
Historic Preservation: Washington, D.C. Neighborhoods and Economic Change

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Abstract

Over the past thirty-five years the goal of historic preservation has shifted from simply protecting older buildings from destruction to using them as part of a neighborhood economic revitalization strategy. While much of the current literature asserts the effectiveness of this strategy, no neighborhood-specific study has been conducted in Washington, D.C. to support the claims of effectiveness. This paper compares three Washington, D.C. neighborhoods—the Le Droit Park and Anacostia Historic Districts as well as the Columbia Heights neighborhood—in order to determine whether the current system of historic preservation in Washington, D.C. has led to significant economic and housing development in those neighborhoods, and, if not, what factors have prevented the success of this strategy. Through an examination of five economic indicators (unemployment rate, average income, poverty rate, rental vacancy rate, and homeownership rate), it becomes evident that, while there is no direct correlation between historic preservation and economic revitalization, the strategy may indirectly contribute to economic development. The study also concludes that gentrification cannot be equated with historic preservation within Washington, D.C.

Introduction

As the capital of the United States, Washington, D.C. holds a unique place on the roster of America's cities. The government buildings and monuments that fill the city are symbols of the country's history and the ideals on which it was founded. Yet these icons are not the only part of Washington with historical significance. Many of the city neighborhoods just beyond the reach of Capital Hill played an important role in both the local and national history of arts, humanities, and social rights struggles. Often the historical resources pertaining to these struggles are located in poor neighborhoods within the District, and thus their designation as historically significant takes on a dimension of importance beyond the simple remembrance and preservation of the past. According to the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, the concentration of historically designated sites in Washington is one of the highest in the country, and thus the city provides a rich and important context for the study of issues surrounding preservation.

Like many other major cities in the United States, the Washington, D.C. region has grown rapidly over the last decade, causing changes in the District's neighborhoods that residents are struggling to address. As property values continue to soar and construction costs escalate, space and affordability are becoming more pressing issues for some neighborhoods and, in turn, for both the local government and area residents. In response, efforts at historic preservation have shifted from merely saving old buildings to becoming a "strategic component of urban policy where preservation is not an end in itself but a vehicle for larger and arguably more important ends"—namely, economic revitalization and housing development (Rypkema, 2003). This study explores the effectiveness of historic preservation as a strategy for revitalization within three Washington, D.C. neighborhoods—Anacostia, Le Droit Park, and Columbia Heights—in order to determine the extent to which the current strategy has succeeded and to discover what if any factors have prevented success.

While historic preservation was expected to bring economic benefits to District neighborhoods, the positive changes that these neighborhoods have actually experienced over the last thirty years turn out to be no greater than those experienced by non-designated neighborhoods during the time. This being the case, it is important to examine why the use of historic preservation as a revitalization strategy continues to find favor within the District. I will argue that though there is not a direct correlation between historic preservation and economic revitalization, the strategy may contribute indirectly to economic development by increasing the desirability of property in designated neighborhoods. Ultimately, then, historic preservation alone and in its current form does not produce significant economic change for a neighborhood's original residents and thus is not as effective a revitalization tool as many District officials believe. However, there may be non-economic benefits to historic preservation. Furthermore, changes to existing historic preservation legislation could transform designation's potential to positively impact the economic health of District neighborhoods.

With historic preservation such a prominent part of the District's existence it is important to examine how the designation of historic buildings, neighborhoods, and other resources affects the city's economy and the lives of its people. While researchers have discussed generally the role of historic preservation in economic and housing development, no comparative study of neighborhoods within the District exists. Such a study is especially important in light of the local controversy surrounding gentrification and displacement, in that it could have very real implications not only for community debate, but also for future changes to regulations governing the historic preservation system and its use to bolster economic growth in Washington, D.C.

While the economic costs and benefits of historic preservation have been much debated, the topic is difficult to approach because, as Randall Mason (2005) points out, "historic preservation is organized primarily to sustain and create cultural values," and so studying it from an economic perspective is like

trying to “price the priceless.” As a result there is a good deal of research supporting the cultural value of historic designation and even the physical implications of preserving old buildings, but the scope becomes much more limited when addressing the economics of preservation.

The prevailing consensus in current research is overwhelmingly that preservation does indeed carry with it economic benefits. Donovan Rypkema (2002) has repeatedly made the case, for instance, that the rehabilitation of older buildings is often less expensive than the construction of new ones and that such rehabilitation generates more jobs, tourism and population growth. This view is generally echoed by others (e.g., Listokin, Listokin, and Lahr, 1998, among others). There is controversy, however, about the role of historic preservation in promoting gentrification and displacement in neighborhoods.

