From Good Looks to Substance: Savannah's Numerous Attempts at Self-preservation

Udo Greinacher
Associate Professor, University of Cincinnati
udo.greinacher@uc.edu

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Background

For over a century, most of the American populace turned its back on the city while searching for a simpler, more harmonious style of life. According to Nancy Stieber,[1] "the desire to fashion a retreat from the unruly world of power and gain" drove many from the city proper to its outskirts, where they sought tranquility in a natural setting. As planners, architects, and developers expanded the metropolitan envelope further and further into rural areas, they created the almost seamless sprawl that characterizes the contemporary American landscape.

Initially, this practice led to low-density suburbs with ample open space, little traffic, and unimpaired vistas. These very amenities, however, evaporated as more and more people left the city in pursuit of a better life. Once an area had been developed to 70 percent of its capacity, residents once again experienced crowded and congested neighborhoods, limited opportunities for their children, and many of the vices traditionally associated with urban centers. As a result, the cycle of flight, renewal, and decline would likely begin again in a yet more remote location.

Continued urban flight has led to the deterioration of many city centers. The farther away people have moved, the less frequently they come downtown. Family-owned businesses and department stores have closed or have been replaced by chains. Those cities who have failed to attract franchises to fill the void have experienced a decline in their tax base and a deterioration of their infrastructure. Communal costs have also risen due to the decrease in population.

In spite of this neglect, downtowns still possess valuable utilities, infrastructure, and cultural institutions that are costly to recreate elsewhere. They offer historical, cultural, educational, and nostalgic associations that most suburban communities have been unable to acquire. For this reason, there has been a renewed interest in the urban core. In the mid-size city of Savannah, Georgia, urban design professionals and city managers have teamed up with public and private institutions to reclaim the entire historic district for new uses. The following case study analyzes three different strategies for revitalization used in Savannah and discusses their advantages and liabilities.

Rise and Fall

Undoubtedly, the unique layout of Savannah's historic downtown[2] is the city's biggest asset. Its plan, drawn up by James Oglethorpe in 1733, organized the town into a series of neighborhoods, each based around a central square. The original layout contained six such wards with 40 houses each. The profits from trade and cotton farming helped transform the original settlement into a city rich in culture and architecture. Oglethorpe's layout remained intact as the city expanded,

1 Nancy Stieber, "The Seductions of Withdrawal," December 1995, quoted in William Fulton, *The New Urbanism* (Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. 1996), 7.

2 Oglethorpe's layout is based in part on Richard Newcourt's plan for the rebuilding of London after the devastating fire of 1666.

consistently following the original plan and increasing the number of squares and wards to twenty-four. Each square reserved two sides for churches, stores, places of assembly or other public functions[3], a unique feature that gave each ward its distinct character. This approach, creating incremental growth through the repetitive addition of large-scale units, came to an end in 1856. From this point, the city increased its footprint by extending the street grid without the communal squares.

The prohibition of slavery and the ensuing Civil War dealt a severe blow to Savannah's economy during the latter half of the 19th century. Cotton remained the city's lifeline until 1920, when the boll weevil laid waste to half of Georgia's cotton. New industries, mainly paper production, took its place. During World War II more and more heavy industry was added upriver, enticing people to settle further away from the historic downtown. By 1950 the city was in a state of decline. Over a quarter of the white population had abandoned the downtown in search of the suburban dream: a ranch house with two cars in the garage. Formerly grand residences were subdivided into apartments and left to deteriorate by absentee landlords. Shops and offices followed white residents to greener pastures at the city's outskirts, leaving the downtown streets lined with boarded up buildings and storefronts. According to Georgia Fawcett, a longtime Savannah preservationist, "the old part of town had become a slum. ... The banks had red-lined the whole area. The great old houses were falling into ruin or being demolished to make way for gas stations and parking lots."[4]

The automobile played a large role in the destruction of Savannah's historic fabric. Already in 1935, the three squares along Montgomery Street were demolished to allow motorists easy access to the waterfront.[5] U.S. Highway 17 cut right through the squares and reduced them to narrow, greened traffic islands. Years later, in 1954, the city market and the adjacent Ellis Square were leveled to make room for a city-owned parking garage. The following year, the much admired yet dilapidated Isaiah Davenport House was scheduled for demolition to make space for a funeral home parking lot.

