

CONTENTS

Preface	xiii
Introduction	1
Part I Addressing the Challenge	
Chapter 1 <i>Why Buildings Are Being Lost: Burdens and Barriers</i>	11
Elimination: The Fallacy of a Clean Slate 14	
Exploitation and Exportation 17	
Barriers in Historic Preservation Standards and Designation 20	
Barriers in Process: Financing and Delivering Professional Services 23	
Chapter 2 <i>Why Buildings Matter: Purposes for Preserving</i>	27
Environmental Benefits, Embedded Possibilities 28	
Practical Benefits: The Prosaic 31	
Narrative Benefits: The Poetic 32	
Power of Persistence: Priorities 35	
Neighborhood Inventory: Buildings and Values 37	
Chapter 3 <i>What Works: Processes and Perspectives</i>	45
A Perspective on Resources 46	
Incremental and Iterative Processes 49	
Alternatives for Financing and Delivering Professional Services 54	
Considering Historic Preservation Standards and Designation 56	
Part II Purposeful Approaches to Existing Buildings	
Chapter 4 <i>Priorities: Saving Endangered or Threatened Buildings</i>	63
Stabilization: Mullanphy Emigrant Home (St. Louis, Missouri, US) 70	
Structural Support: Chantry at Kilve (Kilve, Somerset, UK) 77	
Mothballing: Homes of Springfield District (Jacksonville, Florida, US) 81	
Protest and Documentation: Richard Nickel in Chicago (Chicago, Illinois, US) 86	
Moving: Collected Thoughts and Examples 91	

Chapter 5 <i>The Poetic: Activating Buildings Through Narratives</i>	99
Conversations: The Heidelberg Project (Detroit, Michigan, US) 106	
Interlocutors: <i>The Marysburg Project</i> and <i>The Dollhouse</i> (Marysburg, Saskatchewan, and Sinclair, Manitoba, Canada) 110	
Witness for Justice: Ben Roy's Service Station (Money, Mississippi, US) 117	
Witness for Peace: Bombed Out Church (Liverpool, Merseyside, UK) 121	
Memory Markers: Collected Thoughts and Examples 125	
Chapter 6 <i>The Prosaic: Activating Buildings Through Practical Interventions</i>	135
Shelter: Million Donkey Hotel (Prata Sannita, Italy) 144	
Gardens: Plant Concert in the City Club (Newburgh, New York, US) 149	
Remediation: De Ceuvel (Amsterdam, The Netherlands) 157	
Education: Bánffy Castle (Bontida, Romania) 162	
Individuation: Denny Row Housing (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, US) 168	
Part III Community Examples: Profiles of Purpose	
Chapter 7 <i>Radical Hospitality</i>	175
Chicago: Dorchester Projects and Stony Island Arts Bank 175	
Chapter 8 <i>A Different Story to Tell</i>	189
Rural Virginia: Menokin and Remembrance Structure 189	
Chapter 9 <i>Service Is Your Rent</i>	203
Liverpool: 10 Houses on Cairns Street and Granby Winter Garden 203	
Chapter 10 <i>Social Sculpture</i>	215
Houston: Project Row Houses and ModPod 215	
Conclusion	229
Notes.....	235
Acknowledgments.....	263
About the Author	265

Introduction

“Years of experience, much of it forged in the crucible of misguided programs such as urban renewal, have clearly demonstrated the folly of destroying a place in order to save it.”

—Richard Moe, *Rebuilding Community*

One of the most sustainable things we can do at a societal scale is to invest in existing communities, making use of the embodied energy of generations before us. Yet investment flows into developing greenfields further and further from our historic city centers and in thick blankets around rural towns, leaving core communities more vulnerable and underresourced.

A slow drive down Lafayette Avenue on the South Side of Chicago in 2019 reveals a streetscape not so different from other disinvested Rust Belt communities, with empty lots and abandoned or distressed buildings. Some of the remaining buildings are neatly kept, trying to hold it together. Vacancy characterizes much of the neighborhood.

The density of this neighborhood in 2019 is perhaps not so different from what it was in 1870, when John Raber chose it for building a brick Italianate residence on 6 acres. Now, the landmarked Raber residence is almost com-

pletely obscured by tree growth and vines, its boarded windows rendering its tall façade expressionless. Further down the block, a twentieth-century brick building, formerly the home of the Mount Mariah Missionary Baptist Church and Deliverance Healing Temple, is also vacant, its windows filled with wavy glass blocks. On the half-dozen lots between them, the only structure that remains is a single-story bungalow from the 1960s, its picture window embellished with white shutters and a single trimmed shrub. Around this home, a chain-link fence defines its island.

The Raber House in Chicago in 1999.
(Photo by Camilo José Vergara.
Raber House, 5670 S. Lafayette Ave.,
Chicago, 1999. Library of Congress,
Prints & Photographs Division
[reproduction number LC-DIG-
vrg-09604])



“After generations of municipal neglect, predatory lending practices, and increased waves of foreclosure, the neighborhood was hollowed out and its structures demolished,” Sweet Water Foundation details.¹

“Compounded by several decades of loss of population . . . the area sat vacant, ‘blighted,’ and deeply scarred” by what Sweet Water Foundation describes as a “constructed ecology of absence,” explains Anthony Balas in a Mellon Foundation publication of their interview.²

This constructed ecology includes the built environment, part of our whole Earth ecosystem. In disinvested communities, the deep effects of absence are visible within the constructed ecology. There is a marked vacancy and lack of investment to fully address the properties that remain.

