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## Historic Preservation Rules Are Economic Policy

By [Matthew Yglesias](#) | Posted Monday, May 21, 2012, at 5:09 PM ET

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The original proposal  
Image scanned from submission by ICG Properties.

What kinds of considerations should be in play when a new building goes up under circumstances that require historic review? That, I think, is the real issue posed by David Alpert's [excellent overview of the controversy](#) over a replacement structure for the Third Church of Christ, Scientist.

The basic position of the Historic Preservation Office is that it's inappropriate for a building on that stretch of 16th Street to be taller than 90 feet in any way, even though taller structures would be allowed under the Height of Buildings Act. Alpert's basic rejoinder is that denying the city extra square feet of office space in a very expensive and very development-constrained central business district is a very costly piece of economic policy. We are talking about several floors worth of offices that would have been filled by employed people that now won't be. Very optimistically, all that same employment will still exist but at remote less environmentally friendly suburban locations that don't benefit the city economically. More realistically, downtown has some irreplaceable qualities and the aggregate quantity of employment and economic activity around the region will be reduced by this decision.

But what's especially frustrating about it is that in the official HPO process these considerations don't get *any weight at all*.

I don't, personally, understand the aesthetic principle that it's always better for new things to look similar to old things. But the real point is that these are key municipal economic policy decisions and deserve to be considered as such. HPO seems to have spun itself a tale in which a tallish office building on this site will put us on a slippery slope to a rooftop bar at the St Regis hotel. But maybe we should let the St Regis Hotel open a rooftop bar? That would be, again, more jobs for bartenders and guys delivering the booze. It would also mean more tax revenue so the city can afford cops and teachers and bus drivers. Maybe all things considered that's a bad idea. But we really ought to be considering all things. A modern urban economy is built around downtown office buildings, so decisions about how many downtown office

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[Matthew Yglesias](#) is *Slate's* business and economics correspondent. Before joining the magazine he worked for ThinkProgress, the Atlantic, TPM Media, and the American Prospect. His first book, *Heads in the Sand*, was published by Wiley in 2008. His second, *The Rent Is Too Damn High*, was published by Simon & Schuster in March 2012.



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buildings can be built are some of the most important economic policy decisions a city makes and yet the [fields of expertise](#) required for membership on DC's Historic Preservation Review Board include almost everything but economics.

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Alsatian

Ayn Rand? Is that you?  
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Steve

Except many cities and towns that prevented development have thriving down town markets and tourist trades.

Knocking down old, preserved buildings for new ones is short sighted and destructive.  
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Adam

Which ones?  
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**Iceman**

That would apply to places like New Orleans' French Quarter, that actually have architecture and history worth preserving, not nondescript neighborhoods of cities like New York and DC. You can make a case for strict preservation of 1-2 older neighborhoods in a city but with much more open development in the rest of the city. That's what they have in a lot of Europe and Asia - preserve one "Old Town" or "Old Quarter" and then put tall and modern buildings everywhere else. Don't try to save 50-year old warehouses just because they are 50 years old, or try to keep an unattractive untouristed neighborhood restricted to low-rise buildings instead of developing and gentrifying it.

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**Pogo**

Ice, that kind of thinking has led to the destruction of many historically minority neighborhoods. Many such neighborhoods, and their "unattractive untouristed" structures (including old warehouses, poor folks shotgun shacks, slave or servant quarters, company towns) are now sought after property and/or cherished as important historic areas - which have become "touristed"/ sought after properties.. But you seem to be refuting a point not made - that preservation means saving every single old property. It doesn't - usually it means preserving a locally valued neighborhood or other significant structure.

I don't know of any city that prohibits new building of any sort. The problem tends to come when an entity (in downtown areas, usually a business, often not based in the city in question) wants to remove or significantly alter a protected structure.

It might be helpful for you to think of protected structures like a locally protected species. once they are gone - they are gone. Making a new one that "looks" ( and they are usually wrong even as a "copy", in my experience) like the old one is not the same thing at all.

