Where is the History
In
Historic Preservation

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On August 1, 1864, Boise’s crowded Main Street astonished the editor of the newly established Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman. That day the fledgling supply town, which had barely been in existence a year, teamed with activity as 100 immigrant wagons streamed through its streets, mixing with those of local farmers bring hay and produce to market. Added to the confusion were “long lines of ox teams loaded with lumber and other goods from Salt Lake and the Columbia River.” Those wagons, a lifeline to those who occupied this small town in the middle of the vast high plains, would be a welcome and regular site to early pioneers. Scenes such as these are far removed from today’s growing metropolitan area of Boise and soon, one of the last visual images of that time in history will disappear with the reconstruction of the oldest building in the downtown warehouse district. Its new architectural plan takes away the bay windows and doors that serviced the freight wagons of pioneer Boise. This destruction of the cities past might not seem so surprising except for its occurrence in a designated historic district supposedly designed to protect historically significant buildings. With this development come questions about the cities commitment to preserving a sense of its historic past.

As with most towns, Boise’s battle to preserve its heritage has evolved over the last 60 years. After World War II the city grew as the nation prospered and the GI bill created new suburbs throughout the surrounding bench areas. Businesses in the core of the city started to suffer as small neighborhood malls appeared in the outlying developments. In 1965 city leaders followed the nation-wide trend of renewal and redevelopment in hopes of transforming Idaho’s capital city into a modern and viable business area. They created the Boise Redevelopment Agency and a plan evolved calling for the replacement of the “deteriorating downtown core” with a new open mall area. Soon blocks of older buildings were bought and demolished using federal funds from the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. What the city didn’t realize was that many of those old and deteriorating buildings contained a cultural and historic connection to the citizens of the town. As people started to see their heritage piled high in rubble, some started to question the demolition. When the bulldozers started to the approach the 1927 Egyptian Theater people stood up and fought against the eradication of their past. But only after blocks of historic structures had been razed did they stop the destruction that had engulfed many pioneer buildings as well as what was left of a once thriving Chinatown.

Figure 1: Boise’s Main Street - 1864. Picture courtesy of the ISHS
Across the nation, communities started to question the practices of those early urban renewal efforts and in the 1970s President Carter authorized a series of tax breaks for those engaged in historic preservation. This change in policy hit Boise at a time when a lack of financial backing had ground the downtown mall project to a halt. Suddenly enterprising businessmen started to look at those “deteriorating buildings” in a new light and together with innovative architects started to refurbish the historic fabric of the downtown area. This attraction to the past bubbled into the residential neighborhoods of the city as residents fought to keep the historic nature of the areas they lived in. The City recognized how valuable promoting the educational and cultural history of the city had become to its economy. In 1976 they established the Historic Preservation Commission with a mandate to “promote, preserve and protect historic buildings, structures, sites, monuments, streets, squares and neighborhoods” to serve as a visual reminder of the cities past. Through the creation of historic districts the commission could designate areas that held special historic significance to the city and then exercise an oversight position over reconstruction of visual elements of those areas. All major remodeling or construction projects in those areas had to pass the review of this commission and their decisions could be overturned only by the city council.iii

During this time, what had once been a struggle between developers and historic preservationist turned into a win-win situation with the refurbishing of old structures into productive commercial space. In 1975, one of the first projects of this type started in the old warehouse district along downtown Boise’s 8th street. The history of warehouses reached back to those far-gone days when the survival of the town depended on the timely arrival of supplies. As early as September of 1864 the local newspaper reported the rapid appearance of “stores, warehouses and dwellings” along the streets of Boise. The city, founded as a trading supply point for miners, needed to expand its ability to store massive amounts of goods awaiting transfer to outlying mining areas. The arrival of goods created news worthy events during those early times in Boise. Articles abounded announcing the arrival at local stores of goods loaded on large pack trains, weighing as much as six to eight thousand pounds. News of outgoing goods also proved to be of vital interest to the community as the paper often announced departures such as that of a 30-mule pack train going to the Owyhee Mountains. The growth of the city became dependent upon the freighting industry and the warehouses needed to hold the goods.iv