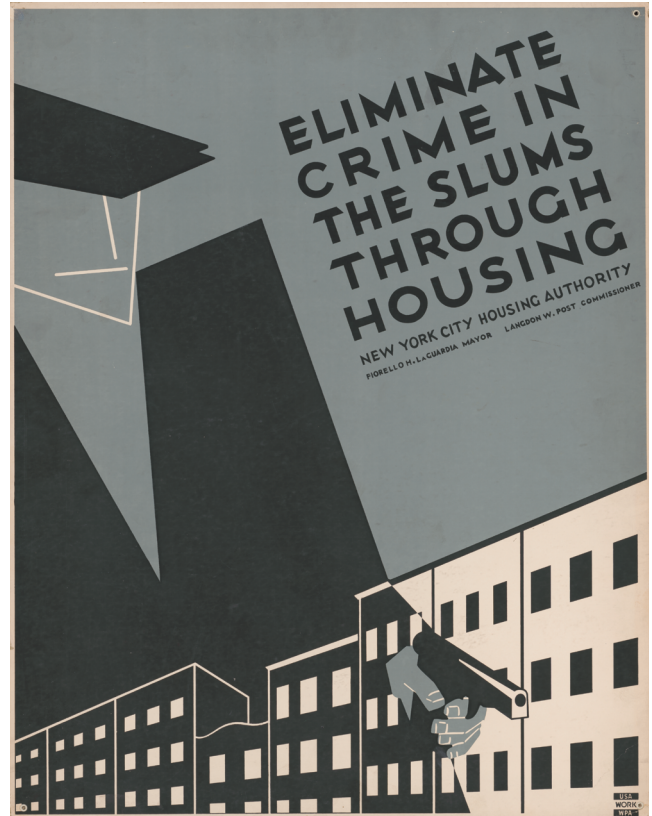
Much of the direct demolition of the built fabric in urban communities in the United States took place through federal programs: so-called slum clearings beginning in the 1930s and urban renewal and transportation planning projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Many urban freeway construction projects during these decades reinforced inequalities by destroying or isolating lower-income neighborhoods while providing a convenient conduit for those with the means and opportunity to work in the city but live in the suburbs.³ Essentially, these large-scale transportation projects aided in draining the cities. Generational wealth, economic stability, and deep sociocultural connections were affected, and the effects continue to be felt in these communities today.

The preservation movement in the United States gained traction in the 1960s, sparked by the demolition of Pennsylvania Station in New York City in 1963. Yet as Richard Moe, former president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, points out, the nascent decades of the preservation movement in the United States were also the tail end of decades in which bulldozers had been blazing through inner-city communities in the name of urban renewal.

“Abandoned buildings can break a neighborhood’s heart,” Moe says. “Demolished buildings can destroy its soul. When disinvestment, poor maintenance and abandonment leave a neighborhood pock marked with vacant or dilapidated buildings, public officials and citizens often seek a quick solution to the community’s woes by razing the deteriorated structures. Demolition may effect a dramatic change in the neighborhood’s appearance, but it’s rarely a change for the better.”⁴

4 | PRESERVING WITH PURPOSE

A Works Progress Administration-era poster promoting new housing as a crime deterrent, 1936. (Eliminate Crime in the Slums Through Housing. New York, 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. New York: Federal Art Project. [LC-DIG-ppmsca-52154])



A sales office for new houses on the outskirts of Detroit, Michigan, 1941. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF34-063667-D]. Photo by John Vachon)



The aesthetic of abandonment deeply affects its residents. Planner Alan Mallach describes how the disinvested environment can reflect a pervasive lack of hope that has deep sociological roots.⁵ Abandoned buildings can be a source of physical danger, from unstable building elements to hazardous materials to a harbor for criminal activity. In many ways, abandoned, distressed, and underused buildings are experienced as burdens.

But removing these buildings can also have negative effects. University of Toronto professor of geography and planning Jason Hackworth states that “research affirms some of the concerns being raised by scholars and local officials about past uses of demolition as a stand-alone device, namely, that absent some other form of affirmative development, disinvested neighborhoods do not autonomously revive.”⁶

Healthy communities need buildings. In disinvested communities, vacant, abandoned, or deteriorated properties (or VAD properties, as referred to by the Center for Community Progress⁷) are often viewed or experienced as burdens. Yet they also can be reintegrated into an ecosystem of use and serve as reminders of the diverse experiences that have shaped our society.

Disinvested communities, as I define them in this book, are areas that are experiencing or have experienced limited investment and economic activity and are characterized by low property values. The effects of disinvestment include a high incidence of VAD properties. A community can remain in what the Center for Community Progress calls a cycle of systemic vacancy for years, even decades.⁸

In this book I explore how artists, activists, and architects are creatively redeveloping buildings in ways that can be strategic for disinvested communities. Some of these redevelopments offer practical benefits to the community, providing shelter, space for artistic endeavors and creative enterprises, opportunities for teaching and learning, and places for growing food and gathering. Other creative approaches may have a role that is not practical but more poetic or prophetic.