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**Adam**

And why are those places now sought after? Because they were not systematically preserved and are thus scarce.

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**Iceman**

I would include historic minority areas like Harlem as neighborhoods that are worth preserving. But if you look at New York as a whole, how many neighborhoods can you really describe as having such a cultural, historic, or architectural significance that new development would destroy? And if so, where should new development be built? If people want to preserve Greenwich Village and Harlem in their current forms, I can appreciate that, but then development needs to be more open in places like Murray Hill, Long Island City, Williamsburg, etc. Instead, every neighborhood seems to have its own preservationists, self-appointed "community groups", and other groups that fight tooth and nail against development there. The end result is that very little gets built anywhere, and you have sky-high rents in desirable areas and the vast majority who can't afford them have the choice between substandard urban housing (walk-ups, bad areas, roommates, etc.) or the suburbs.

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**selene212@gmail.com**

There will always be arguments about how property should be zoned and how buildings should be regulated, about the specific heights and styles and modifications, but your point seems to be that historical preservation guidelines are basically worthless, and that seems both myopic and short-sighted.

Not all value can be measured in dollars and cents, at least not immediately, but there is long-term value in the city being a place where people actually want to live and work, and aesthetics play a part in that. Besides that, your argument is one-dimensional and underfed.

"It would also mean more tax revenue so the city can afford cops and teachers and bus drivers."

Maybe, but you'd also be bringing additional people into the city for work who live in the suburbs, so it's not much of a net benefit overall. You're just swizzling resource allocation

"More realistically, downtown has some irreplaceable qualities and the aggregate quantity of employment and economic activity around the region will be reduced by this decision."

I wish you had expanded on this assertion with examples and data, so that you'd sound more analytical and less like an urbania-phillic snob

"denying the city extra square feet of office space in a very expensive and very development-constrained central business district is a very costly piece of economic policy"

But there are also costs to blocking the Sun, Mr. Burns.

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**Dylan**

I think it is unfair to assume that Matt doesn't appreciate the fact that economic efficiency isn't perfectly aligned with the social good. Matt isn't some crazy libertarian; he believes in public goods and externalities. His main point isn't that guidelines are worthless, although he clearly isn't very sympathetic to them, it is that those who are in charge are doing a poor job of weighing the benefits against the costs of their policy.

MaxUtil likes this.

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**Alsatian**

Actually, the more he blogs, the more he sounds like a Libertarian. He's either been mugged, or it's not 2002 anymore.

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**Jeffers**

I agree with Dylan. The problem with historic preservation is that its not analytical. The vast majority of buildings are preserved solely because they are "old", i.e., they have history, and not because they really are historically significant. The historic preservation advocates don't seem to get this. They also don't always appreciate what they are asking for - that certain places look the same FOREVER. That is a long, long, time...

Dylan likes this.

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**yan**

This isn't true -- the field of cultural resources management has several sets of criteria by which significance is weighed. Professional opinions are often underweighed against public sentiment, but the National Register criteria and guidance, used by professionals in the field, is far from arbitrary.

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**Dylan**

I am curious about this. Can one get a dollar value from the criteria. For example if preventing the destruction of a historical building from natural causes is going to cost x dollars should it be done.

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**Reasonable Doubt**

As an architect who has worked in HP, I believe new should be new and old should be old, even in historic districts. I also believe that the old should be preserved. Cities are becoming more livable but for many years the built environment emphasized the car over the pedestrian, the development over the neighborhood. Old buildings are usually more interesting to walk by and old neighborhoods offer variety.

Also, rehabbing old buildings often requires more labor, so I do not believe that historic preservation means fewer jobs.

selene212@gmail.com likes this.

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**selene212@gmail.com**

You have reminded me of Mr. Izzard:

I grew up in Europe, where the history comes from. Oh, yeah. You tear your history down, man! "30 years old, let's smash it to the floor and put a car park here!" I have seen it in stories....

