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Historic Preservation is Not
a Thing of the Past

ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY



Historic Preservation
is not
a thing of the past



A SAMPLING OF STUDENT COMMENTS
ON HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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Department of
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Planning

University of
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On a weekend in February, thirteen students in my seminar on Planning for Historic Preservation (UP487E) went on a three-day field trip to the Chicago area. They had met in class only three times before, and the trip served as an intensive exposure and introduction to the topic. This report gives a sampling of the students' reactions and observations. I feel their fresh perceptions are worth sharing with others engaged in preservation work.

Their itinerary included the following events:

Observation of the quarterly meeting of the Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council, considering nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.

Lunch with members of the State Advisory Council.

Tour of the Frank Lloyd Wright houses in Oak Park.

Visit to the offices of Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc., for a presentation of studies on "Coppertown, USA".

Participation in the all-day Conference on Historic Districts sponsored by the Oak Park Landmark Commission and The National Trust, in Unity Temple, Oak Park.

Reception for speakers and participants in the conference.

Walking tour of Chicago's Loop, on a cold Sunday morning.

Brief stop at the proposed Prairie Avenue historic district.

Visit to the new Historic Pullman Center and tour through Pullman.

The Chicago area field trip and two later ones to other parts of Illinois have been made possible with the aid of grants from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and from the Ottawa Silica Company Foundation.

Lachlan F. Blair
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Historic Preservation is NOT just "a thing of the past"

Linked by a desire to learn about our past, we enrolled in a class in Historic Preservation. Most of us had never seen the beauty in a county court house or the need to preserve a district that, although once beautiful, was now run down and dilapidated.

Our trip to the Historic Districts Conference and visit to several districts provided a tool for learning and involvement in the preservation process. We went armed with many questions - some of which we answered for ourselves through observation of the conference and our tours. Those we couldn't answer for ourselves we asked of the lecturers and participants.

We came away from the conference with an understanding that can't be learned from reading alone. We felt the urgency and need to act now for preservation and we all have a better basis to work from.

What did the conference say to us? What themes could we find in the discussions and debates? How did we interpret the things we saw and heard? The comments on these pages are selected from brief papers we each turned in after the trip.

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"I had pictured in my own mind a preservation meeting as a collection of little old ladies with purple hats. Instead, I found a group of dedicated professionals and interested citizens of varied ages and sexes who seem quite competent and quite interested."

"The personalities involved in preservation at all levels represent high levels of academic training in such fields as architecture, law, engineering, and history among others; the State Advisory Council was exemplary."

"The Pullman historic district visit left one overall lesson which I believe is very necessary in historic preservation if it is to work within the lower economic communities--personal time commitment. It seemed to me that the success of the Pullman project can be attributed to the time many families gave in promotion and in physical labor. This shows pure financing cannot get the job done; manpower is needed to contribute to limited financial resources."

"I got the impression that the historic preservation movement is really an elite, upper-class movement, with its main emphasis being placed on preserving more buildings that belonged to the upper-class and almost ignoring the significance of the type of housing in which the greater segment of the people lived."

"The older people involved in the conference were pleased that younger people had an interest in preservation."

"It is becoming increasingly clear to me that architects are creatures with extremely strong egos. Perhaps this personality trait is necessary for success in the profession. Self-effacement seems to be the keynote for planners. Architects will make bold strokes while planners will retreat and make a study. Lawyers, another professional group concerned with preservation, carry self-confidence even further than architects."

"More than any other reaction, I think that this weekend pointed out to me the great need for local leadership. This observation would have been most difficult to ascertain from class discussion. It was interesting to observe how much the amount of concern, research, and perseverance of local interests influenced the members of the council meeting Friday morning."

"I was surprised that more women weren't represented on the state advisory committee. I really thought that since some women have much more time to devote to projects and civic concerns, that they would have had a keen interest in serving."

