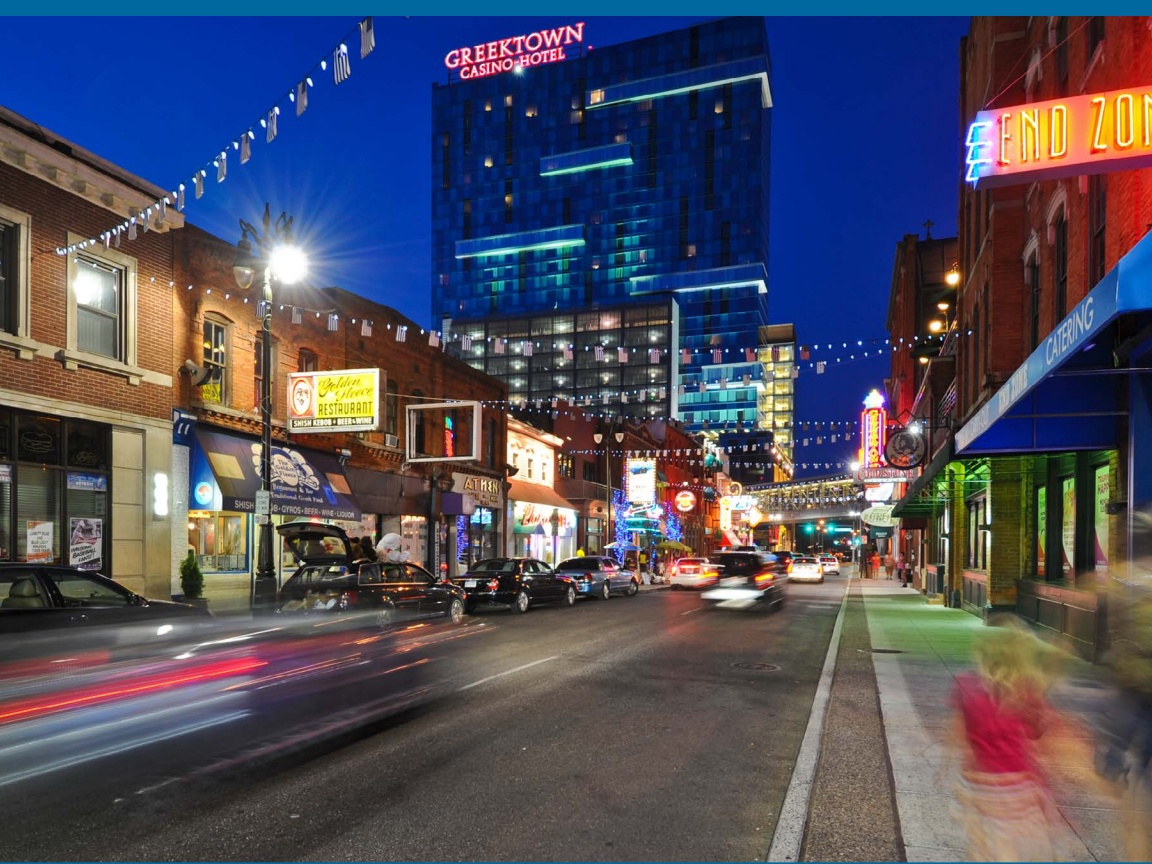


# ForumJournal

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## Preservation in the City



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**COVER: The Greektown historic district is one of the last surviving Victorian-era commercial streetscapes in downtown Detroit.**

PHOTO: VITO PALMISSANO, COURTESY METRO DETROIT



The National Trust for Historic Preservation works to save America's historic places for the next generation. We take direct, on-the-ground action when historic buildings and sites are threatened. Our work helps build vibrant, sustainable communities. We advocate with governments to save America's heritage. We strive to create a cultural legacy that is as diverse as the nation itself so that all of us can take pride in our part of the American story.

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# Rightsizing Right

CARA BERTRON

Over the past 60 years, hundreds of communities across the Rust Belt have lost population. Former manufacturing centers that once churned out automobiles, household goods, and war munitions to power the nation have seen up to 60 percent of their residents move away. Those who remain in these legacy cities and towns face a formidable swath of challenges: few jobs, struggling educational systems, high crime rates, and vacant buildings—to name a few.