Working in the South Side Chicago neighborhood of the Raber House and Deliverance Healing Temple during its multigenerational harrowing-out (in the words of the Sweet Water Foundation from their interview with Anthony Balas), the Sweet Water Foundation gathered and shared life experiences with neighbors.⁹ Soon after acquiring the abandoned church building in 2019, they received a grant from the National Trust to reimagine and revitalize spaces in the community.¹⁰ The foundation proposed focusing commu-

nity efforts on the church building, renamed the Civic Arts Church, instead of on the Raber House.

The Raber House, which was landmarked by the City of Chicago in 1996, had not found an investor or a new use. The Sweet Water Foundation saw that the nearby abandoned church held different stories and different possibilities for regeneration. Although the church was not landmarked, it was seen as having greater potential to benefit the community as a hub of activity around the arts and its importance in telling certain stories. “The act of preserving and transforming the church . . . will unveil elements of Black History in Chicago that are untold and will reactivate a community asset that is deeply rooted in the history of the people who live in the neighborhood today,”¹¹ reads a Sweet Water Foundation publication about the project.

As this example demonstrates, although prominent historic buildings can have importance to a community, sometimes buildings that are considered nonhistoric can have equal or greater importance. And, as architect Beth Brant points out in an article for AIA Dallas, reusing so-called nonspecial buildings can have greater sustainability impact than reusing the so-called special ones.¹² Buildings from a broad spectrum of time can be creatively reused to serve purposes that benefit the community.

In *Preserving with Purpose*, I argue for saving buildings that are of value to the community. Whether the building becomes a symbol of resistance, a place of refuge, a teacher, a business incubator, or whether interventions at the site help clean the soil or serve as a marker for mourning or remembrance, good can come to the community through even temporary or partial reuse of an underused site. I believe that widespread demolition removes certain possibilities of goodness without preventing gentrification.

When I talk with people about approaches to the reuse of buildings in disinvested communities, the question that arises most frequently is, “Doesn’t this lead to gentrification?”

My response is, “Sometimes.” The negative effects of increased investment and raised property values, such as displacement, can occur. Offering discussion in several community profiles about inclusion or affordability as community priorities, I advocate for retaining and building on the physical resources within disinvested communities because, as Alan Mallach points out in his book *The Divided City*, “the reality is that today most neighborhoods that don’t revive, go downhill.”¹³



In this book, I suggest ways that professionals such as historians, architects, and urban planners who potentially come from outside a disinvested community can participate in a way that respects and empowers community members to consider the best method and use of existing buildings. Part II of this book features examples from around the world of buildings that have been prioritized and strategically preserved by their community for later redevelopment and buildings that have been repurposed or adapted for practical or poetic purposes. This catalog of approaches developed in part because it was a resource that I wished I had in discussions with clients—something to spark the creative process.

Part III offers profiles of four places that were in a cycle of systemic vacancy or at a stage of critical abandonment but have, over time, redeveloped buildings by using the approaches described in this book. Three of these profiles—Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas; The Dorchester Projects and Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago, Illinois; and Menokin in Warsaw, Virginia—are in the United States. The fourth profile, of 10 Houses on Cairns and the Granby Winter Garden, is in Liverpool, England. Menokin is in a rural area and the others are urban. The examples all have different stories, of course—different ownership models and different dynamics that have played

A Juneteenth celebration at Civic Arts Church in 2024. The new sliding door on the side of the building activates the open space between the church and the adjacent residential structures, including the Raber House. (Courtesy of Sweet Water Foundation)

out over time between the individuals and groups involved. Yet in these communities, artists, residents, activists, and architects have approached existing buildings in strategic, creative, purposeful ways.

Although this book is written for a global audience, the perspective is firmly situated in the United States. For example, the book uses the term *preservation* (an Americanism) rather than the term *conservation*, which is more commonly used in other places around the world.¹⁴ I apply global observations to the architecture and preservation fields in the United States because they are the systems in which I was trained and licensed. And because it's my home culture, it's the one with which I am most familiar and feel the most freedom to approach critically.

In addition to discussing the loss of buildings, this book also identifies some barriers to saving them within the disciplines of historic preservation and the building service professions. My goal is not necessarily to revolutionize existing systems but to help make space within them—to create a parenthesis of opportunity—for more buildings in disinvested communities to remain. Architect-preservationist Deborah Burke describes existing buildings as an opportunity “for cities to engage with historical trauma, encourage cultural continuity, and move beyond generic expectations of what older structures can become in a rapidly changing world.”¹⁵

Five years on from a pandemic that underscored our interconnectedness and fragility, we somehow find ourselves more splintered and divided than ever before. We're haunted by persistent social inequities and the urgent ticking of the environmental clock. But when we pause to look around us, we can see afresh the good work that is happening and has already been happening for years, good work that is often overshadowed by higher-budget projects and the insatiable cycle of consumption.

We are no longer in an age (if indeed we ever were) where the Howard Roark archetype of the solitary professional can succeed in addressing the complex issues of our society.¹⁶ We must engage with others not only about how we got to this point but how, together, we can move forward. We can change course away from this constructed ecology of absence and the churning consumption of greenspace toward purposefully preserving environments with existing buildings that are fertile with hope for individual communities and for our planet.