Other scholars have argued that the evidence does not support a direct correlation between historic preservation and economic growth, but suggests the possibility of an indirect correlation. Edward N. Coulson and Robin M. Leichenko (2004) acknowledge that there is evidence that historic preservation increases property values, but also conclude that designation and the ensuing ten-year period thereafter shows little effect on other measures of economic health such as vacancy and owner-occupancy rates.

Not surprisingly most of the literature on historic preservation as a revitalization strategy comes from advocates and therefore lacks critical distance. This is the case in most of the material published by the District’s Office of Planning and other Washington, D.C. preservation organizations like Cultural Tourism. The lack of objectivity in these groups might contribute to a failure to seriously consider alternative economic revitalization options.

Whatever one’s position on the topic, however, the choices made by city leaders in the near future will have more than just a theoretical effect on the development of the District’s neighborhoods. Policies and attitudes associated with historic preservation in the city will have a very real effect on the lives of both current and future neighborhood residents.

Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C.

The rapid growth of Washington, D.C. over the past decade has created a boom atmosphere that has not been seen for some time. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, a number of Washington neighborhoods in the metropolitan area were decimated by riots and fell into a period of economic decline (Williams, 1999 and 2006; Rathner, 2006). These riots prompted the flight of large numbers of whites and many black working- and middle-class families out of these areas and into the suburbs, leaving high concentrations of poor residents, growing vacancy rates, and increasing blight in inner city neighborhoods (Kennedy et al., 2001). This was the situation in the Anacostia, Le Droit Park and Columbia Heights neighborhoods.

Since the 1970s leaders in the Washington community have approached the revitalization of the District’s neighborhoods in a variety of ways, some with more success than others. Policy changes, new public investments, new community leadership, and the designation of new historic sites are just a few of the strategies employed in the past thirty years to revitalize local neighborhoods. Among these options, historic preservation has grown in popularity and now plays a central role in the Washington Office of Planning’s approach to revamping neighborhoods with high vacancy rates and concentrations of poor residents (Historic Preservation Element, 2002).

Historic preservation as a revitalization strategy has not always been a favored method in the District or even within the broader United States. In fact, it was not until the 1960s that the widespread loss of historic places became an issue of debate on the federal level (Listokin et al., 1998). As concern grew, the federal government moved into action, passing the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 and creating a National Register of Historic Places as well as a review process to determine what sites

were worthy of designation. Other federal actions included the 1976 Tax Reform Act, which awarded preservation tax credits, and the 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act. This national shift also brought with it changes on a local level. Washington, D.C.'s Historic Landmark and Historic Protection Act of 1978 established the District's current review process as well as the major entities that would be involved in the designation and management of historic resources, which include the Mayor's Agent, the Historic Preservation Review Board and the Historic Preservation Office within the Office of Planning (Historic Preservation Element, 2002).

The regulation of historic neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. is administered primarily under local District agents. While recognition on the National Register of Historic Places is largely honorific, local designation is the mechanism that provides areas across the country with protection under state preservation laws (Williams, 2006). In Washington, D.C. this differentiation brings with it problems because of the District's small size and unique historic background. As the seat of national government, Washington, D.C. is rich with sites of national historic importance. Although the District has one of the highest levels of designation in the country, it has one of the smallest government and resource structures when compared with America's fifty states. This puts much strain on local government, as the majority of costs and duties associated with administering these national historic treasures falls onto municipal shoulders without much support from the federal government (Fletcher, personal communication, 2006). The result is a strong enforcement policy on the part of the District's Office of Planning, which passes off a great deal of the responsibility to property owners without offering incentives that adequately compensate average homeowners for their investment.

While the strategy of using historic designation is growing in popularity within the District's Office of Planning, the laws that govern its enforcement are causing controversy for some in Washington, D.C. neighborhoods. Designating a structure or neighborhood ensures that houses will not be torn down and replaced by new construction, but also limits the modifications that private property owners can make in order to improve them. In most cases, designation also requires that repairs be completed in a way that preserves the property's historic character; often these repairs can cost more than the resident can afford, thus leading to the displacement of area residents (Cohen, 1998). Many community members and some academics contend that these regulations contribute to increased levels of gentrification¹ (Coulson, 2004). Some community activists also feel that the current historic designation system succeeds in preserving a neighborhood's past, but does not give enough voice to local residents.

