

# DISCOURSE

Where Ideas Meet

## We Must Be Allowed to ‘Reimagine’ Our Past

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The community roared in disgust with cries for leadership, and with threats of boycott,” wrote the Annandale, Virginia Chamber of Commerce in 2012. “Better to ignore us than destroy our heritage and deliver a reviled project. No thanks will be forthcoming.”

If you thought those militant words might refer to something more notable than the replacement of a hamburger restaurant with a drugstore, you would be wrong. That article was written in mourning of Annandale’s old Fuddruckers, replaced by a Walgreens. The building, identified (with a bit of a stretch) as Deco, was previously the main branch of a beloved local chain of pancake houses. And before *that*, it was split between a Firestone tire dealer and Willis Esso. One Mr. Nay also did business at the property. For anybody under 30, none of this probably means a thing.

The “residents of Annandale,” which the Chamber assumes speak in one voice—today more than 50% of whom are Asian or Hispanic—likely do not know, care or mourn what used to be where the Walgreens stands. Should anybody?

### Nostalgia Has Been Winning

Too often, historic preservation plays out in this way: more a matter of personal nostalgia than a broad agreement that a building is truly significant and worth keeping. Furthermore, the validity of historic preservation in regard to commercial or retail structures has always been tenuous. In 1985, Chester Liebs wrote the landmark book “Main Street to Miracle Mile,” which— according to a blurb from the University of New Mexico library—“established the 20th century roadside landscape as a subject for serious study.” Before that, it was largely neglected, and to a great extent it still is.

Liebs identified the commercial flotsam and jetsam along American highways not as eyesores, but as a collection of unique architectural styles. And he noted that little by little, this great wayside compendium of American cultural evolution in the automobile age was being eroded. (It was still possible, even in the mid-‘80s, to drive past many Depression-era structures like early filling stations or cabin courts.) This was genuine history, and ideally, Liebs wrote in his final

chapter, we would find some way to preserve some of it—even “in situ,” such that certain corridors of highway might effectively be museums.

This has never quite happened, and when such structures *are* preserved, it is most often for two reasons. One is abandonment: Many older stretches of highway have indeed become open-air museums of American midcentury architecture, but only because they were bypassed and nobody ever tore down what was left. The other reason is that sometimes, such structures still have economic and human interest value. Frequently this means updating them, rather than preserving them as one would preserve a museum specimen—or embalm a body. Private property and land values have always determined these outcomes far more than preservation *per se*.

But the market has caught up to the reality that there *is*, in fact, some value in many such old buildings, and in the nostalgia or fascination they inspire. Decades after the hospitality industry left the old-fashioned exterior-corridor motel behind, one of the hottest trends in the industry is refurbishing historic motels with a classic, retro vibe. In fact, this trend is *au courant* enough to have served as a plotline in the popular television show “Schitt’s Creek.” These revived establishments appear everywhere from Durham, North Carolina, to Savannah, Georgia, to Bozeman, Montana. Even places with high prices and development pressure have found a way to keep some of these establishments around while, crucially, updating them for modern preferences and turning their *oldness* from a liability into a selling point.

The motel in downtown Durham, formerly the aging Jack Tar Hotel, is now called Unscripted. The exterior has been refreshed, the patio sports wintertime private igloos, and the onsite restaurant offers craft cocktails. The direct-entry rooms, once seen as shady and potentially unsafe, are once again convenient, with minimal friction required to move from indoors to out. And for today’s 20- and 30-somethings, the experience is not obsolete but new.

The classic neon signs are usually retained in these projects—Bozeman’s RSVP Motel retains its old sign even though the name has changed. These establishments are fun and often Instagram-friendly, meaning that their character is, if anything, exaggerated compared to what they looked like when first built.

### **Economic Viability Is Important Too**

This active, lively, somewhat freewheeling commercial approach to preservation might feel less appropriate in the case of, say, a church (though even there, conversions to other uses are often the only way to fund the preservation of the actual structure, which is to say turning it from a liability to an asset).

This is not the static, deferential approach many historic preservationists favor. It is, however, the surest way to turn a neatly adorned concrete box into something of value today. The stodgy manner in which a lot of people, including many preservationists, imagine the endeavor—

committees determining which shutters, which tones of paint, which minute alterations are permitted in every structure in an entire “historic district”—may work in a handful of heavily touristed gems like Old Town Alexandria. But for most places, preservation will follow from a combination of economic vitality and entrepreneurship.

In some cases, the preservation of an old structure simply can't be justified given land values. Consider that if you look at any mature city in the United States, or even many small towns, the building currently on any given lot was probably not the first building there. Gas stations become condos; strip plazas become mixed-use developments; smaller, shorter buildings give way to taller ones. This is not a *preference* for growth over stasis; it is simply the way that healthy, living settlements develop over time. Historic preservation cannot be an alternative to the way that cities work.

Former Frederick, Maryland mayor Ron Young, who oversaw much of that city's transformation from sleepy and worn-out to trendy and thriving, discussed this question regarding historic preservation in his recently published memoir. In a review of the book, Cato Institute fellow Walter Olson wrote:

Young's relations with the city's historic preservation advocates could be contentious. One such “accused me of trying to destroy Frederick. I tried to explain many times to the members of the historical society back then that we had different goals. They were trying to save two or three buildings. I was trying to save thousands. The only way to do that was to make them economically viable. To do that we might have to lose a few buildings of minor historical significance to save the majority. I think if you look at Frederick today my approach won out and was successful.”

As a fan of Frederick, I agree with the former mayor. To the question of whether we should preserve the past or accept urban growth, we can answer, why not both?

### **Mourning the ‘Passing’ of Structures**

What can be done to recognize the loss of such a minorly significant structure? Years ago, in the first piece I ever wrote on land use and development questions, I proposed “funerals” for buildings slated for demolition. I'm not the only person who's had that idea. Another, more practical possibility is to preserve some element of the original building, or at least of its design. Many developers have done something like this. An office building in the Ballston neighborhood of Arlington, Virginia, has a historical marker out front commemorating the iconic Chevrolet dealer that stood on the site for decades. More importantly, it sports an angled, wraparound blue and white awning, a near-replica of the chief design element of the old auto dealer. Most observers will wonder why an office building would have such an adornment. Those who know, know.

In another example from my own D.C.-area home, a beloved, decades-old restaurant in Wheaton, Maryland, was torn down and redeveloped into a larger shopping center. Nothing of the original structure remains, but the landmark sign, rewired to mark the new establishment, still stands. Even such a small nod might serve a fundamental emotional purpose of historic preservation: not to encase the present in amber, but to acknowledge, at least, that something meaningful came before.

But for a cool building to be reimagined, or for a historic sign to adorn a new development, development must be allowed, and growth must be embraced. Economic vitality and entrepreneurship are the best way to keep around these cherished pieces of our everyday past. And to truly preserve a place, you need it to thrive.