PART I

Addressing the Challenge



Companions in sunseting limbo: Will it be removal or regeneration? (Erik Olson, *Longtime Neighbors*, oil on canvas, 30 × 40 inches. Courtesy of Erik Olson)

Chapter 1

Why Buildings Are Being Lost: Burdens and Barriers

“What I was going to do would technically be stealing, but from whom? A memory? The people who had abandoned it? The governments that allowed it to fester?”

—Drew Philp, *A \$500 House in Detroit:
Rebuilding an Abandoned Home
and an American City*

The scale of Detroit’s depopulation is vast. In the postwar production boom of the 1950s, Detroit reached its peak population of 1.85 million. By 2020, seventy years later, the population had fallen to 640,000, or just slightly over one third its former size.¹ Dispersed over a landmass roughly equivalent in size to Manhattan, San Francisco, and Boston combined, Detroit’s remaining population contended with an outsized infrastructure² and a slow unraveling of the built environment its resources no longer supported.

Disinvested communities like Detroit are staggering under the economic and psychological burden of vacant, abandoned, and distressed properties. These buildings, their disappearance, and the disinvestment surrounding

them are not just inherited problems or a random collision of unfortunate circumstances but the result of socioeconomic forces and deliberate choices.³

A policy brief produced for the Vacant Properties Research Network states, “Even though many of the forces and factors responsible for blighted properties are difficult to see, this invisibility does not mean that blighted properties are natural results of urban and suburban development. On the contrary, a number of federal, state, and municipal policies and market trends have helped to create blighted conditions in the U.S. . . . The emergence of blighted properties in shrinking and deindustrializing cities in the U.S. is not happenstance. The emergence of blighted properties is part of a larger pattern of deterioration and neglect.”⁴

Disinvestment has a cause, and it also has a cost. In the early 2000s, depopulating Rust Belt cities such as Buffalo, New York, and St. Louis, Missouri, counted more than 30,000 vacant housing units each. The count in Cleveland, Ohio, was 50,000.⁵ A 2022 report by the Center for Community Progress states that a conservative estimate of the minimum cost to address vacant and blighted structures in the state of Michigan alone is \$1.7 billion. “The direct costs to address these properties,” the reports states, “are more than individual communities can bear.”⁶

And the costs are more than economic. In his article “How Detroit Became the World Capital of Staring at Abandoned Old Buildings,” journalist Mark Binelli recounts Detroiters Marsha Cusic speaking of the “retinal scars” that Detroit’s ruined buildings left on children living in the city.⁷ Her metaphor left a lasting impression on me. The longer I lived in Detroit, the more I understood how the residual outline of each distressed building was seared into the community’s consciousness.

By communities or by owners with more capital resources, historic buildings are being saved. They’re being rehabilitated, restored, reused, reinterpreted. Dovecote Studio in Suffolk, England, a steel structure inserted into a partially ruined stone building, is the darling of creative ruins activists. At Bunny Lane House in central New Jersey (United States) architect Adam Kalkin enclosed a nineteenth-century clapboard house inside an industrial steel shed. In Maastricht, the Netherlands, a bookstore situated inside a historic Dominican church is a pretty good approximation—to my mind—of paradise on Earth.



Artist Rachel Whiteread cast a concrete sculpture of a Victorian terraced house and placed it on an empty block that had once been lined with such homes for working-class Londoners. It served as a collective memory device, a heavy ghost of the block's built past. (Rachel Whiteread; *House*, 1993; 193 Grove Road, London E3. Destroyed 1993. © Rachel Whiteread; Photo by Sue Omerod. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian)



Photographer Richard Nickel documented metal scavengers leaving the former Chicago residence of architect-engineer Dankmar Adler, which was demolished three days later. (Dankmar Adler Residence, Adler and Sullivan, architects. Photo 1961. Richard Nickel Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File # 201006_110815-061)

And yet, in disinvested communities, historic buildings—resplendent with just as many lovely, creative opportunities—are being lost, continuing the cycle of disinvestment. This chapter explores some of the reasons why, to build a foundation for understanding how community residents and professionals can find a different way forward.

Elimination: The Fallacy of a Clean Slate

When populations recede, what's left is an outsized infrastructure. Population reduction leaves a plentiful supply of buildings but no demand. Property values plummet. Access to capital and other resources dries up in inverse proportion to outward flow, like the slow and squeaky turning off of a tap.⁸ The Center for Community Progress explains sustained or increasing vacancy (or “systemic vacancy”) as a looped cycle. A once-vibrant neighborhood faces equity challenges (such as discriminatory or predatory lending), external triggers (such as a natural disaster or an economic crisis), a market shift (demand decreases), and then increased vacancy. The impacts of increased vacancy can fuel further challenges and perpetuate the cycle.⁹

When communities experience disinvestment, buildings can suffer what is called demolition by neglect, which is the gradual and terminal deterioration of a structure due to lack of maintenance. For example, if a roof leak is unrepaired, water eventually weakens and destroys the structure. Sometimes demolition by neglect occurs when, despite good intentions, owners lack the funds or technical resources to maintain the structure. When real estate prices bottom out, owners who do have access to funds often choose not to invest in maintaining a building because of the diminished property values and what is perceived as a negative rate of return.

When large numbers of buildings experience demolition by neglect, distress, abandonment, and vacancy, a community's aesthetic becomes a constant visual reminder of brokenness. Consequently, the vacant and distressed properties can acquire misplaced or disproportionate blame for holding back the community from progress. Overwhelming infrastructure needs, and their cascading drain on physical and emotional resources, can lead to a call for removal.

