

Buffalo Historic Preservation Issues and Opportunities Assessment

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Introduction

The Northeast Office of the National Trust, the Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontier, the Preservation Coalition of Erie County, and the Campaign for Greater Buffalo History, Architecture and Culture commissioned an issues and opportunities assessment to identify ways to enhance the visibility and effectiveness of preservation related activities in Buffalo to build on the successful collaboration to bring the National Trust for Historic Preservation 2011 conference to the city.

This report is the product of the consultant's review of a wide range of documents, news articles, and other background information, and two days of interviews with individuals inside and outside the formal preservation community. The report begins with a set of findings in four major areas related to the status and future of historic preservation in Buffalo:

- strengths;
- weaknesses;
- challenges; and
- opportunities.

Following these findings, the report presents recommendations for how the Buffalo preservation community and its local, state and national partners can build on past successes and increase the effectiveness of preservation efforts in Buffalo and preservation's contributions to economic revitalization and quality of life in the city.

Findings

This assessment is not comprehensive in nature. It reflects the views of a range of individuals active in or familiar with historic preservation organizations and activities in Buffalo and interested in the role preservation, neighborhood revitalization and heritage tourism can play in revitalizing the city. Many different observations and ideas were offered in the interview process, not all of which have been captured here. The purpose of this summary is to highlight themes that emerged with a level of consistency that suggests a more extensive assessment process would tend to reinforce rather than conflict with these findings.

Strengths

The Buffalo preservation community has many successes to celebrate and strengths to build on.

Extraordinary collection of historic and cultural resources. Buffalo has a wealth of architectural treasures from a system of parks and parkways designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, to national architectural treasures designed by architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan, H.H. Richardson, Stanford White, Richard Upjohn, Daniel Burnham and Eliel and Ero Saarinen. It has many charming historic neighborhoods and major natural and cultural attractions like Niagara Falls and the Chautauqua community in close proximity.

High profile preservation successes. Buffalo has succeeded in preserving a number of the area's mostly highly visible and valued landmarks including Shea's Theatre, the Guaranty Building, the Roycroft Inn, Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House Complex, and Kleinhans Music Hall among others. A community developed plan is in place to guide the restoration and re-use of Erie Canal Harbor along the city's waterfront and significant progress has been made in current efforts to restore and re-use the Richardson Complex, the old Buffalo State Hospital in the city's Elmwood village.

Effective grassroots neighborhood revitalization projects. Grassroots, community led efforts are underway in many parts of the city to preserve and revitalize historic neighborhoods. These are limited in scope relative to the need, but coalitions have been formed to try to expand this activity, building on the successes achieved to date.

Major historic schools renovation initiative. Buffalo is in the middle of a multi-year, multi-million dollar effort to rehabilitate historic schools throughout the city, an endeavor described by some as the largest historic preservation project Buffalo has ever seen.

Wide array of heritage tours. Buffalo offers its citizens and visitors a variety of quality heritage tours to show-off its resources and tell its stories from the offerings of the Preservation Coalition of Erie County and the Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontiers' Buffalo Tours program, to the Campaign for Greater Buffalo's open air bus tours, to a Sanctuary to Speakeasy tour led by Motherland Connexions that begins at the Michigan Street Baptist Church. Efforts are underway to expand many of these activities.

Growing appreciation of preservation in the business and development communities. The potential for historic preservation to serve as an engine for economic development is beginning to be recognized and is reflected in increased downtown rehabilitation activity symbolized by the Genesee Gateway Project, the Erie Canal Harbor project and others and a growing interest in cultural tourism possibilities.

Strong financial support from the state, foundations and private individuals. The state of New York is investing millions of dollars in the rehabilitation of the city's

historic schools and the effort to restore the Richardson complex. Private individuals, businesses and foundations have been critical to the efforts to restore other landmark properties and individual historic houses and neighborhoods in Buffalo.