Research Approach and Methods

To assess the success of historic preservation as a revitalization strategy in Washington, D.C., we will examine economic changes spanning thirty years in three Washington, D.C. neighborhoods: Le Droit Park, Anacostia, and Columbia Heights. All three share similar demographics and experienced economic decline and high vacancy rates after the 1968 riots destroyed several areas in Washington's traditionally African American neighborhoods. Both the Le Droit Park and Anacostia neighborhoods were added to the National Register of Historic Places during the 1970s, while Columbia Heights, although having a similarly important historic background, remains undesignated today (see Table 1). Using Mills' Method of Difference as the approach to this comparison, with the similarities of neighborhood histories as the control, this paper will examine whether there is a correlation between historic preservation and economic revitalization or whether a neighborhood's economic condition is more dependent on other factors.

In exploring the contributions of historic preservation to housing and economic development, this paper will focus on quantitative rather than qualitative indicators, including rates of unemployment,

poverty, residential vacancy, homeownership, and growth in heritage tourism. I define a revitalization program as successful if the neighborhood has experienced an increase in average income and homeownership rate coupled with a decrease in unemployment, poverty, and residential vacancy rates. We can use the same data to look for evidence of gentrification or displacement of the neighborhood's pre-designation residents. The data, drawn from United States Census Bureau records for the period between 1970 and 2000, comprise a longitudinal study of factors in these neighborhoods.

Table 1. Neighborhoods and dates of registration as Historic Places. (National Register Information System)

Census Tract Number	Historic District	Date of Inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places
34.00	Le Droit Park	1974
75.03	Anacostia	1978
28.02	Columbia Heights	Not Designated

To determine the correct census tract for each district I created a map that overlaid the boundaries of Washington, D.C.'s historic districts on top of the U.S. Census Bureau's division of census tracts. That the boundaries of the historic districts do not line up perfectly with the tract boundaries as determined by the Census Bureau limits somewhat the usefulness of the approach. However, I chose the three districts discussed in this paper not just for their commonalities in historical experience, but also because the great majority of each district fell within a single census tract, thus lessening the potential for inaccurate measurements. In the case of the Le Droit Park and Anacostia neighborhoods the census tracts of their location contained a few areas that were not historically designated. The Columbia Heights neighborhood, on the other hand, encompassed more than one census tract, so a single tract was selected to serve as a representative sample. Though this method of data selection leaves room for some inaccuracy, it was the most plausible option under the constraints of this project. A longer, perhaps multi-year, study might have made it possible to work with the Census Bureau to acquire more neighborhood-specific data, thus raising confidence in the project's findings.

Research Findings and Arguments

Although census tracts are an imperfect gauge of the economic and housing changes in a neighborhood, they nonetheless provide insight into the overall economic health of the districts studied, due to the regularity of sampling of the same information over time. Graphs are presented below that show the change in each of the five indicators—unemployment rate, average income, poverty rate, rental vacancy rate, and homeownership rate—in each neighborhood beginning in 1970 and ending in 2000.

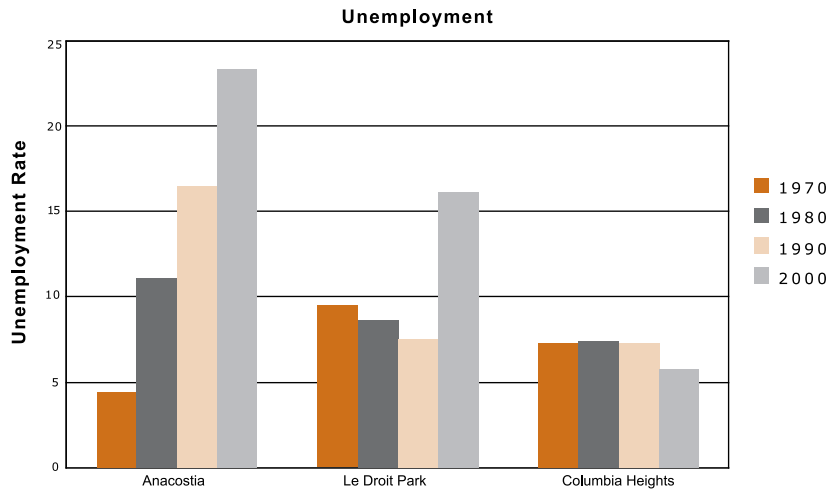


Figure 1. Unemployment Rates. (Neighborhood Change Database, 1970 – 2000. GeoLytics. Georgetown University Library.)