By the 1870s, the mines in the area started to produce less but Boise did not follow the fate of many former supply towns by fading away. Instead it grew as its citizens recognized the potential of the region. Already established as the center of the territorial government, Boise’s businessmen looked for ways to assure the town’s economic stability. The railroads also saw the areas viability and started construction of the Oregon Short Line railway. Boise’s local papers were full of articles telling of the importance of the railroad to the town, but in 1882 the Union Pacific decided not to pass through the capital city due to “extra mileage and 80 ft to the mile grades.”v Once again freighting and warehouses became vital to the
well being of the city, as goods trekked to and from the Nampa depot via freight wagon. Finally in 1887 a spur-line arrived in Boise, but again because of the steep grades down into the valley the railroad tracks stayed up on the southern Bench. Soon warehouses were built close to the wooden depot to hold goods waiting to be transported to and from the city center. Not until 1893 did the railroad build a spur line into Boise’s downtown area, and soon after came the construction of a fine stone depot and park near 10th and Front Street.

Prior to that time orchards owned by Thomas Davis spread along the northern side of the river. Upon receiving word of the railway’s intentions to locate downtown he platted blocks 1, 2 and 3 of the Davis Addition transforming a section of orchard into a workable spot for a warehouse district. The railroad company’s right of way passed through those blocks and in 1902 the first of many new warehouse buildings graced the area.

The original set of warehouses stretched between Board and Myrtle on the west side of 8th street with the right of way forming an alley behind the buildings. Soon the district expanded in all directions including another set of buildings between the alley and 9th street. In 1905 and 1906 a spur line streaked the center of the alley, bring the railway cars to the back door of the buildings.

The areas prosperity in the early 1900s led to the development of grand buildings.
in Boise and even the warehouses bore stately arches, detailed cornices and stout posts. The warehouse district’s wholesalers also prospered as they sent goods to Idaho’s mining, lumber, agriculture and irrigation industries. The district attracted more than just the industrial wholesale business, becoming the home of many wholesale merchandisers who benefited from close proximity to the railroad. Stockmen regularly ordered merchandise from Omaha, Portland, San Francisco, Chicago, New Jersey, and Kansas City along with conducting a brisk business with local markets such as Weiser and Franklin, Idaho. The warehouse area housed hardware, fruit, grocery, and paint wholesalers and serviced industries such as a milling company, icehouse, storage company and creamery. The bustling docks of the warehouse district operated with hand, horse and rail labor, and its dirt streets were often full of horse-drawn carts and wagons. Pulley systems protruded from the side and back of many buildings allowing for the transfer of large crates of merchandise from the warehouses to a waiting wagon.

Two of Boise’s leading architectural firms of the time, Tourtellotte and Hummel and Wayland and Fennell, designed most of the buildings. Tourtellotte and Hummel designed almost the entire first block, which suffered substantial damage during a fire in 1903. The firm had a hand in rebuilding two of the blocks former buildings. The handsome red brick warehouses had workrooms that opened to rear and side loading docks accommodating wagons then trains, and later truck deliveries. The front of the buildings, facing the streets, usually housed offices and storefronts. Between 1902 and 1915 a four-block warehouse area blossomed hosting an array of substantial and beautiful buildings. Between 1923 and 1924 the railroad mainline finally came to Boise, but stayed on the Southern Bench close to the original depot of 1887. This did nothing to dim the prosperity of the downtown warehouse district since the mainline accommodated passenger service only. Freight trains still ran on the original spur line from Nampa to downtown Boise.

The grand age of the railroad came to a halt in the 1940s as roadways carved a path across the nation. Automobiles not only changed the way goods were transported but also the way Boise grew. Wholesalers moved to areas with newer buildings and easier access to highways and the downtown warehouse district started to decline. By the late 1960s, the construction of the freeway system south of town caused a final exodus from the area seemingly sealing the fate of the 8th

Figure 5: Storefronts on 8th street. Picture courtesy of ISHS
street warehouse district. The buildings had become obsolete for modern day warehousing and the area struggled to find a new identity. 

In 1975 a development team bought five of the warehouse buildings and hired historic planner John Bertram as project coordinator. Because the buildings were “no longer usable for modern day warehousing” the developers requested that the city change the zoning to commercial use to accommodate a plan for developing an 8th Street Marketplace in the area. In 1977, developers Winston Moore and Larry Leasure started the first phase of the adaptive re-use plan with renovation of the Northrup Hardware and Coffin building at the corner of Board and 8th streets. That same year saw the implementation of the North Bank Project, providing a new and historic streetscape on 8th between the Bridge and Front Street. In 1978 the South Eighth Street Historic District gained recognition by being placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Then in 1979, renovations came to the buildings on the east side of 8th street where shops and office spaces were developed in the Falk, Carlson Lusk Hardware and Boise Elevator buildings. Conversion of the Falk/Davidson garage into a theatre accompanied the 1979 renovations. The only other business on that side of the street, the Idaho Candy Store, had been in existence since 1909 making that Tourtellotte and Hummel building the home of the longest standing business of the area.