The scale of vacancy can be difficult for outsiders to fathom. Places that used to pride themselves on the affordability of single-family houses now have thousands of empty buildings and vacant lots. This is true in Cleveland and Syracuse, and certainly true in Detroit. It is true even in cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, where rising populations and new economic activity suggest regeneration and renewal, but reinvestment in the built environment lags behind.

Not everything can be saved, as a drive through any one of these cities demonstrates. Vacancy and abandonment are common. Empty lots are interspersed with tidy houses on one block, while the next block is wholly ravaged by long disinvestment. Across the street, well-kept homes stand between boarded-up buildings and collapsing houses. Few neighborhoods are untouched.

Census numbers back this up. Young educated professionals are driving apartment conversions and hangouts in hip urban neighborhoods from Buffalo to St. Louis, but the overall population in these cities continues its decades-long slide.<sup>1</sup> And population loss and its attendant challenges are not limited to the Rust Belt: 41 states across the country have at least one community with a population of more than 20,000 that has experienced a decline in the number of residents during the last decade.

If we want our cities to continue to be centers of people, ideas, and activity, clearly something must be done.



View of downtown Youngstown from the Erie Terminal Place, a historic train station rehabilitated in 2012 as apartments.

PHOTO: CARA BERTRON

## RIGHTSIZING: THE PLANNING CONTEXT

In rightsizing, a city's physical fabric is adjusted to accommodate the needs of the current and expected population. The idea is loaded. Rightsizing aims to address abandoned properties on a large scale, often through demolition. Many high-vacancy neighborhoods—still reeling from the aftereffects of heavy-handed, top-down urban renewal of the 1960s and '70s—are suspicious of such an approach. Yet there are few alternatives for cities facing budget cuts to public transportation, police, and fire departments; increasing numbers of vacant, abandoned, and tax-delinquent properties; and miles of underutilized infrastructure with mounting maintenance costs.

Youngstown, Ohio, was the first city to publicly embrace rightsizing as the backbone of a citywide plan. An inclusive community process made this shift from traditional growth discussions politically possible. More than 5,000 citizens participated in the planning process, and 150 volunteers signed up for working groups that tackled economic development, quality of life, neighborhood planning, and marketing. The resulting plan, [Youngstown 2010](#), proposed an ambitious civic agenda: to stabilize the population, consolidate infrastructure and public services, redefine the local economy, focus revitalization efforts in viable residential areas and commercial nodes, improve public safety and education, and retool the city's public image.<sup>2</sup>

Planners, urban policymakers, and media across the country took note. Youngstown was named one of the top ten places in the country to start a business by *Entrepreneur Magazine* in 2009.<sup>3</sup> A steel-tube manufacturing company expanded its local facilities. The Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation, formed to target investment, has seen notable successes in the Idora neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> While Youngstown's challenges did not disappear, it was—and is—still kicking.<sup>5</sup>

Detroit is also facing the future with a mix of optimism, pragmatism, and pugilism. The city completed Detroit Future City in 2012. This long-range framework proposes sweeping strategies for revitalization as a permanently smaller city. These include finding creative, productive uses for vacant land; focusing resources and density in low-vacancy, job-rich areas; and coordinating with a variety of stakeholders. On the heels of the plan's public unveiling, the Kresge Foundation committed \$150 million toward implementation.

Strategies for managing vacant land and abandoned properties dominate these municipal plans and related conferences and publications. Preservation is typically included, but it plays a small and isolated role. Youngstown 2010 calls out the “authentic urban environment” of its central core as a significant asset, and Detroit Future City acknowledges the amenities of traditional neighborhoods and recommends prioritizing rehabilitation of historic buildings.<sup>6</sup> The Reclaiming Vacant Properties conference organized each year by the Center for Community Progress nods to adaptive use in a session or two. The American Assembly, a think tank based at Columbia University, focused on legacy cities with a report in 2011 and a conference and report in 2012. Both reports highlighted quality of place as a critical goal and called out historic buildings and neighborhoods as part of that, but the term “historic preservation” did not appear in either.<sup>7</sup>

On its own, the preservation field has mustered a limited response. The National Trust sounded a call to arms with a 2009 *ForumJournal* article on the foreclosure crisis and a [“Thinking About Shrinking”](#) discussion at the National Preservation Conference in

