

## **Preserving Cultural and Historic Resources through Brownfields Redevelopment**

In the Winter 2000 issue of *Urban Age*, Donald Garfield wrote that, according to planner Arjo Klamer, localities generate three kinds of value: social, cultural, and economic. It is the unity, or synthesis, of these values that creates what we increasingly call sustainable communities. Local government managers and administrators are working to build communities where citizens can engage in social issues, participate in economic development, and plan their own futures. In these efforts, cultural resources are major tools for building safe, clean, and smart communities. Historic preservation and cultural reuse cannot always be calculated in economic development terms, but they affect a city's livability, attractiveness, and ability to extend itself beyond the 9-to-5 workday.

Over the past year, ICMA staff members have documented numerous instances where historic preservation and property reuses for cultural purposes have become the turnkeys to social and economic revitalization in urban and rural brownfields scenarios. Brownfields are abandoned, idled, or underused industrial and commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination. Nearly every community in America is facing the challenges of brownfields redevelopment.

### **Brownfields, Culture, and History**

As brownfields redevelopment expands and the public begins to understand the economic, environmental, and social importance of historic redevelopment and the cultural assets of communities, these topics are uniting in complementary ways. Sites are being redeveloped while the historic characteristics of communities are preserved and the intangible values of cultural assets are recognized. This approach to brownfields redevelopment follows an "ecosystem" model where the economic, environmental, and social resources (including cultural and historic characteristics) of a community are addressed collectively. The success of those projects relies on the balance and interdependence of all resources in efforts to create a sustainable community.

Brownfields are losing their stigma as contaminated industrial sites and are being recognized as opportunities to create healthy and sustainable places to live and work. Historic preservation is no longer viewed as an expensive enterprise led by the local garden and tea club; rather, it is valued as an undertaking that recognizes community influences, such as industrial, maritime, or settlement histories. Likewise, cultural uses for properties are no longer viewed narrowly, as options for affluent neighborhoods or big cities. They are integral components that unify people and places to create a sense of community. *Cultural reuses of brownfields spaces are not obscure ideas that make neither sense nor cents.* Increasingly, communities are seeing the advantages of including cultural uses, design elements, and artwork as components of brownfields redevelopment, or as ends in themselves.

Not all historic sites are nationally or internationally significant. Often sites are historic because they represent an aspect of local culture or history that is unique to a particular place. Such places can connect neighbors and generations to a shared identity through their history and culture. For example, old industrial buildings represent an earlier economy of an area, but may no longer be feasible for industrial reuse. These buildings often represent the saga of immigrant groups that came to the United States and contributed to its industrial heritage. Today, they may be attractive to the children and grandchildren of immigrants for housing or artist loft spaces. The buildings reflect boom eras of development and production and foster appreciation for industrial and cultural architectural styles.

### **What is Cultural Reuse?**

Cultural reuse can mean a range of things. In one way it is the redevelopment or use of a site for cultural purposes. "Cultural" can be defined broadly as historic, social, and ethnic places, groups, organizations, neighborhoods, and resources. "Cultural" also refers to the creative and artistic expression of ideas, and

the creation of functional objects. In other words, references to culture are not always limited to fine art forms, such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance.

Cultural reuses of brownfields are uses of properties that support the architectural, functional, residential, or other assets that distinguish one community from others. Such redevelopment can preserve or bring new cultural aspects to the neighborhood, or be defined among the cultural and aesthetic texture of its people and structures.

Historic preservation and cultural reuse are often thought of as ends in themselves. A building is preserved or a site is artistically designed and that is the end purpose. However, pursuing historic preservation and cultural reuse when redeveloping brownfields achieves broader goals: a cleaner environment, infill of urban centers, and creative, productive communities. Historic preservation and cultural reuse are not final stages of redevelopment. Rather, they are means to achieve the myriad of results attainable through brownfields redevelopment, such as: affordable housing, economic development, and community engagement and outreach. Historic preservation and cultural reuse are vehicles to promote economic, environmental, and social revitalization.

### ***Environmental Benefits***

Historic preservation not only saves buildings that might otherwise fall into disrepair, but also reduces the need for building new structures. Historic preservation is environmentally sound because of its preventative nature. Materials and spaces are put to new or renewed uses, reducing the need for new materials and the consumption of natural resources to create those materials. By preserving and reusing historic buildings, communities can continue to draw on the existing infrastructure, such as sewers, roads, and utilities. Conversely, building new structures in previously undeveloped areas creates a demand for new infrastructure that increases negative environmental impacts such as permeable surfaces, and disrupted green spaces and habitat areas. In addition, demands for ground water, waste water treatment areas and other amenities are increased.

### ***Social Benefits***

Historic preservation and cultural reuse both contribute to rebuilding cities and help to foster a sense of place by finding new or renewed uses for older buildings. They create more intimate neighborhoods that reinforce a sense of history and security by preserving what is unique yet familiar in a community. Through the redevelopment of historic buildings, community members gain a stronger sense of the history of the community and the importance of the places and events that helped shape the area. The preservation of historic buildings and creates spaces and opportunities for cultural activities that encourage active neighborhoods with rich personalities. In turn, cultural activities can attract homebuyers to a neighborhood, which can lead to an increase in home ownership numbers and livability standards through the development of schools and parks.

### ***Economic Benefits***

Historic preservation has a number of short-term and long-term economic benefits. In the short term, historic redevelopment can be less expensive than new development. While costs to developers may not be less to fulfill historic preservation requirements, the overall economic costs to maintain a project can be lessened. Similar to environmental benefits immediate short-term cost savings can come through the reuse of existing materials, reducing the amount of new materials required; the reuse of existing infrastructure, which reduces the demand for public services to create new roads, sewer and water maintenance systems, and other utilities.