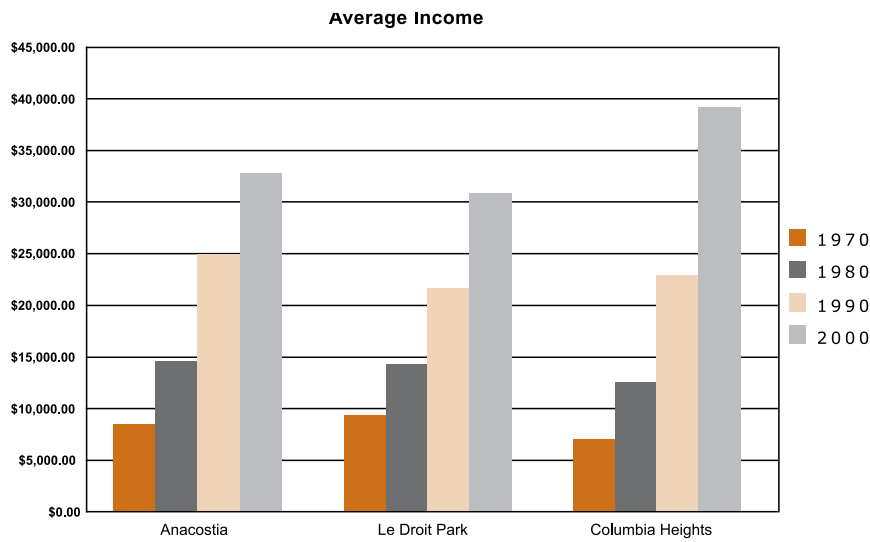


Figure 2. Average Incomes. (Neighborhood Change Database, 1970 – 2000. GeoLytics. Georgetown University Library.)

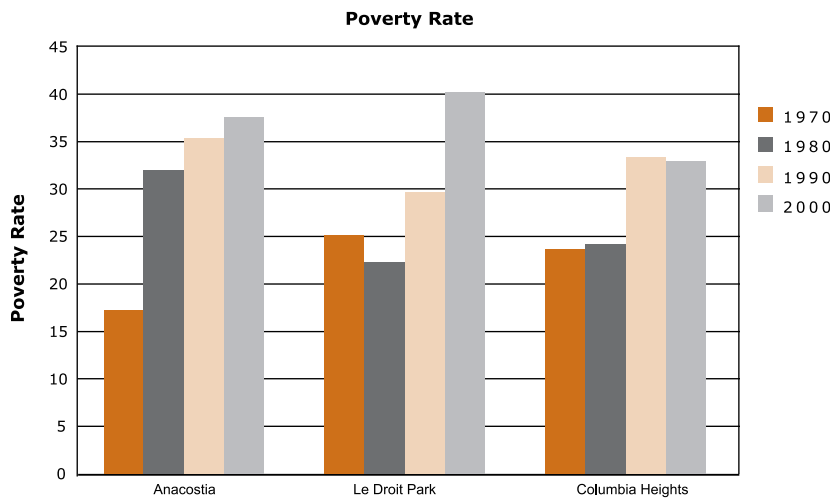


Figure 3. Poverty Rates. (Neighborhood Change Database, 1970 – 2000. GeoLytics. Georgetown University Library.)

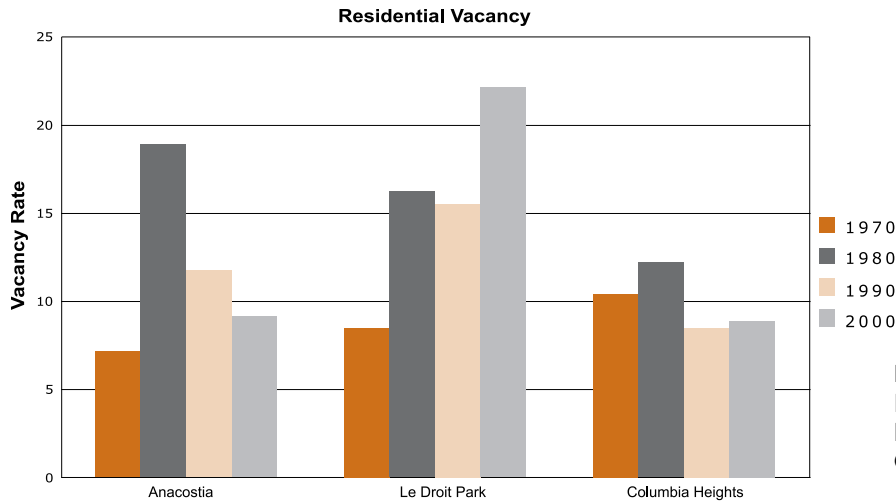


Figure 4. Residential Vacancy Rates. (Neighborhood Change Database, 1970 – 2000. Geolytics. Georgetown University Library.)

