

A PRESERVATION CHARTER FOR THE HISTORIC TOWNS AND AREAS OF THE U.S.

*Committee on Historic Towns, The United States Committee of the International
Council on Monuments and Sites (US/ICOMOS)*

Since the 1960s both the national and international preservation movements have stressed the importance of writing down the principles and practices of preservation. This began in the United States with the regulations that support the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects*, based on the international Venice Charter of 1964. These documents were amplified in the following decades by such detailed conference reports as the National Trust's "Preservation: Toward an Ethic in the 1980s" and "A Vision for America: An Agenda for the Future", which came out of a 1986 conference at Mary Washington College. The practice of formalization has continued most recently with the National Trust's 1990 Charleston Principles; the 1992 New Orleans Charter for the Joint Preservation of Historic Structures and Artifacts, which was sponsored by the Association for Preservation Technology and the American Institute of Conservation; and the 1987 ICOMOS Historic Towns Charter, which is the basis for the United States version of the charter published here.

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HISTORIC RESOURCES



THE BUCOLIC TOWN OF FINCASTLE IN BOTETOURT COUNTY, VIRGINIA.

The 1987 ICOMOS Charter, which set forth preservation principles recognized as applicable throughout the civilized world, was adapted in 1992 by the US/ICOMOS Committee on Historic Towns to suit the specific nature of local government in the United States. It sets forth a comprehensive statement about the importance of historic towns, neighborhoods, and places and states what must be done by communities in the United States that wish to tackle their preservation problems in a coherent, comprehensive way. (1)

WHY IS SUCH A STATEMENT HELPFUL?

The strong preservation movement in the United States was established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and by the activist preservation programs

developed by a relatively small number of historic cities and towns up to that time. While the national program has attempted from its inception to extend its reach to localities through the State Historic Preservation Offices in each state, much remains to be done at the local government level.

The local preservation laws and programs, which have evolved slowly and for the most part since World War II, reflect a fundamental bias of United States culture: a special regard for the needs and rights of individuals and their property. As a democratic society the United States tends not to constrict individual use of property unless and until a greater community good clearly requires it. Even then, the policies and practices of local governments tend to create no more constrictions of individual use than is

absolutely required. While this minimalist—and quintessentially United States—approach at the local level recognizes the primacy of the individual in our society, it has drawbacks. Among others, it is essentially a negative approach that tends to state explicitly what may not be done, but fails at the same time to express what should be done.

Additionally, public policies of almost every kind in the United States, including those related to historic preservation, have tended to evolve slowly and as a response to some external event. Just as food and drug laws in the United States are the results of epidemics of food poisoning and the almost universal requirement of lighted exit doors in public buildings a response to deaths resulting from theater fires, so too local landmark designation, historic district regulations, and other preservation controls are very much a response to the wanton destruction of buildings and places that citizens hold dear.

With notable exceptions, local public preservation policies in the United States

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are highly fragmented because they have evolved from these singular, defining experiences. They frequently tend toward the precise and the detailed. And because of their essentially ad hoc origins, it is sometimes difficult to relate these policies consistently to one another. Many aspects of a coherent, overall preservation policy or philosophy have yet to be clearly articulated. Thus, this traditionally pragmatic approach has limited the ability of localities to imag-

