

TEAM PROJECT

PRESERVATION LEADERSHIP TRAINING NATCHITOCHEs, LOUISIANA JANUARY 13-20, 1996

Introduction

The Team Project gives PLT participants an opportunity to build upon their work experience and apply the lessons of PLT educational sessions in solving practical problems. Participants work with each other to seek solutions to problems facing the host city. Working in groups of seven, five separate teams will address a variety of community issues--each with a preservation element. The exercise will hone skills in teamwork, analysis, fieldwork, time management, and public speaking. During the week participants will interact with the community, local officials, civic leaders and fellow team members. The project will culminate Friday afternoon with each team making a public presentation of their observations and recommendations and will be followed by a short reception. We would like to recognize the following individuals for serving on a local advisory committee which helped develop the Team Project for Natchitoches.

Mr. Raymond Arthur, Chair, Natchitoches Parish Tourist Commission
Mr. Robert DeBlieux, President, Natchitoches Historic Foundation, Inc.
Ms. Myrna Dunn, Manager, Natchitoches Main Street Project
Ms. Sharon Gahagan, Chair, Natchitoches Historic District Commission
Ms. Fran Gale, Director of Training, National Center for Preservation Technology and Training
Ms. Carolyn Harrington, Director, Natchitoches Courthouse Museum
Ms. Saidee Newell, Secretary, Louisiana Preservation Alliance
Mr. John Robbins, Executive Director, National Center for Preservation Technology & Training
Ms. Maxine Southerland, President, Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches

History

Natchitoches is the oldest city in Louisiana and the oldest settlement in the Louisiana Purchase. In 1714 Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, a French-Canadian adventurer, founded Natchitoches as a military and trading post to forestall Spanish occupation of the area. From its founding to well into the 19th century, Natchitoches served as a prosperous cotton port. Its commercial importance declined after 1832 when the Red River, then its main transportation artery, changed course five miles to the east.

Between the Civil War and World War II, Natchitoches remained in an agriculturally based economy, punctuated by the establishment of Northwestern State Normal School which served as Louisiana's primary teaching college for many years. After World War II, the city sought and acquired diversified industry to complement its agricultural base of cotton, soybeans, pecans and beef cattle. Today's industrial activity includes cotton processing, plywood production, and the manufacture of brick and tile. Northwestern State University (NSU), the Louisiana School (for gifted high school juniors and seniors-enrollment 400), and a U.S. fish hatchery are also major employers located in Natchitoches.

Today

In the past twenty years, though particularly in the last decade, Natchitoches has discovered heritage tourism as a new economic stimulus for the city. Colonial period architecture and antebellum plantations (Cherokee, Melrose, and others) that line Cane River Lake are major tourist attractions. Natchitoches is a "Main Street" town which includes a 33-block National Historic Landmark district that boasts vital commercial and professional businesses and serves as a beautiful backdrop to the annual Christmas Festival of Lights. Annual tourist visitation to this community of only 17,000 totals more than 100,000. In 1994, Natchitoches and NSU became home to the National Park Service's National Center for Preservation Technology and Training. Already, people from across the country are coming to Natchitoches to study at the Center and explore a city with a long history of preserving its architectural heritage.

The city's appreciation for heritage tourism dollars and the presence of the Center have helped heighten awareness about the positive impacts of historic preservation. Natchitoches adopted a local preservation ordinance in 1977, and there are two active, nonprofit preservation organizations: the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches and the Natchitoches Historic Foundation. Both organizations are actively involved in advocating for historic preservation and both host tours which kindle further tourism investment in the city.

Issues

All of this is welcome news, of course, but already the city is experiencing some of the problems associated with being a "college town" and boasting tourism as a major economic engine: traffic, parking, property values and sprawl. Within the past five years, the impact of 100,000 annual visitors has intensified stress on the city's infrastructure and increased the city's scale of problems. At the same time, local denizens, Northwestern State's student body (approx. 6000), and the LA School students are not using downtown to its fullest potential. Opportunities to use upper floors of commercial property for student housing, or to tap students' buying power in retail stores are being missed. Furthermore, students and city residents are attracted to the east side of Natchitoches for their shopping needs. The downtown historic district does remain viable with banking, government offices, restaurants and some shops, but most of the retail market is on the other side of the Cane River in shopping malls and strip centers. Tourists make good use of downtown, but the user audience could be expanded.