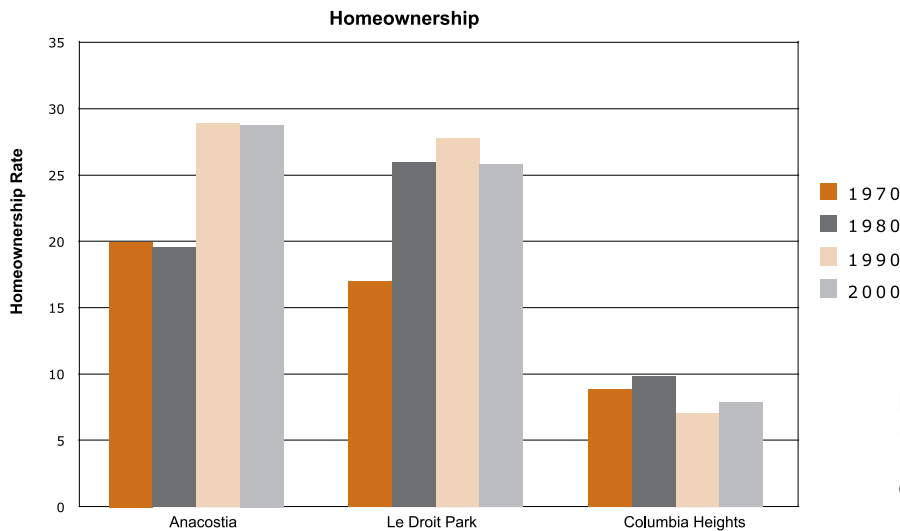


Figure 5. Homeownership Rates. (Neighborhood Change Database, 1970 – 2000. Geolytics. Georgetown University Library.)

Perhaps the two central indicators of economic benefit, especially from the perspective of residents in D.C. neighborhoods, are jobs created and average income generated. These two indicators have a huge effect on the way the residents of a neighborhood are able to live their everyday lives. Donovan D. Rypkema (2003), who leads the push to use historic preservation as a means of revitalizing neighborhoods and creating affordable housing, points out that rehabilitation of older and historic buildings can contribute to the betterment of both these indicators in a historically designated neighborhood. According to him, “[N]ew construction will be fifty percent labor and fifty percent materials. But rehabilitation will be sixty to seventy percent labor with the balance in materials.” The result should be both more jobs and more household income for the residents of a historic district (Rypkema, 2003).

A look at Figure 1 quickly makes evident that this is not the case for the Le Droit and Anacostia Historic Districts. While Le Droit Park did see a small initial decrease in unemployment, after the first twenty years of designation the unemployment rate jumped significantly. Anacostia’s designation did not lead to decreased unemployment at all, but rather, there was a steady increase in unemployment that

resulted in the highest levels of all three districts. Columbia Heights, the non-historic district, maintained steady levels of unemployment and actually saw a slight decrease in the unemployment rate at the end of the period examined. These findings contradict Rypkema's assertion that historic designation leads to lessening unemployment.

Those who support Rypkema's assertion may be overlooking a failure to consider several important factors. First, while rehabilitating a house may in theory cost less than building a new one, rehabilitation according to the standards set forth by the Historic Preservation Office is quite likely to cost more than if the residents were free to renovate as they wished. In light of a recent Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sponsored study that estimated the bill to repair an historic home with moderate physical problems at \$25,000 (Listokin and Listokin, 2001), it seems unreasonable to assume that residents who have annual average family incomes of less than \$35,000 could afford to repair their houses according to preservationist standards (see Figure 2).