Pitfalls of Preservation

To prevent further destruction of Savannah's historic substance, seven feisty elderly women joined forces and raised $ 22,500 overnight in order to buy the Davenport House. Later that year they formalized their partnership as the Historic Savannah Foundation (HSF). In 1966, largely due to their efforts, much of the old city center was designated a Registered National Historic Landmark. More than 2,300 historically significant buildings received this designation; they occupied a 2.5 square mile area in the heart of the city. As a nonprofit entity, HSF used a revolving fund sustained by donations to acquire endangered properties of historic significance. They then marketed the properties and sold them with restrictive covenants requiring prompt authentic restoration and ongoing maintenance. During the next three decades, more than 800 properties were restored to their former glory. The ongoing preservation efforts convinced the city government that it would be possible to restore the historic downtown to something akin to its former glory.

The rehabilitation efforts of the 1950s and 1960s, however, were not without social consequences. The substantial capital needed to sustain a historic home led to the displacement of numerous low-income African-American residents. They were too poor to pay for the additional maintenance that was required by law after their houses became part of the historic register.[6] Unable to qualify for construction loans or pay the city-levied fines, many residents were

3 John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 187 ff.

4 John Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (New York: Random House, 1994), 5.

5 Nathaniel Robert, "Savannah's Lost Squares," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians.* 70, 4 (December 2011), 512-531.

6 Alexander Garvin, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 294.

ultimately forced to sell their houses. The HSF bought the properties and resold them to "responsible owners who agreed to restore and maintain them."[7] Other residents left because they could no longer afford the higher rents commanded by already restored properties. Between 1970 and 1980, almost two thirds of the African-American population left their neighborhood around Chatham and Pulaski Squares for cheaper lodgings further south. At the same time, properties listed on the National Register appreciated tremendously in value - from 279% south of Liberty to 603% in the North Historic District[8] - thus increasing the property tax burden beyond the manageable for many of the remaining owners on a fixed income. This increased the pressure for many residents to leave the district and resulted in a gentrified Downtown Historic District whose population was more than 80% white.[9]

Despite the negative impact of historic preservation on the African-American community, the city placed an adjacent area - the Savannah Victorian District - on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Considered to be Savannah's first suburb, the area was home to numerous wood-frame houses built between 1870 and 1910 in both the Victorian and Queen Anne styles. Shortly after it received its designation, Leopold Adler, an investment banker who had been involved with HSF, began working on a plan to avoid the displacement of low income families that typically goes hand in hand with preservation. In 1975 he founded the Savannah Landmark Rehabilitation Project (SLRP) "to preserve the neighborhood's racial and economic mix and provide the benefits of preservation for the rich and the poor."[10] SLRP used a combination of grants, charitable contributions, and loans from public and private institutions to fund construction mortgages for homeowners. Although his 15-year-long efforts saw the rehabilitation of over 300 housing units and the construction of 44 infill units, the Victorian District remained riddled with vacant and dilapidated structures. Nevertheless, the project was heralded as "among the most innovative in the United States, one of the first preservation projects to work at such a scale,"[11] and in 1982 it triggered the extension of the historically protected area by about 25%. Today, the Victorian District appears to have stabilized its demographics and continues to house a mostly African-American population. Given the low average family income, close to the poverty level, it remains questionable whether the *status quo* will hold. In the long run, a tightening housing market and the influx of younger, wealthier households could transform the Victorian District into "the charming, well-maintained neighborhood preservationists envisioned in the 1970s and 1980s - occupied, however, by a very different population."[12]