Committed preservation volunteers. Buffalo has many citizens who share a commitment to their community, an interest in its history and historic resources, and a belief in the potential of these resources to make major contributions to the economy and quality of life in the city. They donate time, energy and resources to advance the role of preservation in Buffalo.

Buffalo Niagara Preservation Consortium. A consortium of businesses and organizations interested in historic and cultural resources and tourism, led by the Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau, put together the successful bid to bring the National Trust for Historic Preservation Conference to Buffalo in 2011 to showcase the city and build awareness and appreciation of what it has to offer.

Weaknesses

For all of Buffalo's assets and strengths related to its heritage, there are significant weaknesses in the capacity of the city's preservation organizations and enterprises that make it difficult for preservation to become a strong pro-active player in re-building Buffalo.

Lack of a strong lead preservation organization. The lack of a strong, full-service preservation organization creates significant gaps in the preservation leadership and services available in the city. There is a reasonable amount of effective advocacy being done in connection with individual issues and properties, but this is not formally coordinated in any way. There is a program of periodic lectures and a landmark signage program, but other educational outreach is limited. There is no organization providing technical assistance and training for city and non-profit preservation board members. There is no organization taking the lead in promoting survey work and use of historic tax credits and easements. There is a lack of leadership in coordinating the response of the preservation community to key issues as they emerge and in reaching out to various local, state and national partners to strengthen the presence and effectiveness of preservation in Buffalo.

Limited vision for preservation. The lack of leadership and coordination of preservation activities in Buffalo has resulted in a somewhat limited vision for historic preservation. Most of the successful preservation activity in Buffalo and surrounding communities has focused on saving individual landmarks rather than neighborhoods, vernacular architecture, and landscapes. There is limited diversity in the preservation community in terms of people involved, buildings and neighborhoods being preserved and stories being told.

Limited organizational capacity in existing preservation organizations. All of Buffalo's non-profit preservation organizations have accomplishments they can be proud

of, but the strength of individual organizations waxes and wanes over time, depending on the individuals involved. None of the current preservation organizations has sufficient resources to pay a full-time professional staff member. At present they are led by volunteer directors or partially paid staff, some of whom have preservation training and experience, some of whom do not. Fundraising capacity in these groups is limited. There is a general lack of communication, coordination and trust among the preservation non-profits. This lack of organizational coordination, structure and capacity leads to over-lap in some areas and inattention to others and the periodic friction between groups is distracting and counter-productive.

Lack of surveys and adequate code enforcement. Buffalo has some important properties with landmark protection and a few historic districts, but there is a vast array of resources that are eligible for state and national registers of historic properties and suitable for local designation that have not been identified, listed or protected. The lack of survey work and limited amount of code enforcement are contributing to a large demolition by neglect problem with the result that many of Buffalo's historic buildings and neighborhoods are at great risk of being lost.

Activities that are more re-active than pro-active. The limited capacities of existing organizations means that their activities tend to be more reactive than proactive in nature, trying to keep "bad things" from happening, with limited time to engage in proactive planning, education and outreach. This contributes to them being seen by people outside the preservation community as "obstructionist." The major exceptions to this are the independent private corporations that have been created to focus on the preservation of individual, landmark properties. These efforts in general have been quite successful.

Human and financial resources "left on the table." There are many talented and dedicated people working for preservation causes in Buffalo, but the lack of strong leadership, organizations and decision-making processes is limiting what they can accomplish. There is almost certainly untapped potential to build the level of membership in preservation organizations thereby strengthening political influence, credibility and fundraising capacity. There are state agencies and national, state, regional and local foundations that have not been approached for funding by Buffalo's preservation non-profits in recent years and/or have discontinued funding preservation groups in Buffalo because these groups have lacked the organizational capacity to deliver when funding has been granted in the past.

Challenges

It is important to acknowledge that the city of Buffalo faces a number of serious economic and social challenges that have significant implications for the future of historic preservation in Buffalo as well.

