

Preserving Historic Resources in Revitalization

One of the ways that Main Street programs seek to revitalize is through the historic restoration of the downtown. Classified as the Design” point of the Main Street four points, restoration of the downtown is a key element. The historic downtown could be the cornerstone for marketing efforts in the revitalization project.

I have been in many towns and each town has its own preference to historic restoration of the buildings. Towns like Lock Haven were very into fixing up and restoring the historic resources and towns like DuBois were less likely to preserve the past. It is a double edge sword for the developer of building owner. The building looks better if it is restored properly but is usually cost more dollars to do it right.

Some of the improvements that need to be done in the downtown are not privately owned and are part of a streetscape of public space improvement project. These improvements go beyond the private owner and there is a need to deal with government entities. Government entities are seldom flexible and many times have rules and regulations that will affect the outcome of your project. I have had this happen to me on some of the streetscape projects that I have completed.

I had a bad experience I Phoenixville when Penn Dot delayed the streetscape on the issue of handicapped access. The issue has weighed heavily on my mind for the last couple of years as I thought about how projects are treated by government agencies. I thought extensively about the dynamic of how things are made to be the same throughout the road system.

So much to my surprise, when I was traveling in Germany a couple of weeks back, that a public improvement project was happening on a street located in the small burg of Hattenheim, where I was visiting. Hattenheim is a small town with narrow roads and cobblestone wherever you go. What made me smile was that they were fixing some things underground and were going to end up with a streetscape that looked like it did when they started.

I thought back to how things were done in America and there would have been different improvements that would have to be completed in order to meet the regulations tied to the funding source. How easy it would be to not have to care about the other issues attached to a project and only concentrate on the project.

Recently some of the towns on the main line in Lower Merion had been asked to remove their old signs to put in the new reflective, larger signs as recommended by the US Department of Transportation. The township asked for and received a waiver that ended up being signed by the Secretary of Transportation.

There are so many rules and regulations that have been established for public streetscape improvements that they are on the verge of creating one big look-a-like country. Historic street signs being replaced by mandate. Plastic handicapped ramps installed at the end of the street no matter what the spec delineates. We are becoming one big mall as everything needs to be standardized.

It is a “Homogenization of America”...where everything is starting to be standardized and everything starts to look the same. Quaint little intricacies of smaller towns are being swallowed up by an aesthetic that may or may not be appropriate to the historic character of the downtown. Now that is not to say there are not waivers as the folks in Lower Merion showed us, but it cost them to find out. Tax dollars that could go for something else is being spent in defense of something the municipality already had that someone is taking away from them to make the street look the same as the street in the neighboring community.

I wondered that maybe people eyes have changed over the years and what was appropriate lettering in the past is now not appropriate because of some evolutionary change in the retina. Perhaps the eye socket has undergone some change that, although not noticeable to the human eye, renders street signs without reflective glow in the dark tape unreadable.

Then I thought back to Hattenheim ,who in their zeal to reconstruct the street true to their heritage, were reusing the cobblestones from another era. Does Europe know something we do not? Have they hung on to the narrow streets cobblestones just as a whim? On the other hand, are they preserving history and the character of their town?

Once architectural detail or quaint feature is taken away and replaced by a modern day interpretation, it hurts the identity of the town, as it tends to provide the town with a homogenized look. The look of the next town down the road...the Main Street approach is quite the opposite as it advocates design as part of the charm and marketing effort.