Demolition campaigns to remove the so-called blighted structures are often welcomed, even called for, by neighborhood residents. Vacant and abandoned structures pose risks to their neighbors that can harm health,



Unattended property: a frozen waterfall from a burst pipe flows out of a vacant house in Detroit that was in otherwise good condition, 2006. (Amy Hetletvedt)



Is demolition the best solution? An exalted excavator above an open field in rural Michigan, 2024. (Amy Hetletvedt)

emotional wellbeing, and municipal revenue.¹⁰ These effects can compound conditions in the neighborhood and perpetuate the cycle of vacancy. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of vacant, abandoned, and distressed structures, residents may see demolition as the best option.

In Detroit, a Blight Removal Task Force was convened in 2014 to assess the city's building stock. The task force identified over 40,000 blighted structures, plus 38,000 structures with strong indicators to become blighted. In total, 78,000 structures or nearly 30 percent of all existing structures in the city were identified as blighted and needing intervention.¹¹ More than 15,000 homes were eventually demolished, with the final house under the federal demolition funds coming down in August 2020.¹² "The pace of the demolition program," according to a publication by think tank Detroit Future City, "earned the City the recognition of running the largest demolition program in the country."¹³

In the years after the work of the Blight Removal Task Force in Detroit, a majority of Detroiters held favorable views on the city's blight elimination efforts.¹⁴ Many of the problem properties were gone. Indeed, many community safety problems—such as the potential for an unsecured cornice to fall on a pedestrian or the potential for an abandoned building to harbor criminal activity—disappear with the demolition of the distressed buildings.

Yet where the built and natural environments are concerned, a clean slate is a fallacy. Building materials and demolition debris go somewhere, usually to a landfill.¹⁵ The presence of distressed and abandoned structures has been linked to public health problems,¹⁶ but so have their demolition and removal. One study associated demolitions with elevated blood lead levels in Detroit children from 2014 to 2017.¹⁷ Studies are ongoing.

In view of community and public health issues related to the built environment, it is interesting that the word *blight*—often used for communities with high rates of vacancy and abandonment—originates from a term for a diseased plant. The Center for Community Progress explains, "Consider the etymology of blight and where it places the blame. The term blight was first used in the sixteenth century to describe botanical disease that led to spreading lesions that decimated crops—something seen as an act of nature, difficult to predict or prevent. So, when applied to properties, the subtext is clear: Blight is random and blameless. But the systemic vacancy that leads to abandoned and deteriorated buildings is anything but random. It is the con-

sequence of a legacy of intentional disinvestment, poverty, unjust policies, and racist systems.”¹⁸

But if disinvestment is a cause of blight, is demolition really its cure? Or is it a permanent solution to something that could have been addressed differently—like an unnecessary or premature amputation?

Not all buildings can be saved, and communities do need to change over time. But our society demonstrates, at many levels, a knee-jerk tendency to erase and delete rather than to edit. Indiscriminate, hasty, or broad-scale demolition permanently removes resources that have potential benefit.¹⁹

Exploitation and Exportation

In the late eighteenth century, the aesthetic ideal of the Picturesque—that historical artifacts are endowed with an unintentional and inherent beauty—gained momentum through the writings of William Gilpin, Edmund Burke, Denis Diderot, and others. Estate gardens of wealthy landowners began to sprout follies, decayed classical buildings that were constructed in a ruinous state because the ruins were considered beautiful.

It was pure stage setting, an emphasis on experience designed to provoke an emotional reaction to perceived sublimity. Decay became a foil for the abundance of the wealthy and the sense of control enabled by their wealth. It was a fetish of the “haves.” And so it’s worth considering that the perception of beauty in decay depends heavily on one’s vantage point and that economic status has something to do with it.

Architect Sidney Robinson writes of the Picturesque movement, “Not having the money or the time to correct the depredations of gravity, water, growth and decay is one thing. To cultivate them is another.” He concludes this exploration by noting, “The ideals of novelty, surprise, and relaxation depend on intermittency. Repetition renders them dull and inert.”²⁰ In other words, decay can be picturesque if it is a condition from which one has an escape.

This dichotomy in the perception of ruins isn’t just a relic of yesteryear. In 2016, artist Ryan Mendoza partially deconstructed a house in Detroit and exported it to an art exhibit in Rotterdam and later to a permanent collection in Antwerp. Removing portions of the structure, which he called “The White House,” left behind the gaping skeletal remains of the donor house on Detroit’s West Side.

The late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century upper class exhibited a fascination with elaborate miniatures and curiosity cabinets. (The doll house of Petronella Oortman, anonymous, c. 1686–c. 1710. Public domain. In the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, <https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/2002678>)



Although Mendoza discussed it as a form of connection,²¹ others perceived it differently. “I feel disrespected to the max,” said neighbor Beverly Wuong in a *Detroit Free Press* interview.²²

This outrage and sense of disrespect is like that fueled by ruins porn, a term that denotes the photographic exploitation of ruinous structures. Architecture writer and critic Catherine Slessor explains that ruins porn “shamefully overlooks and overwrites the voices of those who still call the city home. Through its reductivist and disassociative prism, endemic social injustices such as poverty, marginalization and racism are ignored or ridiculed.”²³

Brian Farkas, a Detroit Building Authority project manager, said of Mendoza’s White House project, “You can’t do this in Detroit anymore. This is not everyone’s canvas. These are neighborhoods. People live here.”²⁴ In later chapters, I explore the idea of neighborhood as canvas and the ways in which large-scale artistic endeavors can have potential benefit.



