveys the thrust and passion of the preservation movement and will surely succeed in convincing many readers of the significance and advantages of saving historic places.

Joe Ballard is president of Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia. He is a senior preservation consultant with the cultural resource firm, Vineberg & Fulton Ltd. He has experience in architectural history, museum management, and historic interpretation. A great advocate for historic buildings, he owns one of the oldest commercial properties in Truro, Nova Scotia. He has written dozens of articles on heritage preservation and has two books due out in 2018.