Well, we got tons of history lying about the place, big old castles...Disney came over and built Euro Disney, and they built the Disney castle there, and it was, "You better make it a bit bigger, they've actually got them here... And they're not made of plastic!"

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**Vinnie**

I think what Matt's getting at is that, in the name of historic preservation, extra restrictions are put on development of areas beyond the existing zoning code.

Historic preservation where "new is new and old is old" (love that way of looking at it btw) should have requirements placed on individual historic structures, not entire blocks, which is the issue at hand in the David Alpert piece that Matt refers to.

That is the sort of thing that IMHO should have some economic cost-benefit analysis to support.

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**Alsatian**

"Not the entire block"? You just eviscerated 50 years of historic preservation land use law and overturned numerous Supreme Court decisions about the validity of historic districts. Kudos. Not surprised you don't know what a historic district is. Neither does Yglesias or Alpert.

Neither one of them mentioned that the proposed site is in the Sixteenth Street Historic District and that that's the yard stick that the building is being judged against.

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### Chelonia Testudines

England has the right idea. They protect their historic structures and villages. It strengthens their sense of national identity, creates tourist opportunities, and provides a visual esthetic. It is part of the American sickness that they put greed and profit above everything else - including their national heritage.

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### Slicke

Yeah, except London is wildly unaffordable.

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### Null

And NYC and DC (for which London does double duty as capital and largest city) aren't?

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### Adam

Sure, but their old structures aren't less than 50 year old square blocks of concrete.

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### Shirley Márquez Dúlcey

It's not just a question of "new things looking like old things". Scale of buildings has a profound effect on urban neighborhoods. Tall buildings cut off sunlight from the streets and from shorter buildings. Very large buildings overwhelm the services (shops, restaurants, parks) available in the neighborhood.

Regulating scale is independent of regulating aesthetics, though it is true that many places regulate both. I think DC is right on this one; on the other hand, Matt Yglesias makes excellent points in his other article on development restrictions in Silicon Valley. The needs of existing city use and the needs of developers both need to be considered.

selene212@gmail.com likes this.

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### Vinnie

But should "historic preservation" be the impetus for regulating scale of new structures? This is what we have a zoning code for in the first place -- to decide what height and mass the built environment takes in an area (and by extension what sort of natural light and wind patterns).

Why should we prevent new buildings from going to the limits we've decided in the zoning code, just because they are near some buildings we rightly want to preserve?

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### Lex

That area has been zoned for 90-foot buildings since 1958. The developer wishes to exceed that by several stories. The HPO has merely recommended adhering to that height because it is consistent with both the historic and newer buildings there and creates a boulevard approach to the White House.

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### yan

For context. Buildings should fit into their neighborhoods, new or old.

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### elperroguapo

Like most things there is a happy medium here. After all, new building can be aesthetically pleasing, so one doesn't necessarily preclude the other. I would be all for a strategically placed office district in the D.C., that didn't ruin the sightlines of the capitol. Plenty of decrepit real estate to transform! There should of course, be a strict oversight committee that approved the design (energy efficiency, design, etc.), but there's no reason to suppose that all of D.C. should be under a height restriction. The city is developed like a donut as it is, sprawling into Virginia and Maryland.

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### Mark P.

News flash! Matt Yglesias doesn't like historic preservation!

I've seen the result of lack of historic preservation on many downtown areas in small to

medium-sized cities. It isn't pretty, and, ultimately, it isn't productive. New and modern isn't all Matt makes it out to be.

 Steve and  MetrolssuesLou like this.

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### Tracy W

But all cities display a lack of historic preservation at some point, that's how they get to be cities. New York's current downtown is very far from what the first settlers of New Amsterdam built. Boston is mostly very far removed now from Paul Revere's house. London's buildings are mostly 19th century. Paris was mostly drastically altered even in road layout by Napoleon. If it wasn't for a lack of historic preservation most of the centre of the cities of the world would consist of crude huts.

In other words, today's history was new and modern 100 years ago.