A more recent dollhouse. Here, Shonibare's dollhouse recreates a Victorian terraced house in miniature, covering some of the furniture with traditional Nigerian fabric. The reduced scale and depiction of house as plaything call the viewer's attention to the tendency to objectify others. (Yinka Shonibare, Untitled [Dollhouse]; from the 2002 Peter Norton Family Christmas Project, resin, plastic, wood, paper, and fabric. 33.02 × 20 × 26.04 cm. © Yinka Shonibare CBE. All Rights Reserved, DACS/ ARS, NY 2024. University of Michigan Museum of Art, The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection: Fifty Works for Fifty States, a joint initiative of the Trustees of the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection and the National Gallery of Art, with generous support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute for Museum and Library Services, 2008/2.256)

Exportation and exploitation of vacant buildings, though quantitatively much smaller in scope than removal by demolition, have an outsize psychological impact on community residents. Exportation and removal are rife with ethical questions about intent, belonging, and protection. Drew Philp, author (and owner) of *A \$500 House in Detroit*, recounts a conversation with his friend Nate about whether he should salvage the front door from the abandoned house across the street for use in his own house.

“Ahh, it’s fine. It’s going to go to waste if you don’t. They’re going to tear that house down. Or it’ll be taken by someone else. You’re really protecting it,” Nate said earnestly. His argument seemed like the same one used to take mummies from the pyramids and justify them sitting

in the British Museum alongside other antiquities removed for “protection” during colonialism. But this wasn’t Egypt, this was Detroit and this wasn’t a pyramid, it was an abandoned house. What I was going to do would technically be stealing, but from whom? A memory? The people who had abandoned it? The governments that allowed it to fester? . . . I looked around and it didn’t seem as though anyone was on the street, so Nate and I headed over and ripped the door from its hinges.²⁵

Philp’s conversation with his friend touched on many of the contextual issues of material loss. In a sculpture called *Urban Extract* in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, artist Charles McGee presents a building extract as object. The extract includes the window of a barber shop that McGee frequented for many years.²⁶ The piece is a poignant exploration of the severing effects of demolition and extraction on memory and cultural connections.

The magnitude of disinvestment in communities such as Detroit has caused many to view demolition as the best solution to a burdensome problem or to view so-called blighted communities as a source for further exploitation and extraction. Yet in both cases, removing resources from a community removes potential opportunities to use those resources in creative remaking. What is being lost is not only the buildings themselves but their potential benefit as physical and sociological materials for rebuilding.

Barriers in Historic Preservation Standards and Designation

Although access to capital is an obvious reason that buildings are not rehabilitated in disinvested communities, it is not the only reason. It’s important to consider the barriers that current systems within the built environment may present. Some of these barriers are in the operational norms of the architecture and preservation professions.

In a 2019 article titled “Why Historic Preservation Needs a New Approach,” Patrice Frey, former president of Main Street America, outlines several challenges to the field of historic preservation, among them the languishing and loss of historic buildings in disinvested real estate markets. “Valuable historic resources lie fallow because demand for space is low and the economics of rehabilitation can be extraordinarily challenging,” she says.²⁷

Frey doesn’t blame the absence of investment alone for the loss of buildings in disinvested communities. She turns to preservation standards and

strategies. “Our toolbox,” says Frey, “has not evolved to keep pace. . . . Our core preservation tools do not serve all kinds of preservation well.”

Frey takes as an example a two-story brick commercial building in an economically struggling small town. Although it is not especially significant as an architectural resource, it is uniquely significant to the community as an eatery and social hub. “To rehab it in a historically ‘correct’ way—that is, through the stringent application [of] the Standards for Rehabilitation—would be extraordinarily challenging in a town where building valuations are low, traditional financing options are scarce, and historic preservation tax credits are not a likely source of financing.”²⁸

The standards for preservation projects in the United States have evolved little from those established and codified in the 1960s and 1970s. The US Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties offer four categories of treatment: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. These categories are organized by their level of intervention in the historic property. Preservation is the least invasive; reconstruction is the most invasive.

Within the discipline of historic preservation, the question about how much to intervene in a building—and thus the idea of organizing the standards according to level of intervention—goes back to debates rooted in the nineteenth century.

Frenchman Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc was the architect for the restoration of Notre Dame in Paris in the mid-1800s. The building wasn’t in great shape at that time, having suffered decline and significant damage during the French Revolution. Viollet-le-Duc designed the spire with which we are now familiar at Notre Dame, the spire that burned in the April 2019 fire. (After much debate, the spire has been reconstructed to Viollet-le-Duc’s version.²⁹)

The spire wasn’t historically authentic to the Gothic cathedral. It was Viollet-le-Duc’s historicist vision of the spire, the spire he believed should have been there. Viollet-le-Duc viewed restoration as returning the building to a complete state that had perhaps never existed at any particular moment in the past.³⁰

In contrast to Viollet-le-Duc’s passion for revisionist restoration, Englishman John Ruskin, his contemporary, “abhorred restoration of any kind and defended the aesthetic value of ruins.”³¹ Rather than engage in speculative or even historically defensible restoration, Ruskin emphasized the moral and

“Our toolbox has not evolved to keep pace.”
—Patrice Frey

memorial role of the structures of the past and said, “We have no right to touch them. They are not ours.”³²

Viollet-le-Duc’s approach to intervention was very heavy, Ruskin’s was very light. Over time, the lighter approach won over, and later voices in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as that of William Morris, argued for the value of leaving changes that had taken place over time.