An additional factor is that, while restoration efforts do generate jobs, these jobs do not necessarily go directly to the residents of the specific historic neighborhood, nor is it guaranteed that the money for restoration efforts will flow directly back into the neighborhood undergoing rehabilitation. Neighborhood residents may not have the skills or may not be offered the opportunity to perform these jobs. As the potential for profits in historic restoration continues to rise in D.C., more and more private firms, many based outside the District, are eyeing this section of the construction industry, lessening the potential for neighborhood workers to be hired (Cohen, 1998). Because of these factors, historic designation does not necessarily result in higher employment rates for residents of a designated neighborhood.

On the other hand, while the consistent rise in average income in both historic districts would appear to support Rypkema's theory, the income increase was seen across all neighborhoods at roughly the same rate (see Figure 2). With the income change in Columbia Heights mirroring the changes in both historic districts, one can conclude that other forces besides historic designation influenced this change. It is likely that such a general increase in average income across neighborhoods points to inflation or increased living costs experienced throughout the District as contributing factors.

Furthermore, if historic preservation were indeed the cause of increased average income, one would expect to see an inverse relationship between average income and the poverty rates of historic neighborhoods. According to the census data, however, both economic indicators ultimately exhibited increased values at the end of the study period. This is consistent with the observation put forth by the American Institute of Architects (2005) that over half of the nation's 12,500 historic districts continue to experience a poverty rate exceeding twenty percent. The increase in poverty rate in conjunction with increase in average income again supports the influence of additional economic forces and points to a lack of direct correlation between historic preservation and economic improvement.

High residential vacancy is also an indicator of economic distress in Washington, D.C. neighborhoods and is often considered connected with higher crime rates (Rubin, 2002). After the riots of 1968 a significant percentage of housing in the Le Droit neighborhood was left empty and remained so for several years, as indicated in Figure 4 (Rathner, 2006). Both Anacostia and Columbia Heights likewise experienced an increase in residential vacancy due to the riots, but had recovered to near or below pre-riot rates by 2000 (Figure 4). For historic preservation efforts to be considered successful, as defined in this paper—the district experiencing an increase in average income and homeownership rate coupled with a decrease in unemployment, poverty, and residential vacancy rates—we would need to see a far more significant decrease in vacancy rates in the two historic districts when compared with Columbia Heights. The data, however, show that the three districts exhibit different patterns of change in vacancy rates over the period examined, with the oldest historic district showing the highest vacancy rate by the end of the examination period. The lack of a discernible pattern suggests that residential vacancy rate, like average

income and poverty rate, is likely more dependent on other neighborhood-specific conditions, such as changing access to public transportation.

Homeownership² is yet another indicator of the effectiveness of historic preservation in revitalizing and stabilizing a neighborhood, and in this case, appears to be one indicator that points to the success of historic preservation as an economic strategy. Both Anacostia and Le Droit Park saw significant jumps in homeownership rates in the ten years following their initial inclusion on the list of Historic Places, and, when compared with rates in Columbia Heights, they maintained relatively high ownership rates for the duration of the period examined. The initial jump in homeownership experienced in the historic districts reflects what Leichenko et al. (2001) attribute to an increase in the desirability of these neighborhoods as a result of designation. Some new residents may be attracted to the area because they see the neighborhood's designation as affirmation that the area is worthy of preservation and as evidence that it has "character." Others are drawn because housing prices in neighborhoods that are in need of revitalization tend to be low and housing is thus affordable. Outsiders moving in often raise homeownership rates and property values, making it impossible for a neighborhood's original residents to continue to afford to live in the area. This shift is often seen as a sign of gentrification (Rubin, 2002).

One would assume, then, that historic preservation would exacerbate the pressures of gentrification and ensure a more consistent landscape in future years (Rypkema, 2003). However, this is not the case in Washington, D.C. If one examines Rubin's (2002) Gentrification Cluster Index,³ it quickly becomes evident that this assumed link does not really exist. In fact, Columbia Heights, the non-historic district, shows a higher rate of gentrification (ranked at 3.8) than the Anacostia neighborhood (ranked at 2.7).

There are several reasons why Columbia Heights is feeling more pressure to gentrify than Anacostia. First, Anacostia is located in the poorest quadrant of the city and has a historic record of providing housing primarily for working-class African Americans. This reputation, coupled with high crime rates, has detoured many away from visiting, let alone living in, the area. Columbia Heights, on the other hand, is experiencing rapid gentrification in part because of its proximity to business districts in D.C. and its lower housing prices. Also, neighborhoods with high levels of renters, like Columbia Heights, are more susceptible to gentrification and resident displacement than those areas with high levels of homeownership, as the area's original renting residents are usually unable to compete with the purchasing power of potential buyers from outside the neighborhood (Rubin, 2002). With these conditions in mind, it can be concluded that historic preservation contributes to the elevation of property prices, but it is this elevation, combined with additional neighborhood qualities, that results in higher gentrification rates in a community.

