

Historic preservationist says demolition may not be most sustainable option

Donovan Rypkema offers critique of certification systems such as LEED and says more attention should be paid to historic preservation as a sustainable option

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BY SAM BENNETT

Donovan Rypkema doesn't want to save every building. As a historic preservationist, he knows there are limits.

"I'm not one to say nothing should ever be torn down," said Rypkema. "Every time we apply for a demolition permit, we should say 'Is what we're going to get better than what we got?'"

At a lecture Saturday at the 93-year-old Kennedy School in Northeast Portland, which Rypkema quickly noted was a good example of historic preservation, Rypkema said the sustainable building movement, including the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design system, is too focused on building energy-efficient buildings. He believes there should be much more attention paid to saving the stock of pre-World War II buildings.

Rypkema is a specialist in the economics of preserving historic structures and consults as a principal with the Washington, D.C.-based PlaceEconomics, an economic development consulting firm.

At Saturday's lecture, he had some choice words for the LEED certification system, which he said barely gives any points for preserving buildings. His lecture was presented by the Architectural Heritage Foundation.

"The LEED designation is being used as a club to demolish historic buildings," he said. Too often, he said developers justify demolition of historic structures by saying their replacement will be LEED certified.

Historic building preservation has environmental, social, economic and aesthetic value and is, he said, "the ultimate in recycling."

However, the sustainable movement often focuses too much on elements such as energy-efficient windows, low-flow toilets and bike racks.

"We're missing the larger picture," he said. "[The city of] Santa Fe recently adopted a sustainable standard document, and historic preservation wasn't even mentioned. The model for real sustainability isn't Santa Fe, San Francisco or Berkeley, but Dubuque, Iowa."

In Dubuque, the city has designated a 17-square-block warehouse district for a revitalization project that leverages \$200 million in public and private contributions for renovations to create a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use neighborhood.

Historic buildings, such as the warehouse district in Dubuque, should be preserved because they contain what Rypkema and other historic preservationists call "embodied energy." For example, he said tearing down one 20,000-square-foot brick building wipes out the energy savings from recycling 1.3 million aluminum cans.

"By razing this building, you're throwing away thousands of dollars in embodied energy and replacing it with materials that are more consumptive of energy," he said, referring to aluminum and plastics. He added that one-third of all waste going into landfills in the United States is construction debris.

As an economist, Rypkema said he sees many benefits to preserving older buildings. Because new businesses are a critical part of the U.S. economy, Rypkema said it's important that cities preserve historic districts for small businesses that can't necessarily afford to work in core downtown areas where commercial office space is more expensive. He mentioned Seattle's Pioneer Square as a good example of a neighborhood where small businesses can afford to lease space in well preserved buildings.

But he said Seattle has done a poor job of preserving historic buildings in areas such as the Denny Regrade and Belltown – both downtown neighborhoods – as the city continues to focus on high-density development.

On a national level, he said a Department of Sustainable Development should replace the Environmental Protection Agency. He faulted the EPA for not mentioning the importance of historic preservation in its 2006-11 strategic plan. He also said the federal government should purchase excess housing stock – leftover from the housing boom of the last few years – and use it for affordable housing.

The focus of Rypkema's preservation efforts is on pre-War buildings because, he said, "the vast majority of stuff that was built post-World War II is crappy." He said anti-pedestrian, auto-friendly subdivisions of the "Leave It to Beaver" era aren't worth saving.

In addition to recycling, Rypkema sees historic building preservation as a way to tell the story of a city. Once old buildings are lost, the memory is gone.

"Historic buildings," he said, "are the physical manifestation of memory."