"My major disappointment with the conference was that while in the midst of practicing elitism the conference condemned it and cited it as a major hindrance to the movement. Furthermore, there was no evidence of a national commitment or policy to correct or prevent this. Many of the officials seemed to scoff at local historical groups in regard to their lack of professionalism, and to their, often, provincial ways. The movement is now one of intellectuals, and this condition will persist if strong measures are not taken to remedy it. The exclusive nature of the organization will account for much loss rather than gain."

"The walking tour through the loop was interesting, but I think I would like to go back there during the week to observe the people and see how the people relate to their surroundings."

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IS . . . **Variety**

"One of the major themes throughout the conference was the importance of conserving 'sympathetic environments,' not only individual structures. By preserving an environment, one is able to retain a 'sense of place' or 'being.' In many instances, this is 'just as important as the cultural history and architectural history.' "

"The comparison among the three historic districts we visited, Oak Park, Prairie Avenue, and Pullman, was instructive. Oak Park and Pullman have great integrity and potential for preservation while Prairie Avenue seems impossible to develop in any really meaningful manner. Those four mansions of Prairie Avenue stuck in the midst of warehouses and railroad sidings can only have limited museum-like value. But, due to variable access to political power and money, the Prairie Avenue project will develop faster than an area like Pullman which has so much more historic material to work with in a more proper setting."

"The walking tour of the Loop made me aware of the diversity and contrast between old and new architectural styles produced by such architects as Sullivan and Van der Rohe. Both old and new buildings can exist in harmony, lending support to the preservation movement. The Marquette Building ought to be saved."

"Pullman is just beginning and should be a good study in public involvement. The work appears to be on a totally voluntary basis which may be a big problem before the entire district is renovated, rehabilitated or preserved."

"It must be very frustrating for the people who have 'modernized' their homes with artificial stone to now realize that they have done a disservice to their community. I imagine that it will take much time and money to restore some of those homes to their original structure."

"Barton-Aschman's presentation gave us an idea of what a consulting firm is doing now. The Coppertown project is almost too ideal since you don't usually get as much land in one chunk with as much leeway as they seem to have. Their plan for the rejuvenation of Michigan's copper mining district was comprehensive and impressive, and incorporated the surviving historic structures as the core of the proposal. I had doubts of the feasibility of such a plan due to its high cost; in a sense it seemed to create too much of an artificial atmosphere, and depend too heavily upon the tourist industry."

"Once preservationists, historians, and planners realize that visual aspects are important, they must remember to be selective in their decisions regarding the location and number of historic districts. They must learn to focus their efforts on those areas which have the greatest concentration of sites and structures."

"For the residents of Pullman, preservation means the development of a livable environment where a sense of place is important (as evidenced in the architecture and structure of the town). It also means not only retaining the physical structure but also the community structure so that a mix of income groups may live compatibly. For preservation, as considered today, has values to which all groups can direct their energies".

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IS . . . **problems**

"When the crunch comes between the interests of private property owners and historic preservation, preservation will lose most of the time. The legal controls talked about, except those regulating public expenditures, are more persuasive than binding. I do not feel comfortable trying to protect something with words rather than power."

"How selective should the register be? Should development for historic preservation purposes take priority over functional development when the two cannot coincide? Who should decide what is functional? What priority should authenticity in restoration have? Who had the right to decide what is to be preserved and to infringe upon the personal property rights of others to promote this cause? The conference raised more questions than it answered."

"Usually, preservation concerns became active momentarily adjacent to destruction. The stories of heated, short-term confrontations of citizen's groups with developers to save some trees or other such historic amenities were typical. This salvation action was deemed unworkable and unproductive in the long run."

"The discussions of the legal aspects of preservation demonstrated the complexities as well as the need for caution and tact in the acquisition of properties. A great deal needs to be done by state and local governments to establish a framework for the protection of historic districts once they have been identified."

"Mr. Murtagh made a comment at the end that I felt was well worth pursuing. Are all the states being as rigid on their requirements for nomination to the register? Are there nominations which would in fact be put on the Register if another state had been reviewing the nominations?"