As Boise started to recognize the importance of its historic architecture, preservationists started to recommend areas for local historic districts. In 1982, the cities Historic Preservation Commission made the warehouse district its third official historic district noting its significance to the history of the city.

Ownership of the area changed in 1994 as S-16 Corporation bought the marketplace. The corporation, owned by businessman J.R. Simplot and his grandchildren, expanded the area over the next 10 years working with the city to develop a cultural district stretching from the 8th Street Bridge to Grove Street. Additional warehouses were renovated in the area to house practice and business space for the ballet, opera, and philharmonic as well as a contemporary theatre. They combined with the areas existing museums and library to create a unique setting in the downtown area. Educators also saw the advantage of being in the district as a private school move in, again renovating a warehouse building for its use.

In the 1980s, the marketplace attracted many people to the downtown area with an array of small shops, restaurants, and a theater. But by 2001 a rash of closings alarmed the city and owners of the development. Many blamed the new Broadway connector for the down swing in business. The north end of 8th Street and the central downtown area had seen major renovations between 1985 and 2000 and the development of public space had attracted many to the center of the city. But the six-lane cross town connector cut off foot traffic between the two ends of 8th street causing many potential customers to stay on the north end of the street.
In 2003 Brinx and Co., a development firm out of Bethesda MD, bought the marketplace renaming it Bo Do. The new owners released a plan for renovating the market area calling for new development between Front and Broad Street. Boise City’s Historic Preservation Planner, Jeff Neberman, reviewed the plans noting the developer’s intentions to keep the historic buildings between Broad and Myrtle, with the intention of significantly renovating them if needed. The plan moved ahead, replacing the theater in the converted Falk/Davidson garage with a new building, and adding another structure across 8th street, creating retail and commercial space along with a 9-screen theater complex north of the original warehouse blocks. One of the best features of the new development is the walking corridor down 8th street that connects the cultural district with downtown developments on that street.xiv

The city’s urban renewal agency, the Capital City Development Corp. (CCDC), hopes that the new development will breathe life into the older marketplace but local preservationists have some concerns. The new developers expressed no interest in incorporating the areas historic nature into their complex, instead developing elements of the 1950s and 60s into their design. Earlier development in the area also added to preservationists’ concerns about the cities dedication to keeping the historic integrity of the area.

In 1997, plans were brought before the city for a parking structure on the south side of Front Street. They called for the destruction of the historic Fosters Warehouse building, which lay within the boundaries of that area locally designated Historic District. The plans required the approval of the Historic Preservation Commission who in a 3-2 vote rejected the removal of the building. One commission staff member noted that the Tourtelotte and Hummel building was one of the most architecturally significant buildings in the district. It created a visual connection to the railroad era. The building had been constructed just beyond the downtown depot, at a spot where the spur-line tracks curved to head down the alley behind the warehouse buildings. The shape of the structure had been built with a curve to match that of the tracks making it a unique reminder of the railway long after it had been uprooted and paved over. The developers appealed the commission’s ruling to the City Council who overturned it. At that point local preservationists challenged the action in court, stalling the development. Eventually, developers created a design around the building, but did not bother to expose its curved side, demolishing that visual image of Boise’s past. While the front façade exists, it does not carry the same meaning. This same fate awaits another of the structures bought by the Bo Do developers, the districts oldest remaining warehouse the O.W. Smith building.xv

Figure 6: Current day Fosters Warehouse Building. Picture courtesy of the Preservation Idaho Website
On the northwest corner of Myrtle and 8th street resided a 1902 two-story structure built as a warehouse and storefront for Smith and Company. Otto W. Smith owned the business that dealt in essential goods of the day such as seeds, hay, cereals, salt, flour, grain and produce. Mr. Smith had come up through the ranks, working for the Coal and Feed store at 623 Main Street from 1899 to 1901. He then branched out on his own, choosing to build a store on a site close to the depot’s newly developing warehouse district. The front of the building housed a handsome storefront with windows, a canopy and a recessed entryway. The side of the building, facing Myrtle Street, housed a series of bays with windows and doors to facilitate the loading of wagons. A system of pulleys and hoists were used to load bags of seed or other products onto wagons parked on the Myrtle side of the building. Most of these features can still be seen on the Myrtle side and, as with the Foster building, this architectural design again provides a visual reminder to the public of Boise’s history. It illustrates the working history of mule packers and pack trains and the vitally important service they provided to the people of the area as well as the early economy of the city.xvi