Declining population and high level of poverty. As a result of national economic and demographic shifts, Buffalo has suffered decades of population decline from a high of close to 600,000 people in the mid-20th century to less than 300,000 people today. The

loss of people and major economic enterprises has left Buffalo as one of the poorest cities in the country, with a large inventory of vacant and abandoned buildings. These trends have reduced tax revenues, limited demand for space, and kept the rents that can be charged for space relatively low. All of the factors have major implications for the economic feasibility of restoring Buffalo's historic buildings.

An aggressive citywide demolition program. To deal with the abandoned property problem and reduced demand for residential, commercial and industrial property, the city of Buffalo applied for and received state funding that will cover a portion of the cost of demolishing 5,000 vacant structures in five years, the so-called "5 in 5" plan. At present there is no clear neighborhood revitalization strategy guiding this effort and there are concerns that it is not being coordinated with the successful ongoing community revitalization efforts around the city or the major historic neighborhood schools renovation initiative. The threat of this demolition program to historic resources and neighborhoods is heightened by the fact that so many historic resources remain unidentified and unprotected.

Buffalo Preservation Board Workload. The Buffalo Preservation Board is charged with reviewing all requests for demolition or change to properties with local historic designation. It is also charged with reviewing all of the properties slated for demolition in the mayor's "5 in 5" plan. The addition of a full-time professional staff member to work with the board is a major step forward, but the workload is over-whelming, especially for a volunteer board with a number of members who have little or no background in historic preservation. The Board's current responsibilities are so great it is not able to carry out full review of all the proposed demolitions and changes, let alone undertake additional survey and designation work to identify and protect valuable historic resources.

Failure to recognize preservation as an economic development tool for the city. Historic preservation is not integrated into the city's economic development agenda. Many in Buffalo still view economic development in traditional terms and have not incorporated the idea that preservation of historic buildings, commercial areas and neighborhoods, and the development of heritage tourism can be cornerstones of rebuilding Buffalo's economy. All of the economic incentives in the city favor demolition over rehabilitation and permitting and review processes for historic rehabilitation projects are cumbersome and fragmented.

An embarrassment of riches. Like a number of other historic cities in the northeast and mid-west that have lost substantial population, Buffalo has a very large stock of historic resources relative to its population. The number of historic structures exceeds the number the population and economy will be able to rehabilitate and reuse in the foreseeable future. This places great pressure on the preservation community and the city to determine what it is most important to preserve and how to do it.

Opportunities

While Buffalo preservationists face a number of challenges, there are some major opportunities to capitalize on if they can develop the organizational structure and capacity to make this possible.

Realize more of the heritage /cultural tourism potential. The success of Buffalo's heritage tour programs suggests the potential for heritage and cultural tourism to be an important part of Buffalo's future economy. There is real opportunity for additional product development and marketing of tours and other historic and cultural attractions. The city has many different stories to tell from its rich architectural heritage, to its commercial and industrial history, to the stories of the many different people who have made Buffalo their home. There are major opportunities to connect with important historical, cultural and recreational sites throughout the city and the region and build on the partnership with the Convention and Visitors Bureau and others that led to success in securing the National Trust's 2011 conference.

Make preservation a cornerstone of Buffalo revitalization. With new investments coming into Buffalo's downtown and neighborhoods, the time is right to get the word out about the role preservation can play in bringing businesses, residents and visitors back to Buffalo's downtown and revitalizing its neighborhood residential and commercial areas. Forming partnerships between preservationists and successful community revitalization groups, highlighting recent community revitalization successes, and marketing them to decision-makers and the community at large are important ways to show how preservation can be a centerpiece of Buffalo's renaissance.