"The council does seem to have a limited approach to consideration of possible additions to the register and the possibilities of preservation in general. Preservationists must allow more consideration of vernacular architecture, for this too has been a developmental factor in the culture of our cities. Likewise, the natural environment plus these areas should be considered for federal protection, if not on the Register."

"The Pullman tour brought the economic problems of preservation into the limelight. Much of the district is residential, and the Pullman Historic Foundation seems to be generating sufficient neighborhood support to counter the opposing economic forces."

"Barton-Aschman's plans for the 'Coppertown USA' development in Michigan's upper peninsula, seemed to be a good example of how preservation can and should be tied into larger scale planning efforts. In many ways this project is unique and cannot serve as a direct model for other areas. For example, almost the entire area is controlled by a single company. Also, due to the beauty of the natural environment, the area is unusually well suited to development as a tourist attraction. Nevertheless, the basic concept of using preservation of the existing environment as the basis for an expanded economy is a good one which, with some modification, might be applied elsewhere."

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IS . . . **Change**

"I perceived a unifying theme linking the various elements of the Historic District conference and the Chicago tours. This theme is the enlarging scope of historic preservation and the implications for the preservation movement. This was suggested by Mr. Murtagh at the council meeting and was again discussed (or implied) by a number of conference speakers. The theme was expressed by the nature of the preservation proposals for the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan (Coppertown, U.S.A.) as explained by an associate of Barton-Aschman and in the sincere preservation effort at Pullman, Illinois."

"The concept of historical districts, I feel is an exciting one. The expansion of the definition of 'historical districts' to include the concept of social factors that deem an area worthy of preserving despite its lack of historic or architectural significance is potentially viable. It was interesting that this expanded definition is a point of controversy at this time."

"We must broaden our views of preservation and look at the National Register as a tool for the preservation of our cultural ecology, not just as an archaeological or historical exercise."

"A character change in the field of historic preservation was noted throughout the conference. Traditionally, the field was the exclusive preoccupation of the elite. Their time, money, and power went into restoration and protection in the private sector and within the courts. Vestiges of elitism are still present within the National Trust organization with their sponsorship of expensive tours and cruises. For the better, the field is being endorsed by various socio-economic strata, including the young, within the scope of the environmental movement."

"This move of the preservationists away from entirely the upper-class wealthy to many other segments of the population is most inspiring. Being a student who started in the department hoping to find these considerations within regional planning, I am most pleased to find a segment of the planning community more concerned for culture and environment."

"The historic districting concept has enlarged preservation from a single structure to a total environmental approach, this being in compliance with the comprehensive goal of planning. Speakers brought out design factors such as rhythm, form, texture, scale and emotional factors such as a sense of place and time that can only be achieved through districting."

"Could this expanded definition of historical districting lead to a possible stifling effect for the residents living in an area of social importance? Could they end up paying for their conscious effort at establishing a community with unique character and charm by incurring restrictions on their right to change or update their own property? is there a danger that preserving an area exhibiting unique 'social qualities' could lead to stagnation and thereby destroy these qualities that the districting is attempting to preserve?"

"Zeroing in on the highlights of the conference, I feel that Dr. Murtagh's talk dealing with the aesthetic and social dimensions of historic districts was quite exceptional since it put the whole area of preservation in its proper perspective. We in the United States have developed value judgments for dealing with preservation in terms of history first and aesthetic value second, and in fact it should be the reverse! We as planners must keep in mind that aesthetic value of a district is really far more important than historic worth (usually) since aesthetic value deals with the total identity and the total personality of the district. If the relationship of aesthetic value and identity is lost in an historic district then the historic value is also diminished and the planner has defeated his own purpose."

The conference was enjoyable and stimulating, and of course not all of the learning and enjoyment came directly from the speeches. Our tour of the Loop and the Pullman District provided many of us with a delight and appreciation that we had never seen before. The sheer beauty and uniqueness became apparent when we took the time to examine things we usually take for granted.