Downtown cannot (and perhaps should not) compete head-on with shopping malls, but it offers many compelling projects, including the Natchitoches Parish Old Courthouse Museum, the Nakatosh Hotel and Amusu Theater, and a proposed conference center. However, as emphasis is placed on developing the city's perimeters, the central core merely becomes an area to be skirted going back and forth across the Cane River. Consequently, east-west traffic in Natchitoches (especially at the intersection of Keyser Avenue and Jefferson Street) can be dreadful and downtown growth remains static.

Much of the fringe area between NSU and the historic district also lays fallow -- waiting for investment and a comprehensive use plan. Visitors coming to Natchitoches from Interstate 49 must travel through this fringe area before going downtown. As it is now, this fringe area is not the best introduction to what lies beyond: modest residential housing; three cemeteries; minimal tourist and directional signage; a few franchise-type businesses; and several vacant parcels occupy this part of Natchitoches. Nearby, the city's old train depot is vacant and waiting for a some adaptive use.

Below are the team topics proposed to address these issues.

1. White Elephants--what can be done with downtown's vacant historic buildings?

The old train depot, the Nakatosh Hotel and Amusu Theater, and the old Courthouse* are landmark buildings with great potential. However, in their current states, the future of each is uncertain. In consideration of their location, their condition, their ownership, and their past uses, what are some plausible adaptive uses for these historic buildings? Identify potential sources of funding that can be pursued for any of these projects. What incentives should be offered to spur reinvestment in these resources? How can the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches and the Natchitoches Historic Foundation, Inc. coordinate efforts to protect these buildings and identify sympathetic owners/developers? Is the current preservation ordinance adequate in its requirements for minimum maintenance of historic buildings? If not, what recommendations would you suggest to update and enforce the ordinance?

*The old Courthouse is the new home to a local museum, but not all of its space is currently being used. What are some suggested temporary uses that will bring foot traffic to the building but not inhibit the growth of the museum?

2. Transportation--can transportation plans respect the historic district?

Natchitoches' uniqueness lies in its built and physical environments. Evaluate the degree to which the setting (historic buildings, scale, layout, etc.) supports the economic health of downtown. Traffic patterns in Natchitoches have dramatically changed in the past ten years--due in large part to the development of strip shopping malls on the east side of the Cane River and the growth of Northwestern State University on the west side of the river. The principal east-west traffic route in Natchitoches is across the two-lane Keyser Avenue Bridge. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) has recommended replacing the existing bridge with a five-lane structure. What would be the impact of such a five-lane bridge on the Natchitoches National Historic Landmark District? Will the introduction of a new bridge solve transportation problems or simply move the bottleneck?

What elements should be of primary consideration if the city were to develop an overall transportation plan? Is tourist bus traffic too intrusive? If tourist traffic is only a seasonal problem, what measures can be taken to provide temporary or seasonal relief? Is parking for residents and tourists adequate?

Are noise pollution and vibration having a deleterious effect on the historic district? What is the visitor's first impression of Natchitoches when arriving from I-49 and how can it be improved? What is the best location for the visitor's center? Is there adequate tourist information signage?

3. Conference Center--location, location, location?

Natchitoches, with its growing tourism enterprises, is considering the construction of a conference center in downtown. How do local leaders define "conference center"? It is said that the proposed conference center is "common knowledge" in the community. Has the public been involved in the planning phase? Natchitoches' cannot compete with the convention business of New Orleans or Dallas, but there are many smaller meetings and conferences which the City could manage. Conference business would attract more visitors to the historic district and require a conference-size hotel to locate downtown. What are the pros and cons of a conference center? What preservation issues must be resolved before proceeding with such a project? If such a center were to be located downtown, would the current preservation ordinance ensure that its location, siting, height, setback, design, scale and massing would be sensitive to the historic district? If not, what recommendations would you make to update the ordinance? Would some site locations threaten historic resources? Could historic buildings be relocated?