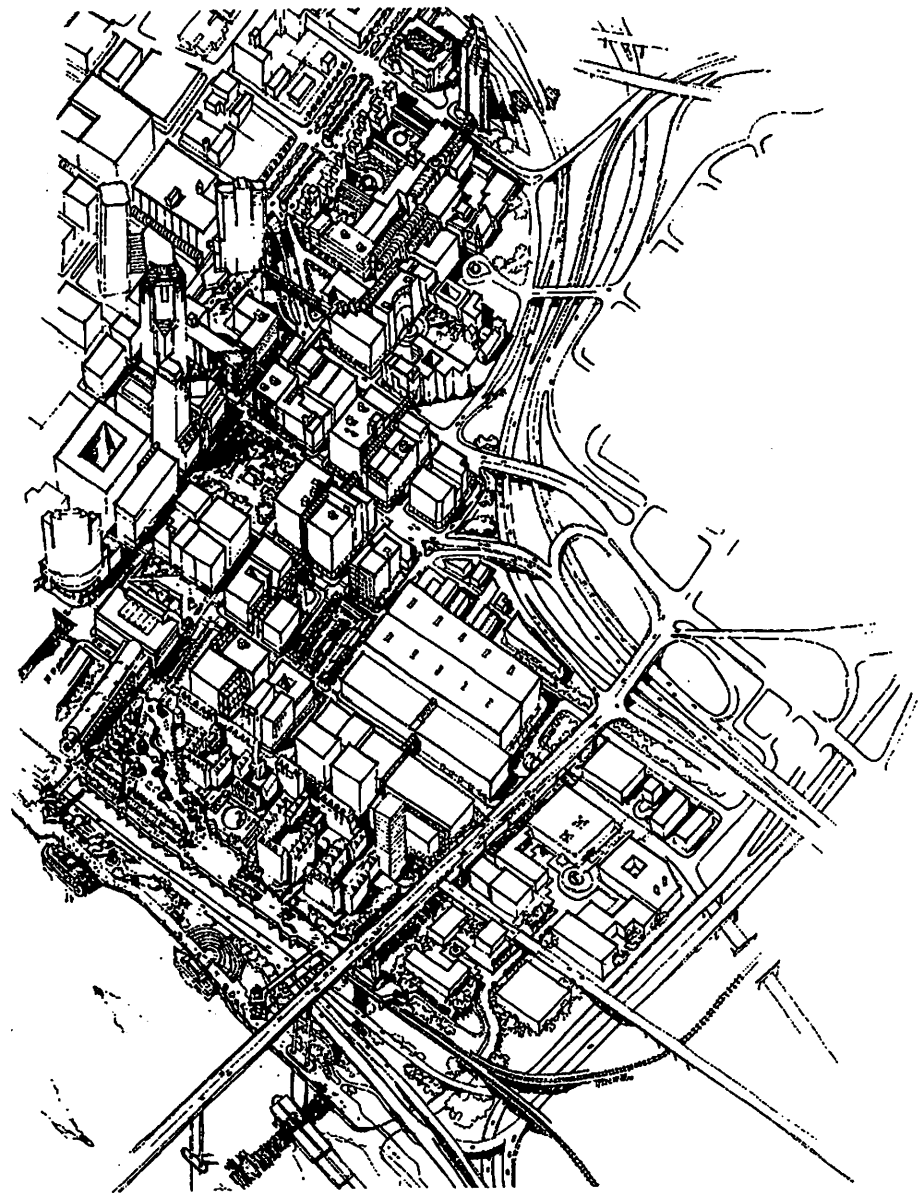
ine and develop a larger, comprehensive picture of what historic preservation is all about.

In the United States, communities and individuals are caught up in “growth” issues. The current way of looking at growth is no longer to plan it, but simply to manage it. Unfortunately, this latest approach to planning reinforces the danger of building a public preservation policy upon discrete, narrowly defined, problem-oriented approaches. Thus, a statement that articulates a broader philosophical base for preservation appropriate to the American setting becomes especially important. The Charter set forth here attempts to put forth a more comprehensive and positive philosophy of preservation—one that can serve as a checklist against which historic towns and cities can measure or evaluate their preservation efforts.

WHAT IS A HISTORIC TOWN OR AREA?

The problems of local preservation are compounded by the difficulty of defining a “historic town or area” in such a vast and diverse country as the United States. Defining “historic” towns or places is further complicated by traditional ways of thinking about history. Until recently American preservationists have tended to think of the historic town as a very old one, such as Philadelphia or Boston, or as one primarily distinguished by its architecture, such as Charleston, New Orleans, or Nantucket. Certainly

these places are, by any normative standard, historic towns, ones that are, incidentally, distinguished by their highly successful preservation programs. But the notion of what constitutes a historic place worthy of preservation has changed. Preservationists no longer consider historic only those places officially designated by the Department of the Interior or by a state preservation agency. We now consider the concept more broadly. For our purposes a historic



LOWERTOWN-REDEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

THE CHARTER CALLS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC TOWNS AND DISTRICTS TO BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE PLANNING PROCESS. PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC STRUCTURES AND DISTRICTS HAS BEEN AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE OVERALL PLAN FOR LOWERTOWN IN ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA.

town or area is any locale—urban or rural, incorporated or not—that presents a clear and obvious sense of age, history, tradition, culture, or place to its inhabitants and to others. It is a place that has integrity of form (meaning that it has not changed

much over time), special visual qualities, and an overall character that is perceived as such by its citizens. This character is derived from the way buildings or combinations of buildings and their appurtenant details are composed. This character also

investment, and operating policies by the local governing board. While these should follow generally accepted guidelines for professional practice, they must also be specially responsive to the particular needs or priorities of individual communities and their assets and their inhabitants. They must also be sufficiently flexible to meet the special needs of unusual or unique cultural resources and populations.

EIGHTEEN BASIC PRINCIPLES

A local preservation program must be based on the following measures:

1. Successful and realistic planning for the preservation of a historic town or district must be preceded by appropriate studies of the place itself. Typically these studies will include United States history and culture, architectural and landscape history, prehistory, and related fields. These studies establish the historic contexts of the place and insure that future public and private

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investment will be based on knowledge and reason rather than emotion. A well-conceived preservation plan must also address the future of the area. Such a plan must be based on appropriate economic, demographic, and land-use studies and projections.

2. The principal objectives of the preservation plan should be clearly stated in both verbal and graphic form, as should the legal, administrative, and financial measures needed to carry them out.

3. The preservation plan should aim to create and maintain a harmonious relation-

ship between the historic area and its setting in the larger town, city, or region.