"Perhaps the most profitable experience gained from attending the conference was the opportunity to spend time in the historic sections of Oak Park. Beyond the tours of noteworthy architecture, the weekend stay was long enough to experience the sense of place and stability of the district. The high quality of the visual surroundings transmitted the unique quality of life in Oak Park. It inspired the commitment of restoring visually aesthetic elements in all communities to also increase their quality of life."

"I thoroughly enjoyed the field trip and I am anxious to go on the next one. It really helped me to actually see what we had been talking about in class. I felt so much more aware of my environment in Chicago this time. I felt that I could relate better to the people and my surroundings. I think this is the first time I really observed things in Chicago and I think I now understand how Chicago natives feel about their surroundings."

"I was surprised to see so much open space, particularly in Oak Park. I had never liked Chicago before, because I felt so hemmed-in. There were so many beautiful trees, parks, and lawns in Oak Park that I actually thought I might like to live there. I didn't think I would feel this way, but I am actually anxious to go back to the Chicago area."

"Sunday's walk through the Loop was fantastic. First, having never seen anything in the Loop except Carson's and then not really looking at that very closely made the trip extremely interesting and helped point out details and their meaning very well. My own feelings about living in a large city were somewhat changed. Looking now for details will be much more in my attention."

"Sunday afternoon was a highlight of the field trip; the Prairie Avenue site and the Pullman Historic District stood in contrast to the visit to Oak Park. Going to Pullman really tied together many of the concepts discussed during the two previous days."

"In every respect the field trip to Chicago and Oak Park was a valuable and stimulating educational experience. The preservation movement was demonstrated to be dynamic and expansive. We as students were well-received by the people!"

"Uniqueness keynoted touring the Loop in Sunday morning, too. The Chicago School of Architecture took on surrealistic dimensions when viewed in falling snow and with a lack of traffic."

"The great variety of activities and experiences of the trip was the feature which redeemed the concentrated nature of the study session. The osmotic learning derived from the trip made it far superior to classroom learning, and other such ventures cannot have any but positive values!"

HISTORIC PRESERVATION IS **Planning**

As future planners it is our responsibility to preserve and create environments that will help produce the best type of life style possible. We are all concerned and cautious, but at the same time excited by the possibilities of planning.

"I found the meeting of the advisory council to be one of the high points of the field trip. It was not talk of planning for preservation, but the reality of this planning. The body composed by the council members was one of impressive expertise. The inadequacies seemed not to lie in the professional realm, but in a lack of background information concerning each specific item nominated to the register. Such information cannot be expected to be supplied in a sterile Inventory Nomination Form, nor can the busy professionals serving in voluntary posts be held responsible. It would seem that a requirement of mandatory local representation at the presentation session would reduce the ambiguity in decisions by supplying information when questions arise. This would make the process a longer one, but the rising quality would seem to justify this."

"Pullman is a historic district which is significant as a 'planned development'. Pullman is an excellent example of a community where preservation has meaning beyond that traditionally conceived."

"Friday night we went to the planning offices of Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc. to view a presentation on 'Coppertown', their planning project in upper peninsula Michigan that directly incorporates historic preservation into the economic and urban future of that area. I find this particularly exciting since it shows in a very real sense the practical applications that historic preservation can have in planning and how the past can be 'reused' to enhance the quality of future planning design."

"Preservationists must learn not to use the historic district as a means to regulate urban areas. Historic districts must continue to be a part of the living, growing city, and not a museum piece for tourism only."