Enhance awareness and availability of incentives for preservation-based development. There are a number of preservation incentives available to developers and individuals in Buffalo that are under-utilized from federal historic preservation tax credits to the city's urban homesteading program. Preservationists could serve as ambassadors for these programs. Opportunities also exist for preservationists to work with others to get a "smart" building code that encourages preservation and "green building," and a more user-friendly permitting process that maintains appropriate preservation reviews and standards, and a local real estate tax abatement program for rehabilitated properties if one does not already exist. Lobbying with others for a stronger state rehabilitation tax credit is another way to level the playing field between rehabilitation and new construction and make more historic rehabilitations financially feasible.

Capitalize on the potential of the Trust conference in 2011. The Buffalo preservation and tourism communities can do more than make the practical preparations required to host the National Trust conference in 2011. They can use the fact that the conference is coming to stimulate a series of events: workshops, conferences, neighborhood outreach activities, to elevate awareness of Buffalo's rich heritage, what historic preservation has to offer and the role it can play in community revitalization. The fact that this national conference is coming to Buffalo in three years means that the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Preservation League of New York, and local and regional foundations

have indicated a willingness to help the local preservation community find ways to capture some long-term benefits from hosting this event.

Broaden the movement. The preservation community in Buffalo is still small and described by some as elite. Many avenues are open to change this from expanding the kinds of resources being identified and restored, to telling a broader array of stories, to reaching out to a wider coalition of people within the city and beyond. The opportunities to build alliances with smart growth advocates, the tourism industry, neighborhood groups, colleges and universities in the area, community foundations and other potential partners interested in the future of the city and the region are almost unlimited.

Recommendations

Preservationists in Buffalo have achieved a number of advocacy and restoration successes over the years. In moving forward, the default option for the preservation community is to continue the status quo, with the preservation organizations operating largely independently at varying levels of effectiveness, depending on their leadership and funding at the time. If this option is chosen, there will continue to be successes, but there will also be gaps in preservation services in the city and limited coordination of activities. Under this scenario a number of people, organizations and funding sources with an interest in preservation are likely to remain on the sidelines.

The primary alternative to the current situation is to create new forums, structures and leadership to transform the preservation landscape. This should not be undertaken lightly. It will require substantial amounts of volunteer time and energy, a committed group of individuals dedicated to making this happen, and funding sources willing to provide financial support during the initial phases of the effort. If all of these factors are present and the effort is undertaken to create new directions and leadership, this could alter the perception of preservation and its role in the revitalization of Buffalo for years to come.

Recommendation #1: Develop a Preservation/Community Revitalization Agenda

The Buffalo preservation community was very effective when it worked with other partners in the community to secure the 2011 National Trust Conference. It is desirable to build on the opportunities and momentum created by that collaborative effort by creating a pro-active 3-year preservation/community revitalization agenda to stimulate additional collaborative efforts leading up to the conference.

Based on this assessment, there are a number of potential agenda items to consider that would contribute to and build on things already underway in the city. These include, but are in no way limited to the following.

- Develop and promote a strategy that would link the mayor's "5 in 5" demolition program to a broader vision that incorporates past and present neighborhood

revitalization efforts and the restoration of neighborhood schools, reaching out to the city administration and other community leaders working on the revitalization of the city.

- Develop an expanded vision and set of activities related to building the region’s heritage tourism economy, working with existing tour groups, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, and other groups active in developing tourism opportunities and products in Buffalo and the surrounding region.
- Develop and implement a strategy to get more historic properties and districts surveyed and designated to strengthen the foundation for community decision-making related to preservation, demolition and community revitalization and protect more of the city’s rich store of historic resources. It may be possible to supplement the work of qualified professionals with trained volunteers to increase the amount of survey work that can be done.
- Hold a series of community forums with engaging speakers from around the country on key topics like the economics of historic preservation; how to deal with the challenge of “right-sizing” an historic city; using historic preservation as a cornerstone for downtown revitalization; and building a heritage tourism infrastructure to broaden community understanding and appreciation for what preservation has to offer.

