

America's Endangered Properties: An Avenue to Potential Projects

By John M. Tess, Heritage Investment Corporation

Throughout the United States there are thousands of historic properties ripe for rehabilitation or preservation. Many of these properties will be picked up by developers and find new life with the assistance of tax incentive programs as our downtowns revitalize. Other properties won't be as lucky, as they may not be eligible for any financial incentives. In any event, either by neglect, location, lack of awareness of a property's significance or just bad luck, many properties end up inappropriately altered, "red-tagged" or, in some cases, the victim of the wrecking ball.

The Desire to Preserve

The desire to preserve historic properties is not a new phenomenon. Dating back to the 19th century, groups advocated for the preservation of America's historic resources. One of the earliest efforts involved the preservation of Philadelphia, Pa.'s Independence Hall, which had fallen into serious disrepair. The historic preservation movement grew during the 20th century as the appreciation of America's historic resources increased.

At the national level, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA) was enacted to protect the country's historic resources through the establishment of the National Register of Historic Places. As defined by the NHPA, the National Register is the official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation.

To ensure that existing buildings were treated the same as new development for tax purposes, the federal historic tax credit (HTC) program was created and is still in existence

today, although in a different form from the original. At the same time, cities began to adopt preservation ordinances to protect significant historic resources. Local incentive programs followed and most states and cities have some type of incentive program for rehabilitating existing structures, whether in the form of financial or building code incentives.

While recognition and preservation of historic structures has come a long way, there still exist properties that are considered endangered. To acknowledge and respond to the condition of these properties on a national level, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) established the "America's Most Endangered Historic Places" in 1988. Published yearly, this list spotlights the country's most threatened historic resources. It is hoped that by bringing attention to these threatened historic resources, stakeholders will take heed and work toward their preservation. According to the NTHP, since the program's inception, the list has identified 242 historic resources. And as a result, many of those resources have been preserved.

Many states and cities have also adopted endangered property list programs that increase public awareness and in many cases offer opportunities to developers to give renewed life to local, state and nationally significant resources. For example, in 1999, the Preservation League of New York State established its "Seven to Save" program, which highlights endangered historic properties within the state. Statewide-endangered property lists have also been established in Alaska, Mississippi, Indiana, Maine, Colorado, Hawaii, Ohio, West Virginia, North Dakota, Tennessee and Washington.

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Photo: Courtesy of Heritage Investment Corporation
Lawrence Halprin's designs were holistic, incorporating fountains and plazas, as well as designs for benches, drinking fountains, trash containers and even specific plantings.

Giving Back

To commemorate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the company, Heritage Investment Corporation has chosen to provide pro bono consulting services to some of the properties that have been identified as endangered or in need of some help in the two cities where Heritage has offices, Portland, Ore. and Philadelphia. The projects that we identified were the Halprin Fountains in Portland and the Joe Frazier Gym in Philadelphia.

The Halprin Sequence

The Halprin Sequence is located south of downtown Portland. Developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of the city's urban renewal work, the sequence stretches across eight blocks and consists of three primary urban plazas linked by pedestrian malls. The design was completed by Lawrence Halprin, who most scholars consider to be the single most influential landscape architect of the postwar years. He nearly singlehandedly redefined the urban plaza as a vibrant, engaging and interactive people-oriented place. The Portland Sequence is one of Halprin's largest, most complex, comprehensive and sophisticated expressions of this concept. The sequence is also seminal in that it is the first full expression of concepts that he would later repeat in varying formats during the next four decades. One piece, the Lovejoy Fountain Plaza, was described at the time of completion by New York Times architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable as "one of the most important urban spaces since the Renaissance." Upon completion, the sequence was wildly successful, both aesthetically and publicly.

Despite being a success, the ensuing decades were not kind to the sequence. First, the resource was part of an urban renewal

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project, a redevelopment concept that fell far out of favor by the 21st century. Second, Halprin's designs were holistic. He was responsible not only for fountains and plazas, but also designs for benches, drinking fountains, trash containers as well as specific plantings. Over time, insensitive repairs and updates had the impact of "a thousand cuts" to the overall design. Finally, as the plazas and promenades aged, city budgets faced financial shortfalls that made it difficult to give this one-of-a-kind resource special treatment. Over time, the fountains operated less frequently, the hardscaped plazas became slightly neglected and the vegetation became tired. As the resource physically deteriorated, its sense of vibrancy faded as public appreciation dwindled, a condition made worse by a substantial influx of new citizens, few of whom had been around to appreciate the initial design.

To stem and turn the tide, a group of local preservationists, architects, planners and developers formed the Halprin Landscape Conservancy. The goal was to revive both interest and financial support for Halprin's once wildly popular and well-loved sequence.

The starting place, it seemed, was to establish the resource's historical importance by securing National Register listing as a nationally significant site. Heritage volunteered its services to research, prepare and defend the nomination through the listing process.

The Joe Frazier Gym

We have also been working with the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia to save the former gym of famed World Heavyweight Champion boxer Joe Frazier. In 2011, the Joe Frazier Gym was included on the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia's endangered properties list. Constructed for use as a window warehouse in 1890, this unassuming three-story brick building became the training home for one of the greatest boxers to ever lace up the gloves, "Smokin'" Joe Frazier. Following his gold medal victory in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and a 21-0 record to commence his professional boxing career, Frazier's financial backers Cloverlay Inc. purchased the former warehouse located in North Philadelphia and transformed it into a first class boxing training facility. Frazier utilized this facility while training for his 1970 fight against Jimmy Ellis in which he became the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. The gym was also Frazier's primary training facility for the "Fight of the Century" in 1971, when he won a unanimous decision against Muhammad Ali.

In 1975, Frazier purchased the gym from his investors and renamed it the "Joe Frazier Gym." During the next 30 years Frazier operated the gym, teaching consecutive generations not only how to fight, but how to be men. The gym was seen as a

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place of refuge and hope, a place for children to learn discipline and skills that Frazier hoped would translate to their daily lives.

The Joe Frazier Gym was sold in 2008 and Smokin' Joe passed away in 2011. Today, the gym is a furniture store. In June 2012, the Joe Frazier Gym was included on the National Trust's 11 Most Endangered List. Heritage's work on the project builds on initial research by the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia and students from Temple University's Tyler School of Art. Heritage is preparing a National Register nomination for the building, which will create the potential for a future owner to utilize HTCs to rehabilitate the building.

Conclusion

Historic buildings give us a sense of place and a sense of where we've come from. They include the Merchants House in Manhattan, New York, Cooper-Molera Adobe in Monterey, Calif. and the Windsor Hotel in Garden City, Kan. And yet we seem to go through a process of forgetting before we can remember. Mount Vernon, home to our founding father, had fallen into severe disrepair before Ann Pamela Cunningham founded the Mount Vernon's Ladies Association in the mid-19th century. More than a century later, a similar battle was fought for the Old Post Office in Washington, D.C.

While many of these resources may be transformed into museums, more often than not, new uses need to be found. Heritage has worked for three decades to find new uses and in some instances just revitalized old uses—the office building that becomes a boutique hotel; the YMCA that becomes affordable housing; the hotel that remains a hotel. Often, the opportunity is evident. But sometimes, as in the case of the Joe Frazier Gym or the Halprin Sequence, the opportunity is unrealized because the importance is unrecognized. We need to pay attention to these resources, to unveil them and to work to save them. ❖



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