4. Living on the Edge--what to do with the fringe areas just outside the historic district?

The area that runs along both sides of College Avenue from Second Street (east); Martin Luther King Jr. Drive (west); and Bossier Street (north) is a transition area with development potential. The area could thrive off nearby Northwestern State University by offering affordable housing and services (laundromats, copy centers, mini-marts, cafes, etc) to students and college personnel. What do neighborhood residents want? What do the students want? What are the strengths of the area that should be touted? What weaknesses should be remedied? What is the city's role in the development and conservation of this area? Identify regulations and incentives which would protect residential community character and preserve historic buildings. What are some suggestions for using or "dressing up" vacant lots? Identify opportunities for affordable housing. Immediately outside the defined fringe area are three cemeteries: American, Jewish, and Catholic. What can be done to protect and enhance the cemeteries (currently they are receiving only basic minimum maintenance)? What are the benefits/detriments of having a cemetery in a neighborhood?

5. What We Need Is a Plan--how should the City plan for development in the historic district?

The Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches, the Historic Natchitoches Foundation, and the Natchitoches Historic District Commission have been extinguishing preservation "fires" for years. Issues and problems arise and troops are banded to fight for the protection of a particular historic building or against the construction of a particular bridge.

Fighting spot problems drains energy and resources, and often hurts the credibility of preservationists with local leaders and developers who feel hampered in their efforts to invest in the historic district. The City of Natchitoches has committed \$50,000 toward the development of a comprehensive preservation plan for the downtown historic district. What should be the major elements of such a plan? What are Natchitoches' most defining characteristics that should lead the discussion of a plan? Are the current historic district boundaries adequate? Should they be enlarged? Are there areas which would make good conservation districts as opposed to more restrictive preservation districts? Is there enough flexibility in the ordinance to allow for sensitive new development?

The White Elephants of Nachitoches

“Few people are blessed with the ability to see what was and imaging what could be.”
- *“The Economics of Preservation,” Donovan Rypkema*

Team Participants:
Stella Gray Bryant
Joan Gould
Will James
Alicia Lay Leuba
Jane Lendway
Linda Swor
Jack Thompson

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Nakatosh Hotel and Amusu Theater

The private investment in the historic community of Natchitoches, Louisiana is evident from the rehabilitation of commercial buildings, homes and surrounding plantations to the endeavors of the two local nonprofit organizations, the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches and the Natchitoches Historic Foundation, Inc. Significant amounts of private dollars have been invested in rehabilitation efforts which in turn have had a positive economic impact realized in increased tourism. Residents, too, enjoy the sense of place and connection to the past that the architecture of this first, permanent Louisiana Purchase settlement provides.

But several buildings in the downtown stand vacant, and have had no use or economic benefit for decades. In the meantime, growth is spreading on the east side of the river and is almost inevitable around the I-49 interchange. Market forces, changing consumer habits and transportation policies have been the major cause of this imbalance between downtown and suburban development. Without intervention, the downtown will most likely continue to decline while sprawl surrounds the historic district and uses up land, depriving future generations of not only their heritage but also their choice of what *their* community will be like.

Can the city afford to sit back and watch this happen? No. Does the city have a fiscal responsibility to guide growth in a manner that protects the safety, health, welfare and quality of life of its citizens? Yes. Does it also have the fiscal responsibility to protect the community investment in the historic district that is so readily apparent? Absolutely. While decline and vacant buildings don't happen overnight, neither do their resurrections. But the city must assume a leadership role in cooperation with the private sector and local nonprofits - who already have a tremendous track record in reinvestment in the historic district - to begin the long process of revitalization. As public funds grow scarcer, spending must grow wiser. The era of federal grants and legislative appropriations is over while the era of partnerships has arrived.

The Nakatosh Hotel and Amusu Theater, located on Front Street, are both listed in the National Register of Historic Places. They reflect the early twentieth century period in Natchitoches' history, just as the railroad depot does. Their scale, materials and rhythm of openings contribute to the variety of the streetscape, and provide a strong anchor to a key intersection in downtown.

The feasibility of the re-use of the hotel and theater as a hotel - or any other use for that matter - is undeterminable because the facts about the cost of rehabilitation are unknown and the market demand is unknown. In the meantime, the city should move immediately to officially protect the buildings from demolition. Once a building is demolished, all options for its re-use are gone.