Buffalo later that year.<sup>8</sup> More recently, the Trust and the Michigan Historic Preservation Network have partnered with local foundations to create two yearlong Preservation Specialist positions in Michigan communities. The first specialist was based in Saginaw and Lansing in 2010-11. Her ambitious work plan included assisting city officials in understanding, identifying, and planning for historic resources; strengthening the local historic district commission through recruitment and training; building capacity for preservation advocacy in the local community; and proposing new partnerships with local organizations and institutions.<sup>9</sup> A new Detroit preservation specialist recently began work with a similar goal of integrating preservation into local rightsizing efforts. At the federal level, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) established a Rightsizing and Historic Preservation Task Force to promote holistic rightsizing models through federal policies and incentives.<sup>10</sup>

Still, no overarching framework exists for preservation to be integrated into rightsizing policies and plans or in decision-making on the ground, though preservation advocates are increasingly realizing the need.

## **RIGHTSIZING CITIES INITIATIVE**

In 2012, PlaceEconomics established the Rightsizing Cities Initiative (RCI) to explore why and how preservation should be included as an essential part of rightsizing. I joined RCI as director, building on my master's thesis on preservation planning in older industrial cities. Our initial undertaking was a research project for the ACHP's Rightsizing Task Force. The goal was to establish a baseline of knowledge around rightsizing practices and trends and to determine how federal resources were—or were not—being used for planning. Information was collected through interviews and surveys with municipal planners and preservation advocates in the 20 cities that had lost the largest share of population between 1960 and 2000.

Our findings were alarming, though not surprising. Preservation was rarely a part of long-range planning efforts, though almost every city we examined was actively working to adapt to a smaller population.<sup>11</sup> Common strategies and tools included comprehensive planning, demolition, land banks, and vacant property policies.

Preservation advocates were playing traditional roles with education, historic designation, and Section 106 review. Yet—as planners began to feel their way with reshaping cities—preservationists lagged behind. Though they had a substantial arsenal of tools and expertise around the built environment, these typically did not lead to participation in the rightsizing process beyond public comments and comprehensive plan working groups.

As a telling indicator, the planners and preservationists we interviewed named 13 roles that preservation advocates were currently playing—roles limited to the areas of planning, education, and advocacy. Their list of roles that preservationists *could* play reached 35 items in much more diverse areas, including focusing resources, developing incentives, reducing demolitions, and enforcement and maintenance. Both preservation advocates and planners see a clear role for preservationists, but a lack of outreach, knowledge, organization, and resources have prevented meaningful participation.

Good practices at the intersection of preservation and rightsizing did emerge. Cincinnati redirects demolition money to mothballing in historic districts, and Cincinnati Preservation Association staff help prioritize buildings on the demolition list based on architectural quality. Dayton, Ohio, provides its housing inspectors with electric drills so they can replace boards on the windows of vacant houses, rather than noting and entering them into a computerized system back in the office.

Partnerships are critical in cash-strapped cities, some of which rely on a single planner to handle day-to-day matters and craft long-range plans. A number of cities work with anchor institutions to coordinate resources in specific areas. Planners in Rochester, N.Y., reach out to the school district to coordinate investments in the same neighborhoods. Cincinnati preservationists have taken on the role of marketing historically significant vacant buildings, and the Cleveland Restoration Society has worked with the Cuyahoga Land Bank to hold properties while a buyer is found.

RCI's next challenge was twofold: to articulate why preservation should be involved in rightsizing and to determine how that involvement should happen. We didn't have to reach far for compelling



Preservation-based development in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood has brought an influx of new businesses, residents, and visitors.

PHOTO: CARA BERTRON

reasons. Historic neighborhoods boast unique building stock, walkable neighborhoods, mixed-use commercial districts, and proximity to jobs and transit—all qualities highly prized by potential residents. The National Association of Realtors found that two-thirds of prospective homebuyers prioritize walkability in deciding where to live.<sup>12</sup> Another study found that over 75 percent of young professionals are choosing to move to historic downtowns and older urban neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup>

Additional research for the ACHP Task Force offered strong evidence that these preferences hold true even when cities are losing population. We looked at census data from 2000 and 2010 and found that the top 20 shrinking cities lost 11.6 percent of their population as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Seventeen cities had local historic districts that lost a combined 6.6 percent. In 11 of those cities, the population change in local historic districts was more favorable than that of the city. Historic districts were not immune from population loss, but overall they had less of a problem than the cities as a whole.

