

CASE STUDIES EVALUATION: TOWARD DEVELOPMENT OF A TRANSFERABLE MODEL

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Summary

Cultural heritage – the unique architecture, arts, customs, industry, history, and language that distinguish one place from another and imbue communities with distinctive personalities – is a powerful economic development tool. ‘Uniqueness’ is one of the forces that create economic value, and cultural heritage resources, which are unique almost by definition, can generate significant economic activity for communities.

But cultural heritage is also fragile, and many of the traditional approaches to capitalizing economic assets cannot be directly transferred to the capitalization of cultural heritage assets. For example, rapid investment in the rehabilitation of historic buildings can inadvertently displace indigenous businesses by rapidly escalating the rent structure.

Without careful planning, significant increases in the numbers of visitors to a historic community can create a pricing system for goods and services which local residents may not be able to afford. Mass production of items popular with visitors can diminish the significance of those items to community residents. And the physical fabric of historic resources themselves can be damaged by visitors without proper infrastructure planning.

Just as heritage-focused community development requires special approaches to capitalization, it also requires special methods of evaluation to gauge its effectiveness in both strengthening economic conditions and preserving cultural heritage resources. Unlike most other types of economic and community development initiatives, heritage-focused community development has no standard benchmarks (like job creation, municipal revenue generation, or real estate recapitalization); the resources themselves are so unique that benchmarks must be developed for each site, and evaluation must be based on these site-specific benchmarks.

Rather than uniform, economic-focused benchmarks, the benchmarks of effective heritage-focused community development programs include:

1. community determination of strengths, opportunities and goals
2. incremental transformation
3. a comprehensive approach
4. achievable actions
5. measurable goals
6. dual or multiple market focus
7. long-term vision

The USA's National Main Street Center, a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has developed a highly successful model for preserving the buildings, businesses, traditions, and personality of historic commercial districts. This model has been successfully transferred to and tested in almost 2,000 towns and cities throughout the United States, as well as being adopted by historic commercial districts in the United Kingdom, Singapore, New Zealand, and other nations.

The Main Street program utilizes benchmarks such as the seven listed above to evaluate progress, which is one of the key reasons the Main Street revitalization methodology has been successfully transferred to communities with broadly ranging types of cultural heritage resources. In this way, the Main Street revitalization methodology offers a useful analog for cultural heritage preservation initiatives and for evaluating the effectiveness of these initiatives in stimulating local economic development and preserving cultural resources.

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is a powerful, but elusive, economic force.

Consumers are generally willing to pay higher prices for things that are scarce than they are for things that are common – a basic principle for creating economic value. Things that are unique or scarce have greater economic value than things that are readily available. And cultural heritage resources - the unique architecture, arts, customs, industry, history, and language that distinguish one place from another and imbue communities with distinctive personalities – are scarce and unique almost by definition. Cultural heritage can therefore generate significant economic activity for communities.

Yet, cultural heritage resources are often neglected in community development schemes, are poorly managed, or are overly exploited. For example:

· *Cultural heritage is frequently pigeon-holed as a tourism development mechanism.* For logical reasons, cultural heritage preservation is often linked with tourism, with the assumptions that tourists will visit culturally significant sites and events and that tourism will improve economic conditions for the site or community visited. Indeed, cultural heritage tourism is a growing industry throughout the world. In the United States alone, 46 percent of domestic tourists cite visiting a historic site or community as their primary reason for travel, according to a 1998 Travel Industry Association of America report. This trend was confirmed by a 1994 Lou Harris survey and report, which found that, while fewer than one-third of domestic tourists in the 1980s said that visiting “cultural, historical and archeological treasures” was their primary reason for traveling, by the early 1990s almost half of those surveyed cited “to understand culture” as the main factor motivating them to travel.

