

Adaptive Reuse and Preservation of Historic Buildings makes \$ense! By Raad Ghantous

In recent months we have heard a lot said and discussed regarding the importance of sustainability and sustainable development. A goal for many worldwide, including locally here in San Clemente, who seek a balance between the health of the environment and a healthy economy. Usually the predominant vision associated with this philosophy of a sustainable future is of state of the art building utilizing energy efficient design and materials. In reality, this vision locally, is not complete unless it also considers the 80 plus years of San Clemente's built heritage that locally stands as a guiding beacon and living example of endurance and sustainability.

These historic built environments are more than simple footnotes to our common history. They help us to identify our place in the fabric of America and California. Rather than generically Southern California suburbia our historic buildings illustrate our unique character and if approached appropriately will continue to serve practical purposes and play an important part in our story.

In San Clemente's pursuit of sustainable development, we have much to gain from adaptively reusing our historic buildings. Bypassing the wasteful process of demolition and reconstruction alone sells the environmental benefits of adaptive reuse. Environmental benefits, combined with energy savings and the social advantage of recycling a valued heritage place make adaptive reuse of historic buildings an essential component of sustainable development.

We can benefit in many ways from "recycling" our historic buildings into useful structures instead of destroying them or even demeaning them through demolition by neglect. Throughout the years many people interested in restoring old buildings have asked themselves, "What would I do with it?" and some even took noble efforts to come up with answers. For example in the sixties, idealistic young people utilized many local abandoned structures across the country - old firehouses, mills, social clubs, and houses - as youth gathering and music venues. As innovative as these were and survived for a time, they were "renovation" efforts, and not adaptive reuse.

What is the difference you ask? Well in a truly adaptive reuse effort, the structure is stabilized and historic materials are saved and strengthened as much as possible, but the main idea remains to put the building back into appropriate use so that it may regain its vitality, and its place in the community.

The numerous benefits from adaptive reuse as opposed to demolition and new construction also include creating a revived sightseeing and curb side appeal, lowering total development cost and in fact leaving other sites around town available for public infill projects like public gardens and parks or little Paseos and pedestrian friendly pathways. Additionally the adaptive reuse of historical buildings and heritage sites also reduces the needs and demands for new construction materials and resources and sustains an existing footprint. After all historically appropriate materials used in a Secretary of Interior's Standards conforming adaptive reuse tend to be often "greener".

Adaptive reuse of these building in some cases also can have the additional unique benefits of providing an opportunity via the process and undertaking to educates the

community about the importance of a living and healthy local environment, shows sustainable energy and restoration practices in action and encourages people to ask questions and last but not least spotlights and displays local history and encourages residents to learn about and discuss local development as a whole and the communities desired approach to it.

So to recap, adaptive reuse is the process of transforming an unused or underused building into one that serves a new and vital use. At its most basic it converts a building from its original intended use into a more functional and timely one. Those who undertake adaptive re-use in sensitive, appropriate and approved methods usually aim to retain as much of the original layout and features of the building as possible to make its past function and form recognizable, all while having the new features compatible with the new use and yet subtle and secondary in visual importance to the original aesthetic architecture.

Why then, do we still live in risk of possibly seeing buildings be demolished or stay abandoned? Seen as eyesores rather than icons simply because of neglect?

Granted sometimes adaptive re-use can be erroneously viewed as possibly even detrimental to a community when it cannot see or understand the historic merit and value of a historic building. There are those who see new buildings as equal to progress and old ones as enemies of it. In San Clemente, however we to a great extent are a community that's more sophisticated in appreciation of our history and historic assets and our understanding of our role as stewards of both and keepers of them for our children and grandchildren. Others might raise issues about the cost of historic preservation versus new building costs as historic preservation is labor intensive and that can raise development costs. However overall usually the material costs can also be lower, as much of the building material is being reused, and the higher labor cost can be due to the fact that adaptive re-use and preservation also requires higher skilled labor earning higher salaries and fees and if available locally that same labor force will now be in a position to inject more money back into the local economy; That's right adaptive reuse and historical preservation can also be good and beneficial to local merchants in a trickle down economic way to say nothing about making the downtown and merchant areas of a community more vibrant with a mixture of building uses and activities and also help develop and sustain tourism.

Today, there are a number of incentives, primarily federal, to reuse historic buildings. Commercial property owners who choose to renovate their historic buildings and follow certain historic preservation guidelines are eligible for a federal tax credit. And in fact a small credit is even available to non-historic commercial buildings more than 50 years old too! Also, many states have given tax credits, for example New York state is even considering legislation that would provide a state income tax credit to owners who rehabilitate their historic homes. Here in San Clemente similarly owners of historical homes can even enter into a Mills Act contract with the City to alleviate some a substantial amount of property taxes due. San Clemente's own General Plan requires the City to work with interested parties and provide incentives such as parking waivers and reduced or eliminated fees to see and encourage this sort of adaptive reuse and revitalization activity of historic assets take place.

So there are many hopeful signs that in the years to come, rehabilitation of our abandoned buildings will be as commonplace as the rise of today's subdivisions.

Often adaptive re-use is the best option to pursue and advocate rather than straight out "Preservation" because communities inevitably change and often times older buildings no longer fit the original context they were intended for. Adaptive reuse is also the ultimate form of recycling, as the building materials are kept out of landfills by avoiding demolition of the historical assets, and the need for transportation of new building materials for any new construction is also minimized reducing the carbon footprint due to car and truck fumes. Just by keeping the historic building material all of these environmental impacts are lessened or eliminated and any possible toxic releases encountered because of demolition avoided.

The active use of a historical structure is key to its survival, as buildings that are vacant usually experience rapid deterioration or vandalism. Having said so, though the best examples of adaptive reuse always take into account the heritage of the structure and retain the historic features of the building that have value. Buildings should not be covered over, and made to look like a new building. Rather the adaptive reuse should recognize the past, and remove those features that have altered the original style of the building over time. When new additions are added they should be sensitive to the historic fabric and respect the history of our beloved Spanish Village, the history of the building and its site. Part of the allure of adaptive reuse is that the building has a history and is a record of the past and its reuse is a way to keep the community from looking like anyplace else or every other place in Southern California. San Clemente is unique.

Our community is a source of pride and joy for many of us and to have it be at risk of losing its uniqueness because of unchallenged attempts to approach development through standardized and generic design concepts, many of which lack character and are downright corporate looking is simply unacceptable and should not be tolerated while societal benefits as well as economic ones are possible through adaptive reuse; and with a little effort, outside the typical development formula box thinking and imagination those benefits are always possible!