OLD PLACES AS AN ANCHOR

I have come to realize that the world is catching on to the idea that old places have economic merit. Finally, after nearly 24 years in the business of working to support the vitalization of a historic area, there is a growing recognition of the concept that economic development and preservation can go hand in hand. A concept I have long believed in and which has served as a guiding force for my efforts.

In this field of preservation, there is often a notion that old places and old things should be put on a shelf and reserved for enjoying on special occasions. Old places suffer under that paradigm. They do best when they become again and again a part of the fabric of our lives. So many old places stagnate behind chain link fences, boarded windows or shuttered doors, and signs that say “not open” merely waiting for someone to bring them back to life. Sadly, they can quickly lose their meaning as the generations who once loved them pass away and the newly arrived generations deem them “old, out of style, weird and in the way.”

To maintain their meaning and access is perhaps the greatest gift we can give old places. To ensure their livelihood is protected by ensuring the economics surrounding those initiatives are well considered is a must. Aside from the emerging discovery that preservation is good for a community’s bottom line, I also see that old places like the Mission can serve as the anchors of a community’s identity. Old places are cool not because they are old, but because they continue to express something special.

Often I find myself struggling to convey the point that old historic and religious places like the Mission not only celebrate a history but can also become or provide a new history for those people without one or those that wish they had a better personal history. Those whose families are broken, or whose lives have endured deep loss, face an illness or look for inspiration, can come to a place like this mission and fall in love with the concept of a nostalgia they never had. Their new history can include becoming a volunteer or worker and in doing so graduate from the experience with their own personal and unique meaning for the place as well.

I find myself still–after nearly 12 years working to promote the concept that sustainability, protectionism and relevance are ideals we must strive for in this field–pushing the point that for the landmark to last forever, it must be fiercely guarded but also be independent. It must always be on a strong financial path of transparency and sustainability and be served by a local community that not only cares, but also realizes that it is in the best interest of the greater good to do so.

This past year, the Mission endured the negative impacts of a state highway’s construction, intense development applications at its shadow, and the misunderstandings of some that it is just a sleepy little landmark that belongs to just a few. In the words of author Margaret Wise Brown to her Mister Dog character, she writes to the dog, “you belong to yourself!” – but in this instance I say to the Mission, “you belong to the world,” and in this year, the eve of your founder’s sainthood, “you belong to those that make it possible.”

See you on the path,

[Signature]
Michelle Lawrence Adams
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