The fire of 1903 left the Smith building untouched and it remained the place of business for Smith and Co. until 1908. At that time, Mr. Smith built a new warehouse and grain mill directly across Myrtle Street and the old building remained in use as a storage facility for Smith and Co until 1921. It then became a warehouse for Peasley Transfer and Storage until 1950. After that a number of businesses used the building including the Amalgamated Sugar Co., both MJB and Folgers coffee companies as well as other wholesale merchandisers and brokerage firms. In 1963 the building became home to the Appliance and Heating Supply Co., which remained there until 1982. After the creation of 8th street Marketplace the use of the building changed and over time it housed a fine arts studio, a carpentry shop and various other commercial businesses. While the storefront had received structural updates, the owners had done little to improve the

Figure 7: Side view of the O.W. Smith building. Picture courtesy of the ISHS

Figure 8: O.W. Smith building - 2002. Picture courtesy of the Ada County Assessors Office.
warehouse portion of the building. It had sub-standard electrical wiring, no modern heat and many other things needed to make the space easily adaptable for modern business use. Over time many of the front and side windows had been altered and the recessed entryway had been filled in and made flush with the front of the building. The brick had been painted and a side-rail of cheap concrete had been added to the Myrtle street side of the building when the connector was built.

Instead of renovating the building as the 2003 plan indicated, the Bo Do development team sold the building in 2005 to local developer Gary Christensen. The same year Mr. Christensen submitted a plan to the Planning and Zoning Department to completely demolish the building. He provided a copy of a structural inspection that had been commissioned in 1999 and 2000 by former owners, the S-16 Corporation. The structural investigation found the building to be “in fair condition” except for some items that needed retrofitted, repaired or replaced. The condition of the masonry proved to be the most serious problem and the 2000 masonry shear test found that the bricks on the west wall had started to deteriorate bring up the possibility of costly procedures to renovate the building. Christensen proposed tearing the structure down and reconstructing a commercial and residential building that would “keep the character” of the area. Because of the buildings location in a historic district the plans needed the approval of the Historic Preservation Commission. The Commission ruled against a complete demolition of the building. After that ruling, Christensen rework the plan and the Historic Commission held workshop sessions to explain the elements they wanted to see.

In October of 2005 the eight-person commission heard a second proposal by Christensen. The design had been set by parameters given by the commission, and focused on keeping only the front wall of the storefront on 8th street. The plan called for the demolition of all but 10% of the original structure and construction of a new building behind the old façade. Developers would then add a third story to the new building that would be set back from the originally storefront. The new design also incorporated the next-door Peasley building into the plan. Historic planner John

Figure 9: Original architectural drawing of the Smith building showing the bays for loading freight. Picture courtesy of Planmakers.
Bertram and historic architect Dan Everhart both wanted more from the developer. Mr. Everhart argued that the real historic value of the building lay in its Myrtle Street wall whose architecture displayed one of the last visual images of the days the freight wagons. He also reminded the group that demolishing 90% of a building is not now, or ever will be considered a historic preservation technique. The developers objected to keeping the Myrtle Street wall because of the masonry shear test showing deterioration of the brick on that side of the building. They argued that the cost of renovating the wall would be prohibitive.\textsuperscript{xix}

The Historic Commission focused on two criteria in determining the fate of the building, whether the changes adversely affected the nature of the Historic District and whether historic renovation proved economically feasible for the owner. In the commissions opinion the commercial storefront of the building represented the primary façade of historic significance and by keeping that the plan did not adversely affect the nature of the district. They noted the preservation of many architectural features on the front façade as essential to keeping the historical accuracy of the building. Mr. Everhart challenged this opinion by reminding the commission that the true nature of the district was not the commercial aspects of the storefronts but the historic aspects of the warehouse era. In his professional opinion, the Myrtle Street façade represented the only readable face defining the building as a warehouse and that losing it did indeed subtract from the “historic fabric” of the district.\textsuperscript{xx}