The interesting dilemma for disinvested communities today is that although older buildings that are considered nonhistoric are opportunities for more experimental and less financially burdensome approaches, designation can give them a helpful visibility to attract funding. Yet, the nature of the designation process and the need to establish of a period of significance reveal a disproportionate focus on conserving buildings as a monument to a particular period of history or as a historic artifact (a precious object) rather than on the role of the building to serve a community’s needs or its potential for storytelling.³³

Buildings in disinvested communities may have lost character-defining features of their architecture to vandalism or decay or may have been substantially adapted for different uses over the years. Referring to the criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, former president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation Stephanie Meeks says, “Those are very high standards to meet, and although standards are important, this high bar tends to limit our perspective of history to architectural significance. There is so much more to our story than that.”³⁴ When character-defining features are foregrounded, what other features (physical, cultural, social) recede to the background?³⁵

The good news is that work is being done to refine the municipal and regulatory systems for buildings (historic and other) and to consider how these systems could be adapted in the context of disinvested communities. Flexible and multilayered approaches are needed to support revitalization efforts in disinvested communities.³⁶

In 2023, the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO) committee released a report on the National Register for Historic Places that advocated, among other recommendations, to “consider adding new criterion for recognition of places of cultural significance that may not retain integrity as traditionally understood, but that may hold deep importance and meaning to groups and communities.”³⁷

In March 2023, the NCSHPO formed a working group to provide recommendations on the standards and their application. American Institute of Architects Historic Resources Committee chair Robert Burns commented, “Our understanding of the need for historic preservation to take on a more holistic view of sustainability including social, cultural, and economic equality . . . calls for us to look closely as to whether current standards are inclusive or exclusive.”³⁸

Historic preservation professionals, architects, and students of those disciplines must contribute to shaping policy, participation models, codes, and standards so that they function better in all communities. In the context of disinvested communities, open dialogues, more flexible standards, and expanded definitions will respect the changes that have taken place over time and encourage preserving with purposes that align with broader use, narrative, or developmental goals in a community.

Barriers in Process: Financing and Delivering Professional Services

A finished product, where buildings and especially houses are concerned, is very much a construct of the so-called first world. If you’ve lived or traveled elsewhere, no doubt you’re familiar with the sight of rebar (steel reinforcing bars) sticking up from the second story of a masonry house. In much of the world, many houses are self-built, but even when they’re not, building one’s house is much more of an incremental process. Rooms are added, floors are added.

One reason for this is financing. The mortgage industry in the United States focuses on the all-at-once. If a homeowner seeks a construction or renovation finance loan, there’s a limited period within which the work must be completed so that the mortgage company has turnkey collateral for the loan. But in parts of the world where housing loans are uncommon or unattainable, construction is self-financed. And self-financing is not done all at once.

Modern architecture and preservation project delivery is based on a triangular structure of participants: the professional (an architect, conservator, or historic preservation specialist), the client (individual, corporation, or nonprofit), and the municipal authorities (the entities that regulate the project and its development). The client initiates the process because the client

brings the funding for the project, whether cash, mortgage, grants, or other financing schemes such as tax credits. The proposed end use for the building shapes the extent of the renovation or rehabilitation project.

The trigger for the cycle and the actualization of a project is funding, and the operation is transactional. The project moves around the triangle in a series of personal, financial, and regulatory transactions. This basic operating structure has been in place since the development of modern building codes and the professionalization of architecture and preservation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although these project delivery norms work well in many contexts, they do not necessarily function well in disinvested communities.

Low property values that result from disinvestment are obstacles for reinvestment, and there is little space to denominate other types of resources. This challenge is an opening to explore and expand ways that clients and communities can work with professionals to acknowledge the expertise and agency of both parties, in smaller increments that require less capital and are more adaptable. Some ingredients for this co-participation are discussed in Chapter 3.

Disinvested communities don't have the same level of access to financial and technical resources as other communities. Often, multiple systems—including physical infrastructure systems and sociopolitical systems—are broken or functioning suboptimally, and the standards and delivery models for interventions in historic buildings do not always work well. But waiting for the fix often leads to more loss.

I do not believe that widespread demolition is the answer for approaching vacant, abandoned, and distressed buildings in disinvested communities. So far, there's not a lot of evidence that the immense postrecession demolition efforts have benefited Detroit. Time will tell. But I wonder, along the parallel timeline of a path not taken, what creativity and the Detroit community could have wrought with the raw materials of their history.

Preserving with Purpose explores contextual approaches to existing buildings in disinvested communities as an alternative to demolition, explains why these buildings matter, and what communities and professionals can make of them, together.



Detail from Candy Chang's public installation "I wish this was." Ongoing from 2012. (Candy Chang)

Chapter 2

Why Buildings Matter: Purposes for Preserving

“The tragedy is not that things are broken.