While heritage tourism is the fastest growing segment in the tourism industry nationally, and tourism in Natchitoches has shown some increase, that doesn't mean that tourism will continue to grow in Natchitoches, or that travelers will stay in a downtown hotel often enough for the hotel to pay for itself. Competition for tourism dollars is heating up. Without a comprehensive marketing study to examine tourism and other compatible economic development strategies - mixed uses spread both the benefits and the exposure - the future will be anyone's guess. But it is worth examining. The unusual regional architecture has been the city's most tangible asset in drawing tourists interested in history and culture. Moreover, across the country,

the League of Cities has found that downtown redevelopment is the area in which cities experience the greatest economic development success. This is time and money well spent.

The city's role in most downtown "white elephant" projects is to help bridge the gap between cost and value. If an investment's value exceeds its cost, the private sector will act on it. However, when a gap does exist and the "white elephant" has historic value to the community, some public investment in the property is reasonable, because in the long run the public benefits from downtown revitalization. Partnerships with the local non-profits are important because almost all historic preservation incentives have been established to bridge the gap in rehabilitation projects. A combination of incentives is often the norm. Some of the incentives that are available for rehab projects are:

1. Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit (20% tax credit on cost of rehabilitation of income-producing National Register property; may be syndicated in a limited partnership for equity). Contact State Historic Preservation Office for further information *in advance of project*.
2. NPLF (National Preservation Loan Fund by the National Trust for Historic Preservation): borrow up to \$200,000 to establish revolving loan fund; loan applicant could be City of Natchitoches or either local historic preservation organization.
3. Enterprise Zone/Natchitoches: rebates sales tax on construction materials within a ten year period.
4. Community Development Block Grant: seed money from city to developer for low interest, long term loan; developer repays loan to city which becomes seed money for a downtown revolving loan fund or facade loan/grant program. Project must demonstrate benefit to low or moderate income residents in community, often through jobs that are created. Contact state community affairs office.
5. Impact fees for new development. Gives the city the option and flexibility to step in and purchase options on properties on the market to link the property with the best buyer according to the city's land use masterplan and downtown development strategy.
6. Tax increment financing: a tool to relieve property tax. For further information, contact State Historic Preservation Office.

In considering uses for the buildings once potential markets have been identified, reusing them for their original function is generally the least expensive option. Flexibility in considering uses is essential. Some options to consider might be:

1. Hotel
2. Residential condominiums
3. Offices or office condominiums
4. Luxury retirement complex
5. In all cases, the two original retail spaces should be for retail uses identified through market analysis as being likely to succeed in downtown Natchitoches.

In conjunction with the hotel's development, the potential uses of the Amusu Theater include:

1. Movie/play house, provided stage is adaptable
2. Restaurant
3. Jazz club
4. Exhibit space

Recommendations:

1. City should officially protect buildings from demolition; no demolitions should be allowed until full architectural plans and financing are in place for new construction on the site.
2. Both local historic preservation non-profits should show support for the preservation of the hotel, theater, railroad depot and courthouse
3. The Natchitoches Historic Preservation Ordinance should be amended to include protection from demolition by neglect.
4. The City should contact the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office about becoming a Certified Local Government, which may provide technical assistance, training and small planning grants, and about any other programs that might benefit the city.
5. The Historic District Commission or the Natchitoches Main Street Program should contact the State Historic Preservation Office to obtain a list of architects with experience in historic rehabilitation projects and encourage developers of any rehab projects to hire this expertise.
6. City officials and local leaders should read The Economic Benefits of Rehabilitation, by Donovan Rypkema, 1995, available through the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
7. The Natchitoches Main Street Program should hire the National Main Street Center to teach market analysis to local business owners.

Case Study: Windsor Hotel, Americus, Georgia

In Americus, Georgia, town about the size of Natchitoches, the Windsor Hotel re-opened its doors in 1991 after several decades of vacancy. Local residents led the 10-year initiative to save the building and eventually invested in it themselves. Today it maintains an 80% occupancy rate and is the focal point of a thriving downtown. The following article describes the project and the issues in Americus that are similar to those in Natchitoches.