"Three of the four morning session speakers emphasized the enlarging scope of preservation by indicating the potential of historic districts for preserving:

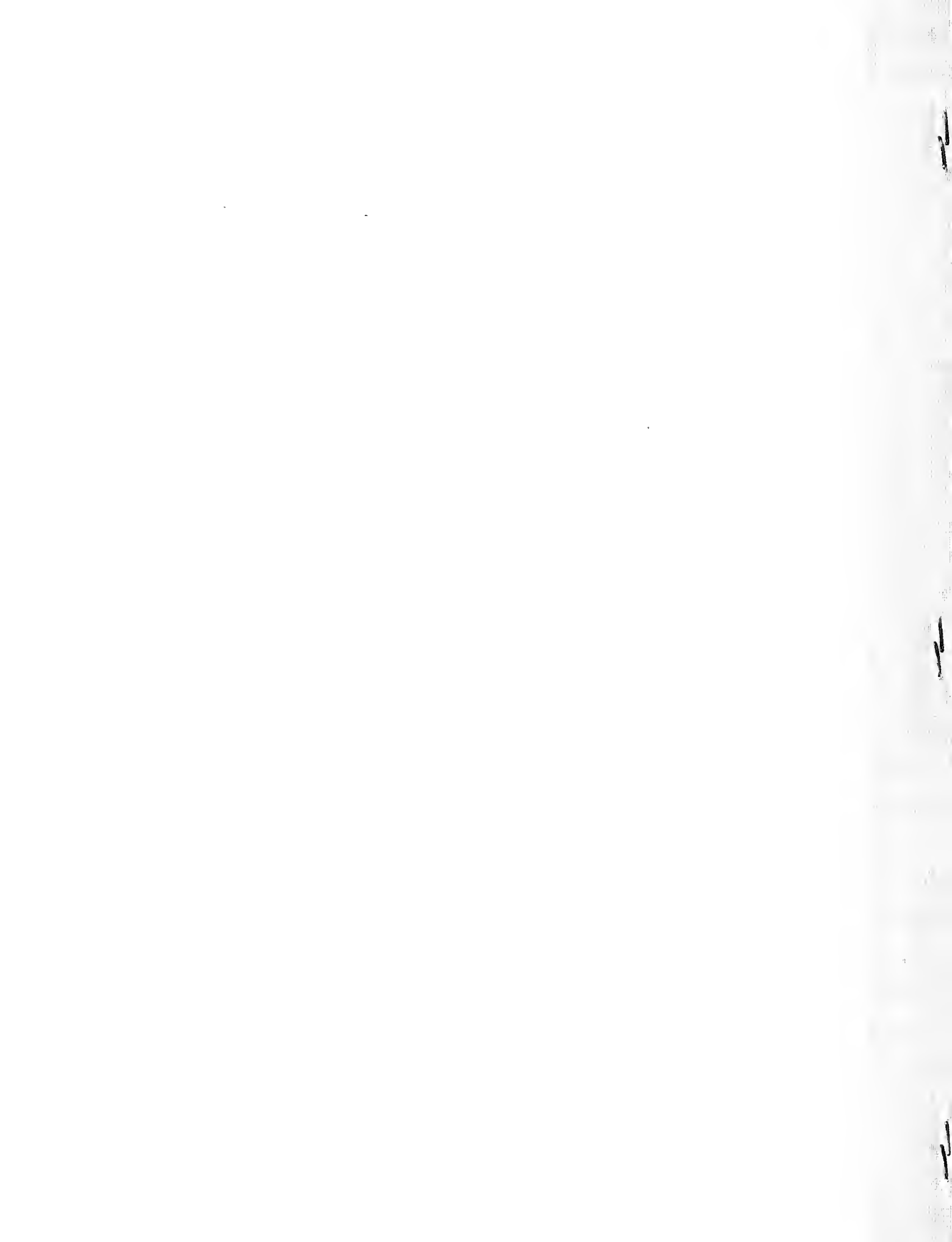
- 1) The visual integrity of an area
- 2) The historic continuity in visual terms
- 3) The evolution of significant environmental characteristics
- 4) Recognition of community values in preservation
- 5) Potential for environmental control
- 6) Planning implications
- 7) Identification to place
- 8) A sense of time in relation to past events

Preservation efforts which successfully meet even a few of the above potentials will go a long way toward achieving a livable and humanly satisfying environment. Certainly this should be the ultimate goal of preservation."

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