

PRESERVATION MATTERS

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 27

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2007

NUMBER 6

Simply Monumental

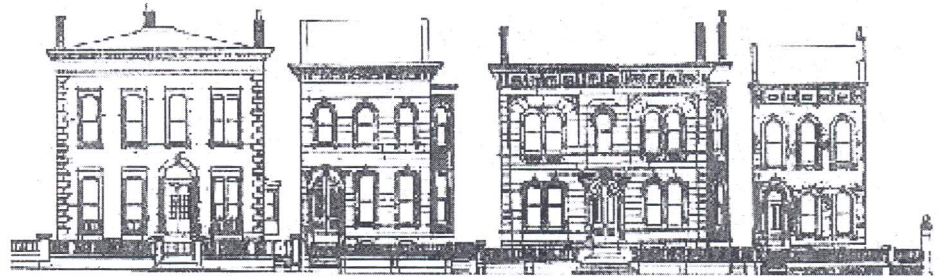
Commonplace places can be the most meaningful of all.

When I was working in the National Trust's [for Historic Preservation] southern office, I spent lots of time on the road, telling people about Trust programs and services. In town after town, my hosts often introduced themselves and their community with a statement similar to this: "Oh my, you come from Charleston! Well, we're not like Charleston. Our poor little town doesn't have anything really historic to save. We're pretty ordinary." I got used to hearing it—but I never got comfortable with the fact that it was an apology.

We preservationists have long recognized that Valhalla sort of place where venerable buildings grace every street, the thrilling spirit of days gone by hovers over every rooftop, and local residents imbibe a reverence for the past with their mother's milk. We think of these charmed spots—Charleston, Boston's Beacon Hill, New Orleans' Garden District, and a few others—as truly, gloriously historic and therefore very special. Our own communities, on the other hand, often seem newer, less grand, less special. We're fond of them, sure, but it's easier to daydream about the wonders of Natchez and Nantucket than to get worked up over the occasional loss of a familiar landmark in the "ordinary" towns we see daily.

That's wrong. Even though they don't merit long and dramatic entries in the history books, the places where most of us live are hugely important and eminently worth saving. They say a lot about who we are and how we got here.

Each is a kind of monument. Maybe no great battles were fought there—except for the ceaseless struggle to make a living out



of dirt or rock or water. Maybe no deathless oratory was uttered—just the everyday jokes and curses and threats and endearments spoken by people building lives for themselves. Maybe no great empires were won or lost—apart from putting down of roots, the pushing back of the frontier, the flexing of industrial muscle that heralded a nation's coming of age. Monuments come in many forms, not all of them involving heroes on horseback. Once you realize that, "monument" doesn't seem too far-fetched a label for an ordinary town.

A wonderful quote from English art critic and reformer John Ruskin hints at another fitting label:

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.

An ordinary community is an important entry in the book of art that Ruskin describes, at least in the vernacular sense. It's largely "unconscious" art (of the sort that American sculptor Horatio Greenough had in mind when he said that the most beautiful things our nation every produced were the clipper ship and the trotting wagon), and that makes it all the

more engaging. An ordinary town—an assemblage of yards and storefronts, signboards and bungalows, a low-rise skyline of steeples and treetops and smokestacks—can be a splendid sight. Its bricks and planks and flowerbeds can convey a powerful sense of the people who put them there. You see evidence of the human touch, the human eye, in the stonework of a courthouse wall, the carefully matched wood grain in a paneled parlor, the arrangement of windows and porches on an old house or mill—and you realize that "art gallery" is another good label for such a community.

Places like these are good to have around. They deserve to be appreciated and cherished, fought for and preserved. They certainly don't need to be apologized for.

Here's the bottom line: We sometimes think of history as a physical attribute, like naturally curly hair; some have it, and some don't. Those who don't often wish they did, and those who do don't always know what to do with it. But history isn't like this; it's more like a heart. Everybody has one—and every community does, too. Even the ones that seem utterly ordinary.

This article was written by Dwight Young it is reprinted with permission of PRESERVATION magazine, March/April, 2005 issue.