Beyond population, historic buildings and neighborhoods offer proven opportunities for revitalization. Preservationists' bread and butter is mobilizing community members to effect change in the built environment, almost always working with scant funding, time, or both. The Main Street model—commercial revitalization in the context of historic resources—has jumpstarted hundreds of downtowns and neighborhood business districts by leveraging public funds. Local developers and residents undertake small-scale



rehabilitations to bring back buildings and neighborhoods using historic tax credits, property tax abatements, and other incentives. Startup businesses can afford to rent space in older buildings, creating local jobs. Apartment buildings and smaller, older houses meet the needs of empty nesters and a growing demographic of one-person households. Historic communities, designated or not, contain considerable resources that can and should form the kernels of smaller, more sustainable cities.

## **RELOCAL: A STRATEGIC APPROACH**

We developed the ReLocal tool as a way to help municipal governments and their partners make strategic, data-based decisions about where and how to reinvest at the neighborhood level. ReLocal seeks to evaluate neighborhoods holistically and comprehensively, using nearly 70 metrics across 8 categories ranging from the built and natural environment to fiscal responsibility. Though it is not an explicit preservation tool, ReLocal recognizes qualities like walkability, architectural character, and real estate stability as the building blocks for strong, sustainable places.

The local community adds an essential layer of information about local priorities. Planning decisions based on consultants parachuting in, conducting cursory public meetings, and running some numbers miss a central opportunity of the rightsizing process: to reshape and strengthen places based on what communities want. ReLocal incorporates a neighborhood-level survey and weighting system to include these priorities.

We soon recognized that simply identifying more viable neighborhoods was not a practically useful or politically tenable solution. Rightsizing efforts must address all neighborhoods in a city, and reinvestment takes many forms: from demolition, land banking, and urban agriculture to rehabilitation and development incentives. We designed ReLocal to identify what the full range of neighborhoods needed to become more sustainable, understanding that long-range sustainability has different meanings in a neighborhood with many vacant properties and a declining population and a neighborhood with a stable population but a struggling commercial corridor.

Indeed, struggling towns, booming metropolitan regions, and

prosperous cities all must make strategic decisions around where to allocate public resources and encourage private investment; none has unlimited funding. We believe that every neighborhood in every city should be sustainable and well used. In some areas, that might mean finding incentives to add population and encourage development; in others, it may look like prioritizing open land uses and offering remaining residents a more pastoral lifestyle. In both cases, conscious decisions are necessary—and should reflect real data and community priorities.

### MUNCIE FIELD TEST

Earlier this year, Muncie, Ind., was the focus of ReLocal’s initial field test. We were looking for a small city with distinct urban qualities and a range of neighborhood conditions, and enthusiastic local partners in city government and Indiana Landmarks made Muncie an easy choice. Masters students in Ball State’s historic preservation program provided assistance with field surveys and research. We also partnered with LocalData, an online community data collection tool, to beta-test its platform with our fieldwork.

We selected five older neighborhoods near the city center to examine: four focus neighborhoods that have lost significant population and are, by many measures, economically distressed; and one relatively prosperous “benchmark” neighborhood adjacent to Ball State University. Three of the five neighborhoods contained National Register historic districts, and one of those also had a locally designated historic district. GIS data was collected for all

neighborhoods from the city, county, state, and census. We spent nearly a week in Muncie to meet with local officials and gather field data such as buildings’ architectural character and up-to-date occupancy status.



Rehabilitation activity in Muncie’s Emily Kimbrough National Register Historic District.

PHOTO: CARA BERTRON



The Muncie field test showed that historic neighborhoods have a role to play in the rightsizing process.

PHOTO: CARA BERTRON

We then analyzed the small mountain of data.

Even in early analysis, some interesting patterns emerged. The four focus neighborhoods have low median household incomes and face much higher

unemployment rates than the benchmark neighborhood. However, half of these neighborhoods have twice as high aggregated household purchasing power as the wealthier benchmark neighborhood due to denser development. Income distribution is more even, too. When compared to Muncie's jobs per capita, three of the four focus neighborhoods hold nearly as many or more jobs per resident. Economic opportunity is not uniformly high, but it is greater than the initial numbers suggest.