Implementation Strategy

To initiate the agenda building process, the Northeast Regional Office of the National Trust and the Preservation League of New York could work with local contacts to convene a Buffalo Heritage Roundtable—a group of about 20 people that would include broad representation of local groups and individuals with interest and knowledge about preservation, economic and neighborhood revitalization and heritage tourism. The purpose of the heritage roundtable would be to consider:

- whether it is appropriate and feasible to develop a 3-year preservation agenda;
- if yes, what should be included in the agenda;
- how many initiatives it is practical to pursue, given current resources; and
- how to implement the agenda.

The roundtable would meet for a series of facilitated sessions, identifying and evaluating potential agenda items based on their urgency, potential impact and feasibility, including where the leadership and follow-through would come from to implement various initiatives. At the conclusion of the process, the roundtable would share its recommendations widely and collaborative teams would be formed to take the lead in carrying specific agenda items forward, drawing on the resources of all interested organizations and individuals.

State or foundation funding would need to be secured to hire an independent local or outside facilitator to work with the Northeast Regional Office of the Trust and the

Preservation League and their partners to design and facilitate this process. Additional funding would be needed to support implementation of the agenda.

Recommendation #2: Build Organizational Capacity

Buffalo needs a strong, non-profit preservation organization with paid professional staff to provide a full range of services to preserve the city's extraordinary historic landmarks and neighborhoods and make them part of a revitalized city.

Major services this organization should provide include:

- local and state advocacy;
- a broad array of educational activities and products: programs, internships, website, newsletter;
- technical assistance services for citizens, developers, and interested community organizations;
- a role in preservation resource identification and planning;
- contact and coordination with other preservation organizations at the local, state, regional and national levels;
- a membership program to build a broader and more influential preservation constituency; and
- fundraising activities to support historic preservation.

Organizational histories and recent events suggest an attempt to merge two or more of the three existing preservation organizations to achieve a single, strong organization would be difficult. It is possible one of the existing organizations could be transformed to become the lead, full-service group, but organizational cultures and past differences can be hard to overcome and a new start may be needed to gain wide public and financial support. The full-service organization could be complemented by the continued existence of one or more of the existing preservation groups dedicated to more limited agendas with mechanisms set up to coordinate efforts in areas of potential over-lap.

Any new organization should draw on the strength of the preservation community, which includes individuals directly involved with the three existing preservation organizations, but also includes organizations and individuals who are not currently involved in these groups who have an interest in making preservation central to Buffalo's revitalization. Buffalo tours could stay within one or more of the existing groups, spin off into a separate organization, or become a program of the full-service lead organization to provide an important source of earned income.

Implementation Strategy

A way to advance this recommendation would be to have the Northeast Regional Office of the National Trust and the Preservation League of New York work with local contacts to convene an ad hoc steering committee of 8-10 individuals representing the preservation/heritage community in Buffalo. The purpose of the group would be to:

- explore the concept and feasibility of creating a full-service lead preservation organization by transforming an existing organization or creating a new one;
- consider the potential structure, mission, agenda, and funding sources for such an organization; and
- identify steps needed to implement the steering committee's recommendations.

The ad hoc committee should meet for a finite number of facilitated meetings to develop their findings and recommendations. These findings and recommendations would be shared with the existing preservation organizations and with other local, state and national leaders who would be critical to the success of such an endeavor and at that point the ad hoc steering committee would make a decision about how to proceed.

State or foundation funding would need to be secured to hire an independent local or outside facilitator to work with the Northeast Regional Office of the Trust and the Preservation League and their partners to design and facilitate this process. Additional funding would be needed to provide start-up operating funds for the new lead preservation organization if the decision were made to pursue that.

Conclusion

Buffalo has an extraordinary array of historic resources and stories to preserve, share and build on. The preservation community has many past successes to be proud of, but a great deal remains to be done. The recommendations included in this assessment could serve as a starting point for enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of preservation related activities in Buffalo. One of these recommendations could be pursued and not the other or they could be pursued sequentially. The greatest impact would come if the community can generate the commitment and resources to act on both of these recommendations simultaneously and let them reinforce and build on each other.