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### Pogo

SO, historic preservation is worthless? Since everything will eventually be old? At some point, a city or region may decide that structures (though it is not only structures that may be preserved) they have are worth reserving. Sometimes they will decide on a period of significance to stick with, or some other criteria, because they feel they are losing something important to them. That's really all HP is, an attempt to preserve something important to the community. Yes, typically HP is about preserving already old buildings, but it does not have to be that way. A community may decide that ca. 1999 is the most significant time period for their city, and wish to preserve THAT.

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### Adam

Historically, cities and regions haven't decided that. Things have been preserved either because they remained adequate for their continuous use or because they've been left stagnant (in either case, there has been no reason to change them).

Now, you can't tear down a 1950s office building, for example, because the architect later became famous or because the members of a board whose function is to impede progress has fond memories of visiting it as a child.

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### MetrolssuesLou


I thought Yglesias was a progressive, but he's taking an awfully regressive, anti-cultural position on this matter. It's especially troubling when he states "I don't, personally, understand the aesthetic principle that it's always better for new things to look similar to old things." Either he hasn't truly explored this, or is one of those people who have allowed themselves to be indoctrinated by the concept of "new and bigger is always better". What's worse is that he seems blind to the environmental and economic benefits of preservation. This guy needs an awakening.

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### Null

It's actually less left-right coded than a lot of other issues like abortion or labor unions: lots of conservatives like old things.

 Moose likes this.

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### MetrolssuesLou

Agreed. I wasn't necessarily equating regressive with conservative. But I don't think one can think of their self as a progressive and pursue regressive ideas. In the minds of many, progress means consistently tearing down the old to build the shiny and new. I'm challenging this thinking.

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### Iceman

And lots of conservatives lapse on their alleged free-market principles when it comes to government regulation restricting urban development I can't remember any Republican mayoral candidate in any major city ever making that an issue.

And many of us who advocate greater urban development in general would not object to preservation of neighborhoods and buildings of genuine historic value or architectural value. But preservationists go far beyond that in most cities, and the result is just to choke off development almost totally in order to save random older buildings that no one really cares about.

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### Bavery

Do you not see any room for a middle ground between "it's always better for new things to look similar to old things" and "new and bigger is always better?" Why not allow for judgement to include factors other than simply age?

You're correct to point out that the environmental impact is one of those other factors, but it's far from simply the case that preservation is environmentally beneficial. Increased density in transit oriented neighborhoods is a substantial net positive for the environment.

Development should be judged on it's merits, not knee jerks.  
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#### MetroIssuesLou

"Do you not see any room for a middle ground...?"

I think everything in the world should be considered on all the merits or demerits. But for rhetorical purposes, I matched one extreme position with another. Until Yglesias demonstrates he's in the middle ground you speak of, I have to call him on it.

"Why not allow for judgement to include factors other then simply age?"

Age isn't the only factor in preservation considerations. Never was the only factor. It is possible that a building can just be old, and provide no worthy rationale for preservation.

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#### elperroguapo

Well to be fair, there are no environmental benefits of preservation. Old buildings are less energy efficient and can't accomodate the same populous per square foot which leads to urban sprawl. It is no coincidence that places like New York City have the lowest Carbon emissions per capita in the U.S. Preservation is strictly an aesthetic, historical, and elitist position. Though in a place like D.C., that is literally a monument to the U.S., those things are worth considering.  
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#### MetroIssuesLou

I would advise further exploration of this subject. There are environmental costs associated with the materials and construction of a new building. Also, many old buildings, such as Victorian-era structures, are built with thick walls that help moderate interior temperatures. Last, environmental retrofitting of an old building shouldn't be given short shrift. Retrofitting can oftentimes be far cheaper, economically and environmentally, than designing a new "energy efficient" (except for the materials and construction) building.  
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#### elperroguapo

Yes, but you run into the same space problem. Simply put, more densely developed areas are always more environmentally effecient by a long shot. It really usurps all retrofitting arguments by an order of magnitude. The numbers back this up conclusively. And if you're spending a bunch of money on retrofit without adding space, the economic argument is rather drowned out. I like twelve foot ceilings large open entry ways and historic architecture too, but environmentally, they are the pits.  
Last Week from slate.com



#### Vinnie

The exploration of the subject should necessarily take into account the economics of the location, however.