The economic benefits of cultural reuses and activities are often overlooked in urban redevelopment scenarios. *Cultural activities generate funds.* For example, if there is a theatre or series of galleries in a neighborhood, direct economic benefits include the following: sales of items to create artwork or sets; ticket, meal, and concession sales; parking or public transportation costs; and salaries and commissions

earned by artists and actors. Cultural reuses also have secondary economic benefits. For example, spaces where artists live and work can be considered a marker for neighborhoods on the rebound. Artists often purchase or rent neglected properties at low rates and invest time, effort, and creativity to improve the property.

Another important economic consideration of brownfields reuse for cultural activities pertains to the local quality of life. Many economic factors in quality-of-life discussions are difficult to calculate. For example, *how much is your home value improved by a view of the park?* There is no question that cultural and historic aspects of a community are important economic draws for cities and towns. A look at almost any town's convention and visitors' center or a chamber of commerce's promotional materials will show an emphasis on the natural and cultural resources of a community. These are often the materials used to attract new businesses, conventions, and other activities that create jobs and vital economy.

### **Cultural Resources**

Cultural resources are often defined as artistic, but if communities are counting artists and arts organizations as their only cultural resources, they are overlooking great assets that can enhance their quality of life and contribute to the economic, environmental, and social revitalization of a community. Historic sites, cultural and ethnic groups, faith organizations, and neighborhoods are all important resources that should be counted and celebrated in efforts to improve communities, generate economic opportunities, and address social concerns. All of these elements can be coordinated to embrace an important part of a town or county's identity, economic vitality, and social well-being. Investments in cultural resources produce visible results like arts districts and new visual identities for streetscapes and parks. There are many ways that these resources can foster critical elements of brownfields redevelopment, such as community participation, business incubation, heritage tourism, and the creation of public spaces and arts districts.

### ***Community Participation***

Engaging community groups and residents in the physical redevelopment neighborhoods and other districts helps create spaces that reflect the interests and needs of the community and gives residents a sense of ownership. Simply stated, *community involvement in redevelopment fosters individuals' contributions to improve their own neighborhoods.* Local cultural groups and artists are also important stakeholders to include as a community works toward cultural and neighborhood revitalization. In turn, a community that is enhancing its own environment is more likely to attract increased investment through home purchases and complementary business establishments like stores, banks, and restaurants. An attractive and vibrant downtown becomes an advantage in drawing conferences and conventions to the area and in recruiting corporations to relocate there. In these ways, cultural resource investments can bring great financial rewards.

### ***Business Incubation***

Local ethnic groups, faith organizations, and social organizations possess skills and traditions that they can turn into important economic activities while they promote themselves and preserve their traditions. Some communities are working with such groups to encourage small, local enterprises through job training centers that offer resources to facilitate small-business development. For example, cities and counties can use education centers and community kitchens as places where ethnic groups can make, package, and market traditional, gourmet foods and specialty items like sauces, soups, and baked goods. A community kitchen allows for the large-scale production of goods using state-of-the-art facilities, opportunities that would not be readily be available to those groups on a daily basis. This opportunity also allows participants to learn about the legal and health procedures necessary for restaurant and food production. The overall outcome is that an organization and its workers fulfill the basic steps required to develop a business, learn important life skills, share cultures, and turn a profit. This sort of enterprise also enables the entire community to learn about other cultures' traditions.

### ***Heritage Tourism***

Heritage tourism can be a great economic development tool to attract local residents, visitors to the city, and passers-by to experience the history and culture of an area through its historic sites and museums. Visitors to a museum or historic site often buy souvenirs, eat a meal at a nearby restaurant, and participate in what the neighborhood has to offer.

### ***Creation of Public Spaces and Arts Districts***

Effective public spaces facilitate social interaction. Community centers and social spaces encourage citizen participation and interest in the redevelopment of brownfields. Many brownfields-afflicted communities do not have central public spaces that can serve as (1) a testament to the history and culture of the community, (2) a recreation area, and (3) a well-designed green space. Similarly, a local government can benefit by actively attracting artists. One way in which this can be accomplished is through designating an arts district where artists can live and work. Some towns have turned over abandoned warehouse districts to individuals at discounted prices to create loft-studio work or living spaces. Arts districts attract more artists, galleries, art supply stores, and other secondary activities. Festivals, monthly gallery walks, and similar events can be planned to support artists, provide publicity, and draw arts patrons to the neighborhood. These activities are also beneficial to secondary businesses like restaurants, coffee shops, and bookstores. Often cultural resources and historic preservation are considered afterthoughts to economic development. In reality, an injection of arts is often the catalyst that a hotel or restaurant needs to make an investment in revitalization.

The benefits drawn from historic preservation and cultural reuse, along with the resources that can be leveraged, make those approaches important considerations for community revitalization. ICMA has published, *Old Tools and New Measures: Local Government Coordination of Brownfields Development for Historic and Cultural Reuses*, a report on the results of such research that discusses brownfields cleanup and redevelopment. It is based on a year of research with stakeholders active in cultural reuse and historic preservation. The report discusses a range of redevelopment scenarios, challenges, and strategies for successful revitalization.

The publication, *Old Tools and New Measures: Local Government Coordination of Brownfields Development for Historic and Cultural Reuses*, can be purchased by calling the ICMA distribution center at 1-800/745-8780, or by visiting ICMA's online bookstore at <http://bookstore.icma.org>. For more information about ICMA's brownfields program, <http://icma.org/brownfields>.