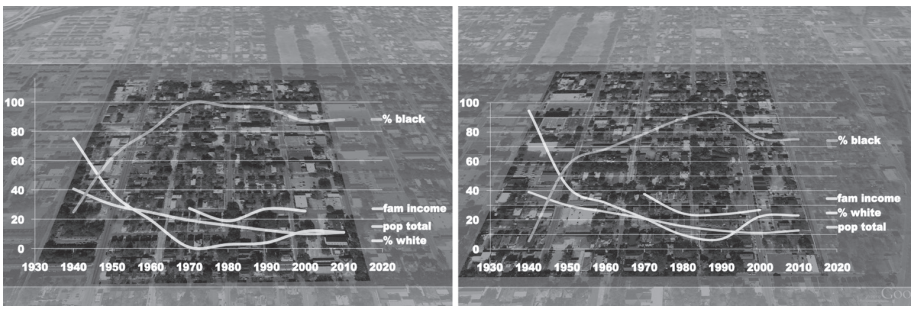

Fig.1: The Victorian District

7 Ibid., 292.

8 "Profiting from the Past: The Economic Impact of Historic Preservation in Georgia," *Government Finance Review*, (April 2000), 39.

9 See census tracks 3, 8, 9.

10 Robert Samuel Hodder as quoted in "Urban Studies in Savannah: Historic Preservation and Gentrification in Savannah," accessed 14 December, 2011, http://savannahurbanstudies.blogspot.com/2008/04/historic-preservation-and.html.

11 Stepanie Churchill, executive director of the Historic Savannah Foundation, as quoted by Joseph Giovanni in "A Neighborhood Is Renewed While Its Residents Stay Put," *New York Times*, 21 July, 1988.

12 Garvin, *The American City*, 294.

Tourism as Industry

The automobile that had once threatened the integrity of Savannah's historic district eventually facilitated the rise of Savannah's tourist industry. Earlier it had created a need for roads and parking structures that had led to demolition, and it had allowed an ease of commute from outlying areas that had hastened the city's depopulation. Over time the culture of the automobile spurred the growth of the travel industry, and historic sites became popular tourist attractions. The continued efforts by preservationists set the stage for Savannah's transformation from an industrial harbor town into a national tourist destination. While applying for historic status, the preservationists had created an inventory of all the historic properties. The huge number of historic buildings revealed by this inventory, with the conversion of houses into museums, and the HSF's active role in promoting the entire district helped catapult Savannah right behind Charleston on the list of America's historic gems. Their efforts paid off; tourists visiting Savannah increased their spending from $1 million in 1962 to $75 million in 1977.[13]

Savannah's historic neighborhoods and Southern charm also attracted Hollywood's attention. Since 1975 over 40 movies have been shot in its preserved historic district, one of the largest and most intact in the nation. Thrillers like *Cape Fear* [1962 / 1991], *City of the Living Dead* [1980], and *Slayer* [1980] have used the city's cobblestone squares and trees dripping with Spanish moss to create a threatening background. Unfortunately, in spite of the free advertising the city received by being featured in horror movies, its historic district continued to decline during the recession of the late 1970s and early 80s.[14] Many tourists visited the city, but they did not bring in enough revenue to halt the deterioration. Family incomes remained flat or declined due to inflation, and the cost of historic maintenance increased. As a result, the historic district saw a continued double-digit exodus.

The Best Seller as Change Agent

A scandal involving one of the preservation movement's main figures indirectly led to a turnaround in the city's fortunes. Jim Williams had worked side by side with the Historic Savannah Foundation ladies, who were credited with singlehandedly saving the Davenport House. He was personally responsible for the careful restoration of more than fifty historic houses in Savannah over several decades, but was rarely mentioned due to his sexual orientation. In 1981 he was arrested for the shooting death of Danny Hansford, Savannah's most popular male escort of the late 1970s and early '80s. The author John Berendt came to Savannah to look into the story and decided to stay after succumbing to the city's charm. In 1994 Berendt published *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. In this book, he described the colorful characters and rascals that prowled Savannah in the eight years it was his home-away-from-home: "the well-bred society ladies of the Married Woman's Card Club; the turbulent young redneck gigolo; the hapless recluse who owns a bottle of poison so powerful it could kill every man, woman, and child in Savannah; the aging and profane Southern belle who is the 'soul of pampered self-absorption'; the uproariously funny black drag queen; the acerbic and arrogant antiques dealer; the sweet-talking, piano-playing con artist; young blacks dancing the minuet at the black debutante ball; and Minerva, the voodoo priestess who works her magic in the graveyard at midnight."[15]

According to Edmund White, a writer and cultural critic, "the book has everything going for it - snobbism, ruthless power, voodoo, local color, and a totally evil estheticism."[16] It is

13 Hunter S. Edwards, "The Guide for Future Preservation in Historic Districts Using a Creative Approach: Charleston, South Carolina's Contextual Approach to Historic Preservation,"*University of Florida J Law Public Policy* 20, 2 (August 2009), 225.