If the current structure provides x amount of usable space, while demand for the location notes that 3x amount of space would be occupied if the supply was there, the environmental benefits of densification outweigh the costs of rebuilding. There will be some point where demand will be low enough so that this relationship will reverse.

The point -- not including any sort of economic analysis and instead saying "sorry, this is a historic district -- new buildings can't go beyond y feet high" doesn't make any sense. Yet, that tends to be the way historic preservation regulations work.  
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#### Iceman

Let's say you have a low-rise building in the city center, and it has 10 apartments. If the choice is between replacing that building with a new high-rise building with 100 apartments or leaving it alone and building 90 McMansions in distant suburbs, there's no question the high-rise apartment building would be far more environmentally efficient in the long-run, regardless of the small environmental impact of its construction.  
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#### Alsatian

Elperrowhatever, what are the three pillars of Sustainability? Go ahead and google it, then come back and explain why leveling cultural assets for the sake of the densest use is antithetical to Sustainability Principals.

You'll be amazed how far back Sustainability goes in the way back machine. But that would be history, and history's bad. Never mind.  
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**Adam**

You do realize that the fundamental disagreement is about what is a "cultural asset" and what isn't?  
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**Jessica**

This whole project needs to be thrown out. After reading David Alpert's article, I find it interesting that one of Yglesias' comments "I don't, personally, understand the aesthetic principle that it's always better for new things to look similar to old things" doesn't even pertain to this case. The HPO isn't even questioning the aesthetics, merely the building's height -- and I agree with Alpert that a stronger piece of architecture needs to be designed for this corner. A hunk of glass over the church's entrance does not a piece of architecture make.

Speaking of economics, can we talk about what is being completely ignored in this article? Not only is a historic church structure being razed, but it is being replaced by a completely uninspired structure whose only purpose, it seems, is to create profit for the church it is replacing (I assume that the church still owns this property). And who's to say that the church doesn't up and leave this building, giving up its three floors to even more offices, while it moves out to the suburbs? Yglesias admits that the "downtown has some irreplaceable qualities", but refuses to mention that those irreplaceable qualities are, in part, due to its history. Removing a church, brutalist it may be, in favor of a vanilla office building only strips away at the qualities that makes areas such as these attractive to future tenants and their customers.

Preservationists understand that economics is a huge factor in what they allow or don't allow. In fact, many of our case studies come from property owners who feel that they deserve to make the most money possible, regardless of what happens. Unfortunately, it is the economics that takes everyone else's focus - and it is up to the preservationists to speak up about everything else, including a building's character, history and aesthetics as a part of its city.

MetroIssuesLou likes this.

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**Bavery**

I'll just point out that even though you say that aesthetics doesn't pertain to this project - every point you make is about aesthetics.

"a stronger piece of architecture needs to be designed for this corner"  
"hunk of glass"  
"vanilla office building"  
"building's character, history and aesthetics"

I'm not sure what that part about the church moving to the suburbs means. Are you trying to preserve the building or the organization? If the organization ever wants to leave, you really don't have a say in the matter - or perhaps I'm not understanding your point.

MaxUtil, Moose and elperroguapo like this.

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**Jessica**

I do feel that aesthetics does need to be addressed in this project, but from what I read in the two articles, no one involved in the project does. And you're right, if the church wants to leave, it has every right to do so. However, it seems odd to me that the church wouldn't want to replace its building with a new church, instead of building a space for itself within a new office building.

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**Adam**

I had understood the back story to be that the church's membership has been dwindling for years. Which isn't particularly surprising given that it's a church that's in the middle of the downtown business district, and it's not a particularly large sect to begin with.

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**Adam**

Oh, and the land is now incredibly valuable and the church wants to cash in.  
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