But, while communities with culturally significant resources often benefit economically from tourism, they sometimes find that tourism can be also be harmful. For instance:

- Tourists’ willingness to pay higher prices than local residents for basic goods and services often drives prices up, making these things more expensive for community residents.
- Differences in wage levels between tourism-related jobs and local, pre-tourism jobs can wreak havoc on local industry and employment. In instances in which tourism jobs pay less than non-tourism jobs, local residents often earn less as tourism grows and becomes a more significant part of the local economy. In instances in which tourism-related jobs pay higher wages than pre-tourism jobs, local residents often quit their original jobs to work for hotels or restaurants – putting not only a community’s industries at risk but also threatening the cultural resources for which the tourists visit the community. In the 1980s Crisfield, Maryland, a small community on the Chesapeake Bay, began attracting tourists interested in observing the community’s indigenous crabbers and oyster tongers. Several new hotels, restaurants, and tour boats opened, offering better wages than the local seafood industry provided. Consequently, scores of crabbers and oystermen left their jobs for the new tourism industry, undercutting the cultural resource which the tourists found attractive.
- Shifts in property ownership often occur in tourism-driven economies, as out-of-town investors who are often able to pay higher prices purchase local land, buildings, and businesses.

· *Rather than being used as the consistent, unifying focus of a comprehensive community development plan, cultural heritage preservation is often treated as a detail, unrelated or only marginally related to other elements of the initiative.* Cultural resource preservation can be a powerful and effective community development tool. In order to maximize its effectiveness, it should be treated as the central philosophy driving a comprehensive community development plan, with all the specific elements of the plan – business development, housing development, transportation, industry, recreation, etc. – deriving from and reinforcing this central philosophy. However, cultural resource preservation is too often treated as a small, marginal section of

comprehensive community development plans, essentially unrelated to other elements of the plan.

· *Cultural heritage resources are often over-marketed, with too many visitors causing physical damage to historic sites or eroding the cultural significance of traditions and crafts through over-exploitation.* There are almost countless examples of cultural heritage resources being physically damaged by tourists throughout history, from religious pilgrimage sites in the Middle East to Anasazi petroglyphs in the southwestern deserts of the United States. But non-tangible cultural heritage resources, like music or dance, can be damaged, as well. For example, the influx of tourists from throughout the world to the Hawai’ian islands from the 1950s onward and the consequent popularity of the Kodak “Hula Show” eroded the cultural significance of hula for native Hawai’ians themselves, shifting it from a dance with spiritual significance to a stylized tourist attraction with little spiritual meaning. Fortunately, Native Hawai’ian groups have made considerable progress in the past two decades at reestablishing the cultural significance of hula dance – but, throughout the world, many non-tangible cultural heritage resources have been lost through over-exploitation.

But one of the most significant problems in creating and managing successful cultural resource-based community development initiatives is that of finding appropriate program models that can be easily transferred to and adapted for communities with different kinds of heritage resources, at different stages of development, and with different goals. And, one of the greatest challenges in finding and adapting appropriate program models is that of analyzing a potential model’s core structure, the characteristics that give it cohesiveness and that can be transferred to other communities. In the broader community development discipline there seems to be an unfortunate, and almost universal, tendency to emulate the specific details of a community development plan, rather than to examine why those particular details work within the context of that specific plan. In the United States, for example, many cities have tried to recreate the success of Baltimore, Maryland’s vibrant Inner Harbor, a festival marketplace developed by the Rouse Co. in the early 1980s. But almost all of these communities have found that their own iterations of the festival marketplace have failed; they imitated the outcome of the planning process, not the planning process itself.

The challenge, then, is to “recapitalize” cultural heritage resources – to generate revenue from the resources or to attract new investment – in a way that protects the resources themselves. The models that work best for heritage-based community development initiatives seem to be those that, rather than specifying details, provide a flexible organizational or planning framework that can be adapted to meet the needs, skills and resources of as broad a range of communities as possible.

The Main Street program, a program of the USA’s National Trust for Historic Preservation that helps towns and cities revitalize their historic town centers, has demonstrated the economic benefits of community development initiatives focused on cultural heritage preservation. Over the past 25 years more than 2,000 communities in the US, and a growing number of communities in other nations, have successfully used the Main Street program’s methodology. It provides a highly adaptable model for

cultural resource-based community development in a very broad range of circumstances.

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Biographical Sketch

Kennedy Lawson Smith is one of the nation's foremost experts on downtown revitalization. After graduate school in architecture, she took a strange turn and became the downtown manager in Charlottesville, Virginia, where she created a retail market analysis methodology specifically for historic and traditional commercial districts. She joined the staff of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Main Street Center in 1985 and has served as its director since 1991. She has written numerous books and articles on the economic dynamics of downtowns and is a popular international speaker on main street development issues. She is a member of the board of the League of Historic American Theaters.