14 According to Ms. Thomas, a local real estate broker, "in the 1980s we thought this city – the historic district – wouldn't survive." "Arts College helps Revive Savannah's Downtown," *New York Times*, 7 February, 1999.

15 John Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (New York: Random House, 1994), inside flap.

16 See review by Edmund White on http://www.amazon.com/.

not surprising that this combination gained "The Book" enormous popularity; it set a record for nonfiction on the New York Times bestseller list at 219 weeks.[17] References to "The Book" appear all over Savannah: gift shops display autographed copies in their windows; its cover illustration appears on countless T-shirts; and locations mentioned in the book figure prominently on guided tours. Tourists can buy "Midnight" cookies (with a tart key-lime taste) and a "Midnight" newsletter for $4.[18]

"The Book's" popularity increased Savannah's tourism by 50 percent, with an estimated three million visitors spending over one billion dollars annually. Berendt described the local characters and the beauty of the city so well that his book has been given credit for helping transform the seedy historic district into a glamorous tourist attraction. Its burnished image has enticed new and better restaurants and more sophisticated shops, and has generated over 20,000 tourism-related jobs.[19] Savannah has acknowledged the impact that the publication has had on the city's wellbeing by naming a square after the author[20] and offering him the keys to the city.

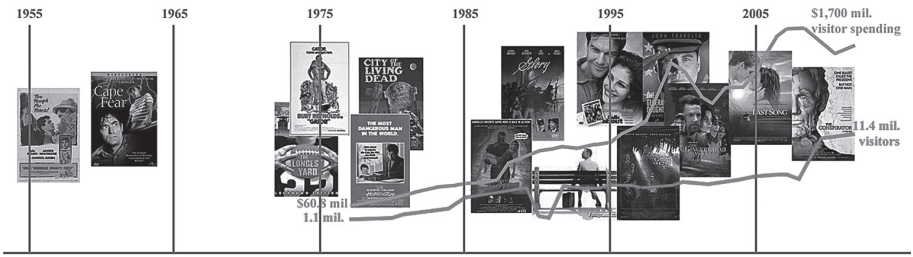

Fig. 2: Film and Tourism

From Heritage to Film Tourism

Curiosity about the settings of "The Book" and its subsequent movie, as well as the growing interest in heritage tourism, hastened an increase in the number of Savannah's visitors - from 2 million in 1981 to over 5 million by 1990. The rise of film tourism, however, led to unforeseen explosive growth in the tourist industry; the number of visitors increased from 5 million to a record 11 million two decades later. Heritage tourism had previously been the gold standard. Heritage travelers outspent the average tourist by staying longer and preferring hotels to private homes.[21] Film tourism, however, is believed to have distinct advantages over heritage tourism. It is an all-year, all-weather activity and, due to its wide socioeconomic appeal, covers a much larger social and educational spectrum than heritage tourism.[22] Furthermore, films often have a lasting impact on the economy. Although they generate the most interest right after their release, studies

17 Melinda Kanner, "Savannah after midnight," *The Gay & Lesbian Review* 9, 3 (1 May 2002).

18 *St. Louis Post*, 15 August, 1997.

19 Steve Hendrix, "Savannah after midnight," *Washington Post*, 10 December, 2000.

20 In 1996, the mayor of Savannah announced a John Berendt Day and temporarily named a main square after him. *Daily Telegraph*, 4 April, 1998.