The focus neighborhoods also rank highly in our community engagement category, with excellent access to community centers and organizations serving seniors and youth. Three of the four outscore the benchmark neighborhood in the strength of their neighborhood associations. The two focus neighborhoods with historic districts mustered the most residents by far to participate in our community survey. Though none of these are definitive measures by themselves, together they begin to reveal the underlying social strengths of local communities.

Distinctions appeared in our analysis of the physical environment as well. Not surprisingly, the neighborhoods with historic districts score higher in architectural character than the neighborhoods with no designated districts. Buildings in these neighborhoods are also in better condition. And all the neighborhoods we looked at had more trees per acre than the city of Muncie as a whole. It is important to note that these are true for the entire neighborhood, not just the historic districts within them—even when the historic districts constitute only a small part of the neighborhood. The

Muncie field test reinforced our premise that older and historic neighborhoods have the resources and ability to play a central role in rightsizing strategies. We are now looking forward to taking those lessons and applying them in other cities.

## CONCLUSION

Older industrial cities face tremendous challenges. Though preservationists are used to uphill battles and long shots, these cities are the largest-scale, longest shot yet. In many neighborhoods, population densities are insufficient to support local business districts. Buildings that need maintenance and investment easily outnumber willing buyers. Moreover, the math of rehabilitation doesn't always work out: it is possible to invest \$100,000 in improving a house and sell it at a market value of \$30,000. Limited public dollars mean fewer incentives—and fewer city staff to develop and implement plans and provide assistance with preservation issues. The public infrastructure and services that play an integral part in local quality of life are too underfunded to meet expectations. And while foreclosures in recent years have affected cities across the country, they hit older industrial cities particularly hard, adding another wave of abandonment to decades of disinvestment.

Still, these are the places where preservation is most necessary. In an increasingly mobile economy, quality of place is an enormous advantage. Older cities cannot compete with the surrounding suburbs by simply demolishing buildings to create larger lots. Instead, cities must emphasize their strengths: a sense of place, well-constructed buildings with exquisite architecture, the option to walk or take transit instead of driving, and more concentrated, diverse human capital. People moving back to the city may not be able to express the charm of Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square or Detroit's Midtown in terms of history, density, or urban design elements, but they know that's where they want to live.

Historic places should be the cornerstone of rightsizing efforts. Our work in Muncie shows that older neighborhoods have quantifiable strengths, with or without historic districts, though they still have a way to go. Thus—while architectural character can still be first in preservationists' priorities—it must be followed closely by

other considerations, like working to strengthen schools and community organizations in older and historic neighborhoods. Critically, preservationists must do the legwork to be included: we must make the connections, present ourselves at the table with a useful proposed role, and refuse to leave. These are our cities—our places—and we have work to do. FJ

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CARA BERTRON is the director of the Rightsizing Cities Initiative at PlaceEconomics. She and Donovan Rypkema will present on ReLocal at the [2013 National Preservation Conference in Indiana](#). ©2013 PlaceEconomics

- <sup>1</sup> CEOs for Cities, *Young and Restless 2011* (March 27, 2011). Between 2000 and 2009, Baltimore, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis all saw growth rates between 25 and 87 percent in the 25- to 34-year-old population with a four-year degree. For more news around urban living trends, see David C. Barnett, "Rust Belt Reboot Has Downtown Cleveland Rocking," NPR, June 11, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/06/11/154740024/a-comeback-for-downtown-cleveland>; and Susan Glaser, "Cincinnati Fights Its Way Back into Hearts of Hip and Trendy," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), June 2, 2012, [http://www.cleveland.com/travel/index.ssf/2012/06/two\\_days\\_in\\_the\\_city\\_cincinnati.html](http://www.cleveland.com/travel/index.ssf/2012/06/two_days_in_the_city_cincinnati.html).
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- <sup>7</sup> *Rebuilding America's Legacy Cities*; American Assembly, *Revitalizing the Legacy Cities of Upstate New York* (2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Royce Yeater, "The Foreclosure Crisis: Preservation Concerns and Responses," *Forum Journal* 23, no. 4 (National Trust for Historic Preservation, Summer 2009): 19-26; Alan Mallach, Hunter Morrison, and Bradford J. White (panel discussion, National Preservation Conference, Buffalo, NY, October 21, 2011).
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- <sup>14</sup> Donovan Rypkema, Cara Bertron, and Courtney Williams, *Population Change in Historic Neighborhoods* (prepared for the Right Sizing Task Force, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, June 2012).