Conclusions

This examination of census tract data reveals that historic designation does not automatically lead to economic revitalization, gentrification, or displacement. Instead of experiencing increases in the homeownership rate and in average income coupled with decreases in unemployment, poverty, and residential vacancy rates, the historic districts examined, according to the census data, ultimately experienced increased unemployment and poverty rates and saw little or no change in average income (the non-designated areas experienced comparable changes) and in the residential vacancy rate (as revealed by inconsistent changes in residential vacancy rates across neighborhoods). Homeownership was the only indicator that pointed to neighborhood improvement. In total, this evidence supports the lack of a direct correlation between historic preservation and economic improvement.

The high levels of homeownership, however, do support an indirect connection between the historic designation of an economically depressed neighborhood and its subsequent economic improvement. The evidence points to the possibility that historic status increases the desirability of property and thus has an

indirect effect on homeownership rates. This relationship cannot be called a direct correlation, as evidence suggests that it is low purchase price and other location or transportation factors combined with historic status that attract people to live in these areas. Further examination of additional economic indicators may yield more conclusive connections between historic designation and economic improvement. In addition, a broader sampling of historic districts in Washington, D.C. could help determine the extent to which these relationships can be generalized or are dependent on the unique locations, economies, and social situations of the selected neighborhoods.

While the five indicators examined here reveal that historic preservation is not a significantly effective revitalization strategy, I believe that changes in preservation policy and enforcement that address the economic needs of a neighborhood's original residents could boost its potential. One policy suggestion is to use a tiered approach in designating landmarks and districts (Listokin et. al, 1998). In this approach, restrictions on alterations are graded to match the assigned level of historic significance (with greater restriction in allowed alterations to homes coming with increased historic significance). I feel that this approach is especially appropriate to Washington, D.C. because of the great population increase it is experiencing at present. If the city wants to accommodate this influx while retaining the historic character of its neighborhoods, there must be flexibility built into the system. If the system remains too rigid, more incoming residents will buy homes in surrounding Virginia or Maryland because of their affordability, with D.C. losing the potential tax revenue.

Another policy implementation is already moving through the approval process in local government. The legislation is to create a District-specific Historic Tax Credit through which "eligible homeowners can receive up to a \$25,000 reduction in taxes for substantial renovation of an owner-occupied unit" (Historic Preservation Element, 2002). When people live in homes that they own in historic districts, they are more likely to invest the time and money to preserve them in accordance with preservation law than if they own a home but live elsewhere or are renters in the neighborhood. The act provides credit for homeowners in ten of the more economically depressed historic neighborhoods, provided that the homeowner's income is less than 120% of the median income as designated by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (Lipman, 2004). Hopefully, implementation of this policy will help make the price of homeownership and maintenance in historic districts more affordable and encourage higher rates of homeownership for the original residents of a historic neighborhood (Historic Preservation Element, 2002).

These two policy changes offer great potential for the growth of historic preservation as an economic revitalization strategy in District neighborhoods. Such developments would not only continue to promote the popularity of historic preservation for economic gain, but also would reinforce the primary motivation for historic preservation in Washington, D.C. and around the nation: to preserve the cultural, architectural, intellectual, and artistic past of the United States. The preservation of our national heritage must always be weighed at least as heavily as economic gain. The ideal situation would be one in which the needs for preservation encourage economic benefit, a situation made possible through creative partnerships among community members, local government, and private enterprise. In the end, neighborhoods that find protection through historic preservation are national treasures, which should be supported by all these sectors for the benefit of future generations.

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Notes

1. Gentrification is “the process of neighborhood change that results in the replacement of lower income residents with higher income residents” (Kennedy and Leonard, 2001).
2. For the purposes of this paper homeownership is limited to situations in which the owner of a house occupies his/her property.
3. This index measures the rate at which housing costs have risen to the point of pricing out many prospective homebuyers. The rate is determined by analyzing Urban Institute data collected from the D.C. Office of Tax and Revenue as well as home mortgage data collected from the federal government and mortgage lending institutions, who must report mortgage applications and transactions by Census tract (Rubin, 2002).

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