21 According to a 1997 report by the Travel Industry Association of America, heritage travelers are a little older and more likely to have a postgraduate degree, they tend to take longer trips (staying 5.2 nights versus 3.3 nights for the average traveler), spend more money, participate in more activities, and stay more often in hotels, motels, and bed and breakfasts than in private homes. They also are more likely to fly to their destinations and shop when they get there. Altogether, heritage tourists spend an average of $688 per trip compared to the average $425 of other United States travelers. J. Leihthe and P. Tigue, "Profiting from the Past: The Economic Impact of Historic Preservation in Georgia," *Government Finance Review,* April 2000, 39-40.

22 S. Hudson and P. Richie, "Promoting Destinations via Film Tourism: An Empirical Identification of Supporting Marketing Initiatives," *Journal of Travel Research* 44 (2006), 388.

suggest that the number of visitors interested in a film's setting increases by over 50% during the five years after its premiere.[23]

Savannah, which originally established itself as a 'film tourism' destination through the Oscar-winning films *Glory* [1989] and *Forrest Gump* [1994] - the latter said to have singlehandedly increased tourism by seven percent[24] - has continued to attract great numbers of visitors. "Just as Hollywood's treatment of best-sellers sent visitors trekking to a far-flung corner of Iowa to see a baseball field of dreams, … they find themselves drawn to Savannah after her starring role in the film version of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*."[25] Movie tours, ranging from $25 for 90 minutes to $253 for four- hours tour showcase "where Forrest Gump sat on a bench, Paula Deen's Lady & Son's, Clary's Cafe, Leopold's Ice-Cream, the Mercer House (from *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*), the Six Pence Pub (from *Something to Talk About*), to name a few."[26]

Hollywood's contribution to Savannah goes beyond supplying actors and film crews. The distinctive gazebo on Whitefield Square that adds to the Victorian charm of the area is a set piece donated by Burt Reynolds after filming *Gator* in 1975. Forrest Gump's Bench was never located in Chippewa Square. It, too, was a prop, made of fiberglass that returned to a Hollywood warehouse after the filming was completed. After numerous inquiries and complaints, the bench used in the movie was re-acquisitioned for the Visitor's Center. Hollywood's most recent addition to the 'historic' fabric of the area is the church on Tybee Island used for the filming of *The Last Song* (2010). Disney agreed to donate the building to the island after Tybee officials lobbied to keep it as a non-denominational chapel.[27] Individual Hollywood stars have also donated money for preservation (Lukas Theater - Kevin Spacey), provided film props and costumes for benefit auctions (Clint Eastwood), and redesigned 'authentic' store interiors (art director Daniel A. Lomino - Leopold's Ice Cream parlor). Most importantly, each time the city lands another film, the $5 – 10 million budget translates into over 100 high paying jobs.[28]

The city of Savannah quickly recognized the economic benefit of being a major film location and, in 1995, created a film commission to foster its relationship with Hollywood and help filmmakers scout locations and issue permits for projects. As a result, moviemaking has contributed between 10 and 20 million dollars yearly to the city's coffers,[29] and the city of Savannah has been inseparably tied to movies such as *The Gingerbread Man* [1997], *The General's Daughter* [1999] and, of course, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* [1997]. In 2002 Savannah expanded its media presence to television; the popularity of the "Paula's Home Cooking" television show attracts an average of 1,100 customers per day to her "The Lady and Sons" restaurant and generates $30 million in annual revenue.[30] Cognizant of the film industry's economic impact and thankful that it has remained unfazed in spite of the 2008-09 recession, Savannah's city officials want to cement the city's role as a movie town. At present they are considering plans for a new soundstage in order to attract more and larger productions,[31] not necessarily only those set in Savannah. The officials are aware that the film industry is essential for the city's economic well-being.

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23 Ibid., 389.

24 Ibid.

25 "After Midnight Since John Berendt's Book," *The Toronto Sun*, 26 October, 1997.

26 Lee Thomas, "The Qualitative and Quantitative Benefits of Film-Induced Tourism in Georgia" (PhD diss, New York University, 2008)

27 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Song_%28film%29, accessed 5 January 2012.