4. The preservation plan should determine which buildings, groups of buildings, sites and landscapes must be preserved, recognizing that what is worthy of preservation is an evolving concept.

5. Before any changes, including restoration, preservation, adaptive use, and/or conservation are made to individual structures or their settings, existing conditions must be thoroughly documented.

6. The current residents of the historic area should be actively and continuously involved in the planning process. They should have access to all necessary information. Their reactions and comments to all public and private proposals for the area should be actively sought.

7. Until a preservation plan has been adopted, and as an interim measure, any necessary preservation work should be carried out in accordance with the objectives and principles outlined here. Such work should also be in conformity with the Venice Charter and other relevant ICOMOS and UNESCO recommendations and charters.

8. Local, state, and national governments must recognize that the continuing maintenance of both public and private property and the economic well-being of the inhabitants are essential to the effective preservation of any historic place.

9. New functions and activities proposed to take place within the historic town or district should be compatible with the overall character of the place. When historic places and buildings are adapted for contemporary use, it is essential that the design, installation, and maintenance of supporting public utilities and facilities be sensitive to the special character of the place.

10. The improvement of housing, the retention of affordable housing, and the avoidance of wholesale displacement of ex-

isting residents should be among the basic policy objectives of a preservation plan.

11. When it is necessary to construct new buildings or to adapt existing ones, the existing scale and spatial structure of the place must be respected, as well as the relationship of each building or place to its larger setting. The introduction of appropriate contemporary design, in harmony with its surroundings, should not be discouraged. Such contemporary additions, when appropriately designed, enrich and enliven a historic area and provide as well a measure of cultural continuity.

12. When appropriate, knowledge of the history of a given area should be expanded through continuing programs of archaeological investigation, and through the presentation and preservation of archaeological findings and artifacts.

13. Traffic and transportation inside a historic area must be controlled and must respect the historic environment. It is essential that parking areas be designed in ways that do not cause aesthetic or functional damage to any historic structure, group of buildings, sites, landscapes, or the general environment.

14. When major roads and transit systems are planned or built, they must not penetrate or divide a historic area, but should improve access to it. Transportation and utility corridors and other public works within the historic area must be designed and constructed to cause the least possible damage to historic structures, groups, sites, or landscapes or to the setting of the whole area.

15. To maintain both the physical heritage and the security and well-being of residents, historic areas should be protected insofar as possible against natural disasters, pollution, nuisances, and other harmful intrusions. Whether in laying plans for the protection of a historic area from disaster or in its aftermath, preventive and repair measures must be adapted to the specific character of the area and its component parts.

16. In order to encourage residents to participate in preservation activities and to enhance the local climate for preservation, continuing general information and educational programs should be established. This effort must begin with heritage education programs for children of school age. Specialized training should be provided for all those professions actively involved with preservation, as well as for public officials, volunteers, and volunteer organizations.

17. The creation and support of appropriate preservation organizations should be encouraged.

18. An appropriate variety of preservation-related financial incentives should be identified. Their development should be encouraged by governments, private businesses, and individuals.

For information about membership and programs, write US/ICOMOS, 1600 H Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

The United States Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (US/ICOMOS) is one of sixty-five national committees that form a worldwide alliance for the study and conservation of historic buildings, districts, and sites. As the American preservation movement's window on the world, it encourages a two-way exchange of information and expertise between preservationists in the United States and abroad. The US/ICOMOS Committee on Historic Towns was established in 1989, modeled on the international ICOMOS committee of the same name. It works to develop new understanding and support for broad historic preservation efforts in the historic towns and areas of the United States.

The members of the US/ICOMOS Committee on Historic Towns are: *John N. Pearce, Chairman, 1991-present; *Robert E. Stipe, Chairman, 1989-1991; *Gustavo Araoz; *Ellen Beasley; *Rachel Belsky; Richard Bierce, AIA; *Elliott Carroll, FAIA; *William R. Chapman; *Francois-Auguste de Montequin; *Stephen Dennis, Esq.; Hiroshi Daifuku; *Mary Dierickx; Carl Feiss, FAIA, AICP; *Elizabeth E. Fischer; *Ronald Lee Fleming; *John M. Fowler; James A. Glass; *Eric Hertfelder; *Carter L. Hudgins; Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll, AIA; *Bruce M. Kriviskey, AIA, AICP; *Weiming Lu, Hon. AIA; *M. Hamilton Morton, Jr., AIA; *Terry B. Morton, Hon. AIA; Phyllis Myers; Sally G. Oldham; *Katherine Wentworth Rinne; *Brian Schmuecker, AIA; *Ann Webster Smith; Stuart Stein; *Catherine Wilson-Martin.

The names of members at the time of adoption of the charter are marked with an asterisk. The charter was adopted by the Historic Towns Committee on March 14, 1992, in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and by the US/ICOMOS Board of Trustees on May 11, 1992, in Washington, D.C.