The tragedy is that they are not mended again.”

—Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*

When vacant, abandoned, and distressed buildings are eliminated, the problems that they represent may disappear, but so does their potential. It’s a loss that can’t be retrieved.

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg’s early work was rooted in questions he asked about the physical structure of communities and health outcomes in Chicago following the heat wave of 1995.¹ In his latest book, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, he defines social infrastructure as “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact.” He clarifies that “social infrastructure is not ‘social capital’—a concept commonly used to measure people’s relationships and interpersonal networks—but the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops.”²

Klinenberg’s studies in Chicago demonstrated that where other factors—such as poverty and racial demographics—were the same, South Side

Chicago neighborhoods with less abandonment had better public health outcomes during exceptional events. “In places like Englewood, the shoddy social infrastructure discouraged interaction and impeded mutual support, whereas in places like Auburn Gresham the social infrastructure encouraged those things,” he noted.³

Thriving communities with robust social infrastructure have buildings. When decay and demolition hollow out a community, poorer social infrastructure can negatively affect residents. In disinvested communities, particularly, retaining and rehabilitating existing buildings is critical. Although retaining buildings means that the potential for gentrification is greater, extensive demolition decreases the likelihood of socioeconomic recovery. Says planner Alan Mallach, “Gentrifying areas are rarely the most distressed areas of a city, particularly those where the cumulative effect of demolishing vacant buildings has undone the neighborhood’s fabric. . . . Indeed, the idea one hears that urban demolition is a stalking horse for future gentrification is yet another urban myth; in reality, it more often creates a moonscape of vacant land that all but guarantees gentrification will *not* take place.”⁴

Existing buildings matter to social infrastructure, to economic regeneration, and to healthy communities. Though distressed or abandoned, existing buildings have embedded possibilities and energies that can benefit their communities and can tell stories that are important to healing us all.

Environmental Benefits, Embedded Possibilities

Abandoned or distressed buildings are often seen as an environmental burden. Indeed, existing buildings often contain environmental hazards such as lead and asbestos that must be properly remediated. But eliminating existing buildings does not obviate remediation because even demolition requires environmental remediation.

Some characterize architectural salvage as the environmental and economic upside to demolition. When buildings are deconstructed and materials are salvaged, they can be reused and add value to artisanal products or other building rehabilitations. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 1, salvage operations can also be a way to extract from a disinvested community, and although deconstruction can be an environmentally kinder alternative to demolition, it still precludes later possibilities for the use and value of the structure.

From an environmental perspective, it is almost always more sustainable to reuse an existing building than to build new because the construction process is so resource intensive.⁵ Based on an analysis of a damaged multifamily building in Spain, a study in the *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* concludes that “even with a severely damaged building, the repair and retrofit work incurs a lower economic and environmental impact than that of a total replacement with a new construction.”⁶

The concept of *embodied energy* refers to the total energy consumption over a building’s lifespan, from the raw and extractive energy of the building materials, to the energy consumed in the construction process and the energy used in maintaining the building. In an article called “Embodied Energy and Historic Preservation,” Mike Jackson calculates that even if salvage practices are used in demolition and the new building constructed in place of the demolished building is energy-efficient, it would take fifty-seven years before a net energy savings is achieved.⁷

As architecture critic Thomas De Monchaux says, “So much of a building’s lifetime ecological and energetic impact comes through the operations of initial material extraction, manufacturing, transportation, and construction; and then of eventual demolition, further transportation, and decay. Sustainable buildings are therefore not new buildings—however fuel-efficient their machines and materials. Sustainable buildings are buildings that have been sustained.”⁸

Residents in a disinvested community may ask, “Why should we lead the way?” If the environmental benefit of keeping and reusing buildings is good for the whole planet, why should a disinvested community bear the burden of rehabilitating the building? One answer comes from reframing the perspective. De Monchaux defined sustainable buildings as buildings *that have been sustained*. But buildings also have the capacity *to sustain*. A building can be approached as a resource to the community.

Opening up possibilities for an existing building *to sustain*, to lend its resources while it’s waiting for its next act, can recapture or capitalize on the embodied energy of the building. This is true not only in terms of the fossil fuels and material values that the building represents but also in terms of its embedded social value. Existing buildings contain possibilities to benefit disinvested communities—some in ways that are very practical and others in ways that lean more toward the poetic or narrative.

“Sustainable
buildings are
buildings that have
been sustained.”

—Thomas De
Monchaux

This building-as-gas-can graphic connected the growing historic preservation movement with the energy conservation and environmental movement, 1980.

(© National Trust for Historic Preservation, available through the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis)

P R E S E R V A T I O N :

Reusing America's Energy

Preservation Week May 11-17, 1980



It takes energy to construct a new building.
It saves energy to preserve an old one.

It takes the energy equivalent of one gallon of gasoline to make, deliver and install eight bricks. Preserving eight old bricks instead of throwing them away and making new ones means that the energy of a gallon of gasoline can be used to meet other needs. Reusing old buildings saves the energy required to demolish and replace them with new buildings. And properly rehabilitated old buildings use no

more energy, on the average, than brand new buildings for operation. Save energy—save a building! Join the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the U.S. Department of Energy in observing Preservation Week 1980. For details, write to Preservation Week, National Trust, 178 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Or contact your local preservation organization.

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