28 "Savannah Lands Another Film, City Leaders Consider Studio Investment," Savannahnow.com, accessed 22 February 2012, http://savannahnow.com/news/2011-11-16/savannah-lands-another-film-city-leaders-consider-studio-investment#.T0pwY8yDobS.

29 "Georgia's film industry," *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 August 1998.

30 Thomas, "The Qualitative and Quantitative Benefits".

31 "Savannah Eyes Film Studio," accessed 7 September 2012, http://www.gpb.org/news/2011/11/21/savannah-eyes-film-studio.

Town and Gown

Savannah's economy has also benefited from another group of temporary residents: students of arts and design. In 1979, years before Richard Florida identified the "Creative Class" as one of the 20th century key forces driving economic development, Richard and Paula Rowan founded the *Savannah College of Art and Design* at the edge of the historic district. Many institutions of higher education are typically located at the edge of a community in order to expand more easily. From its inception, however, SCAD has been an urban campus that has gradually expanded throughout the historic district. It has become a permanent fixture that has attracted and sustained a number of businesses.

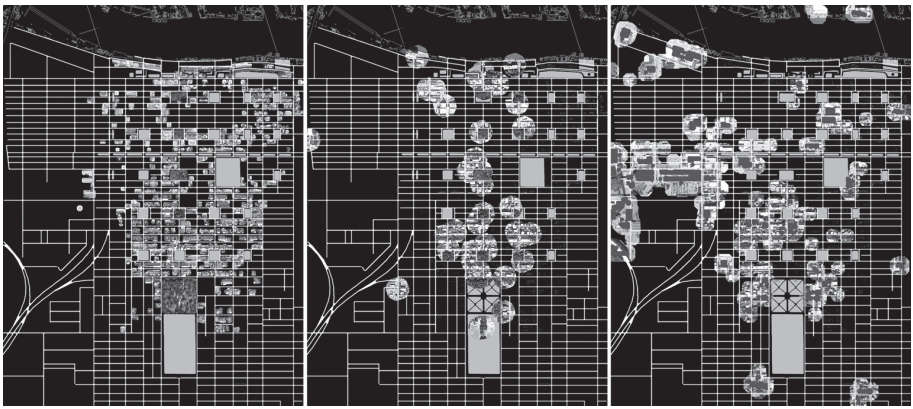

Fig.3: The Three Savannah's: Preservation, Film Tourism and College

Institutions of higher education have proven to be a unique redevelopment tool for ailing cities. Colleges and universities often attract commercial research institutes and businesses that seek to benefit from the well-educated and inexpensive labor pool provided by the student body. Furthermore, most colleges offer community or outreach programs aimed at increasing the educational level of the general population. They also enrich the city's cultural offerings through their libraries, public lectures, and events, all without cost to the city government. Prospective students typically select an institution based on its educational programs and standing rather than its location. Once enrolled, students are likely to seek housing and part-time employment in close vicinity to campus. They frequent local businesses as well as cultural and entertainment venues, and contribute in no small means to the local economy. Given the ever-increasing number of highly specialized fields of knowledge, the need for new institutions of higher education will likely persist in the near future. Mid-size cities could certainly benefit if they were willing and able to attract such an institution for their downtown.

SCAD serves as a perfect example of the positive impact that an institution of higher learning can have on a community. It has attracted new residents to the historic district, made large contributions to preservation, arts, and entertainment, and kept downtown businesses viable during the off-season when fewer tourists visit. In addition, many prospective students come with their families for a college visit and extend their stay to explore the historic district. Over the years, the school has blossomed. It started with 71 students in one large building and has since grown into a significant institution with over 8,000 students utilizing more than one million square feet. The college has invested $30 million to purchase and restore more than 52 abandoned buildings. These buildings are situated throughout the historic district, allowing the school to become part of the fabric without overwhelming one particular area.[32] The ever-increasing

32 Ibid.

number of faculty, staff, and students[33] reside in the historic district, where they provide a steady clientele for its numerous bars, restaurants, coffee houses, and galleries. The collegiate population has helped support a diverse commercial and cultural environment that would otherwise have been impossible to sustain. The streets are full of life. Work, study, entertainment, and housing are all conveniently located within walking distance for the students and staff of SCAD. Residents populate the streets at all hours, which, according to the *Atlanta Constitution,* makes the downtown safer.[34]

