

ARCHITECTURE VIEW: BUDGET CUTTERS ARE UNDERMINING HISTORIC BUILDINGS

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For the nation's Bicentennial, the Federal Government is proposing not a celebration, but a wake. It is not just that the occasion is increasingly taking on the aura of a bad joke, although a group in Texas giving Bicentennial Bad Taste Awards found so many contenders for the prize that it had difficulty narrowing down the field. What Congress and the Feds are doing, in the 200th year of the founding of this great, confused republic, is far more serious: they are about to sabotage the nation's heritage.

By enacting a 50 percent budget cut in preservation funds—a step so misguided, so misanthropic, and so cruelly petty when one considers the really small amounts involved—they will kill many existing programs and doom much of the country's past. And because preservation has become so broadly and inextricably linked with urban quality and improvement, this will help along the deterioration of the cities in a way that could not have been better calculated if an instrument of destruction had been conscientiously sought.

In fact, by the most perverse measurement, that is a peculiar kind of value—a lot of destruction for very little money. This Dubious Bicentennial Achievement will be the result of cutting a \$20 million appropriation to \$10 million—peanuts reduced to crumbs. That is a national budget, mind you, to be spread across the country to encourage public and private preservation. One big, bad, new building costs more. From any angle it begins to look ludicrous.

But it becomes wilfully blind and illogical against the background of officially sanctioned and sponsored, burgeoning preservation activity in the last 10 years. The Historic Preservation Act passed by Congress in 1966 (what a way to celebrate an anniversary!) recognized that "the historical and cultural foundation of the nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development" and established the role and responsibility of the Federal Government in the process. It authorized assistance and funding to state and local programs and designated the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which had been chartered by Congress in 1949, as a distributor of matching grants.

These state and local programs have developed from salvaging landmarks and archeological sites to stabilizing city neighborhoods. They include, as a basic requirement mandated by Federal law, a survey of each state's sites and properties that can be listed as historical and cultural resources. In addition, the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act broadened the mandate still further by requiring environmental review and impact statements for all Federal projects that might affect historic sites or properties.

All this on \$10 million? Or even \$20 million? From National Park Service sources it is reliably reported that \$400 million a year for the next 10 years would be needed to clear up just the identified backlog of historic preservation projects. That is a total backlog of \$4 billion. The Federal funds that have been available have only served as seed money for a constantly rising tide of matching grants at local levels, estimated currently at over \$200 million. A lot of the matching money will, of course, be lost; the Federal budget cut simply turns off the spigot.

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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Budget Cutters Are Undermining Historic Buildings



Garth Huxtable

Will Congress save Seattle's Pioneer Square?

And at least 670 projects would have to be dropped next year.

A few more indications of reality are in order. The official listing of sites and buildings on the National Register of Historic Places has run from slightly more than 1,000 entries in 1969 to more than 12,000 entries today. And that is just the tip of the iceberg of the

country's heritage. In 10 years, the number of cities and towns having landmark or historic district commissions has risen from less than 100 to almost 450. Each state has been required, again by Congress, to set up a State Historic Preservation Office with a professionally qualified staff and review board. National Trust membership, a good mea-

sure of public interest, has doubled in a decade. Grass roots support has grown to the point where it can no longer be counted.

Obviously, we are not dealing with a diminishing or exotic need. The Wall Street Journal, not given to noting arcane esthetic movements, has called it a "preservation explosion." Preservation has turned out to be neighborhood conservation at the time that this has been perceived as a real urban need. It is recognized as a strong factor in the quality of life and cities, and a powerful tool for creative redevelopment. In places as disparate as Brooklyn and New Orleans, historic district upgrading has brought the necessary middle class back to the center city. Preservation has become a profoundly influential factor in the environmental and economic well-being of the country.

National Trust figures indicate that a \$10 million Federal budget cut would endanger at least \$20 million in jobs and purchases alone. But the economic impact of preservation is actually much greater. One of the more interesting side effects of inflation, of which construction costs have been one of the most rapidly rising factors, is that in many cases remodeling has become more economical than new building. This change has been reinforced by energy costs. Coupled with the growing interest in saving and reusing the better buildings of the past as essential to the goal of urban quality, there has been a "recycling" boom.

Innumerable cities and towns have been immensely enriched and strengthened by newly renovated landmarks, converted to contemporary uses, that have sparked both pride and more recycling. The extent and scale of this work is amazing. It has meant construction jobs when they are in very short supply, and construction investment when the industry is depressed. The preservation business is no traffic in sentimental souvenirs.

It is worth noting just a few token examples of the many undertakings that are now threatened. The restoration of Pioneer Square in Seattle has brought the city's old, deteriorated downtown back to life; the assessed valuations in the district have gone up more than 800 percent. Without Federal help, it will not be possible even to bring the rest of the structures up to minimum building code standards. Ohio City is a grass-roots neighborhood in Cleveland being upgraded by people of modest means maintaining their foothold in the city, using sweat equity and Federal preservation grants to restore housing and history. In Ybor City in Tampa, Fla., the ravages of urban renewal are being corrected by local residents and Federal preservation assistance.

In New York City, the restoration of houses in the historic black community of Weeksville, part of the Bedford-Stuyvesant renewal, must have Federal grants to continue. The old Merchant's House and St. Mark's in-the-Bouwerie, both landmarks of the Early Republic, are being repaired and kept alive by Federal "phased funding," which would just be phased out. These examples can be multiplied from sea to shining sea. Happy Birthday America. Wherever you are, and whatever is left.

Correction: The show "One Hundred Years of Chicago Architecture" will open in Chicago on May 1 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, not at the Art Institute as reported in "Rediscovering Chicago Architecture" (March 14).