The commission’s second issue of interest centered on the economic feasibility of renovating the original structure. They concluded that the cost to bring the building up to the seismic standards required by building codes created a financial hardship for the owner and that in the opinion of the staff it would be impossible to restore the deteriorating brick in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Thus renovation would not be economically feasible to the owner. Mr. Everhart countered that option by suggesting that the Peasley building be raised to three stories restoring it to its historic presences and that it could then be used for the condominiums. Then the developers could renovate the Smith building by taking advantage of the tax rehabilitation credits amounting to 20% of the cost or $200,000. Mr. Christensen responded to this by stating that in the past he had found the restrictions put on renovations using the tax credits onerous, making the projects financially infeasible and thus had decided against using those means for this renovation.\textsuperscript{xxi}

One commissioner, while supporting the project, also brought up the concern that “peeling away” so much of the building may not only be stripping away at the warehouses history but may jeopardize the structures National Registry status. Historic planner John Bertram later voiced this same concern about the district as a whole. He noted that many small changes had been made to the buildings since their 1982 placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Those changes he suggested, added to the loss of the oldest building in the district, could place the designation at risk.\textsuperscript{xxii}
As more commissioners and guests commented on the project at the October meeting it became apparent that Historic Register status was not driving the decision but rather, as one member commented, economics. The usability of the building became the bottom line, and the adverse affect of possibly having the building remain empty seemed of more importance than keeping the historic fabric in place. In the end the commission ruled in favor of the developer’s second plan with the condition that the original storefront be appearance as presented by John Bertram in three historic photos of the building. The plan will be approved upon submission of designs for this additional restoration.

In looking at the 1977 decision on the Foster Warehouse building and the 2005 ruling on the O.W. Smith building, one notes a change in focus on the part of the Historic Preservation Commission. Promoting the economic welfare of the City became more central to the discussion than promoting its cultural and educational welfare. While commissioners in the October 2005 meeting talked about architectural aspects of the building, and “retaining the character” of the area, little was voiced about preserving the actual history of the district. Historic fabric goes beyond design elements such as beams, cornice designs and pilasters. It includes a discussion of the working history of the area and the contributions to the city made by the people who worked in the warehouses. That history speaks, maybe ironically, about the cities economic past and its earliest means of economic
stability. The discussion by the commission should also have addressed the preservation of those elements when talking about adversely affecting the historic nature of the area. The latter conversation seemed to be strangely absent from the discussion in October of 2005. Instead it became an issue, as Mike Hall of CCDC stated, of having the building occupied. Over and over the usability of the structure was noted as the driving force of the Commission. xxiv

This change in focus may have been more by design than anything else. Members of the Historic Preservation Commission are appointed by the Mayor and serve 3-year terms. There can be as many as nine commissioners appointed to the board and at the time of the most recent hearing eight of those spots were filled. In talking to the Mayor’s staff about his policy on the Historic Preservation Commission they stated a desire to look for more “balance” in the commissioners. This need stemmed from a perception that past commissions had been focused too much on preservation, and that in fact not all buildings in a district had historic significance and should be saved. They also sited the need for buildings with usable space, especially in the downtown business core. xxv

While the city should be concerned with preserving only historically appropriate buildings, it seems an unnecessary battle in historic districts where their significance has already been established. It is also undisputable that the economic viability of Boise’s downtown core is of vital importance but one has to question any precedent set by the Historic Preservation Commission to trade that for historical integrity when working within Historic Districts. While much of the O.W. Smith building may have met the criteria for demolition due to the high cost of renovation and saving the façade at least brings coherency to the streetscape, it is highly questionable whether it can be said that the proposed project does not adversely affect the historic nature of the district. The designation of the front as the primary façade of historical significance is simply not justified by the history of the district and a project that focuses on preserving only the front 10% of the building, while destroying the wall that truly speaks to the historic nature of the district, cannot truly be called historic preservation of the building. After all what is Historic Preservation without the history?

End Notes

i Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman, 2 August 1864.


Planmakers, 1-15.


Planmakers. 1-15.


Planmakers, 1-15 and John Bertram, Interviewed by author, 6 April 2006.


City of Boise Planning and Zoning Department, Minutes of Historic Preservation Meeting, 10 October 2005.

Ibid.

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MS 2/0026. Financial documents relating to location of Depot in Boise. Idaho State Historical Library.

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