The college also contributes directly to the vitality of Savannah's downtown area. All exhibits, lectures, workshops, films, and performances are open to the public. Yearly events such as the *Sidewalk Arts Festival*, the *Art Educator's Forum*, and the *Comics Art Forum* attract visitors from the nearby area as well as from out of town. Each year, over 35,000 people come for SCAD's *Savannah Film Festival.* Besides the 20,000 prospective students visiting the college and surrounding area, another 2,500 guests attend homecoming and graduation each year. In addition, the college manages several galleries, two diners, a tearoom, and a bookstore, all catering to students and the general public alike. In 2007, the economic impact of the college was estimated to be $369.7 million, $114 million more than in 2003. Over 4,500 jobs are supported by the college, with 1,600 at SCAD alone.[35] Overall, SCAD's economic impact is significant.

Although generally credited with "helping [to] revive Savannah's Downtown,"[36] the college's contributions have not always been welcome. Never a center of education until the 1980s, the city was unprepared for the sudden influx of students. Existing zoning laws did not permit dormitories. Thus the students lived in garages and basement apartments until SCAD took over the largest apartment building in the city. Shortly thereafter, the school acquired a failing drugstore, a vacant furniture store, the former Salvation Army building, and an empty office building. While many residents were satisfied and remarked about the latter that "at least the building isn't vacant anymore,"[37] others began to complain about the noise and the vulgar window displays that followed the influx of students. By the same token, some homeowners in the historic district felt that the college's presence would make inducing "people to invest in buying and preserving homes in the historic district" impossible.[38] Others, however, were convinced that, without the school, the historic district would not be able to survive.[39] SCAD continued to expand and has become an integral part of the city with schools, lecture halls, and administrative buildings seamlessly interwoven with the city's urban fabric.

By acquiring and fixing up more than 50 old buildings in creative ways, the college has energized the development effort with its architectural expertise. Renovated properties include the Chatham County Jail (offices and fitness center), the Hamilton Electric building (video production facility), an old movie theater, and the Levy's Department Store (library). Acquisition and restoration continues, and is primarily undertaken by students, faculty, and the college's own historic preservation design and construction team. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, the Historic Savannah Foundation, and the National Park Service have repeatedly recognized SCAD as a leader in historic preservation.

It is not surprising that, given the scope of the undertaking and the relative prominence of the buildings being restored, the college has been almost singlehandedly credited with sparking public

33 "Their parents bought houses for bargain prices, put their kids and other students in them, fixed them up." Cora Bett Thomas, as quoted in "Savannah's historic homes fetch millions," *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 December 1998.

34 Ibid.

35 "Scad Boosts Economy," savannahnow, 2 March 2009, accessed 9 March 2012, http://savannahnow.com/stories/101301/LOC1248979.shtml.

36 "Arts College Helps Revive Savannah's Downtown, *New York Times*, 7 February 1999.

37 "College's Growth Has Old Savannah In An Uproar," *New York Times*, 29 November 1985.

38 Ibid.

39 "'The school saved this community, you cannot overstate that,'' said Ms. Thomas. ''In the 1980s we thought this city -- the historic district -- wouldn't survive.'' As quoted in "Arts College Helps Revive Savannah's Downtown," *New York Times*, 7 February 1999.

interest in renovation within the Savannah Historic Landmark District. This claim, made by the college, news outlets, and public officials, ignores the fact that the years prior to SCAD's founding saw the restoration of about 800 buildings. This number increased to 1,200 by 1999; the college, however, had only restored some 30+ of these properties. City officials have also asserted that SCAD is "a neighborhood amenity that adds value to nearby property and triggers renovation activities." A 2007 study undertaken by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy disputes this claim. They found no evidence that close proximity to SCAD has had a positive effect on renovation. Houses near SCAD buildings are not being renovated earlier than those located elsewhere, nor is "the anticipated catalyst effect felt more strongly and earlier within the immediate vicinity of SCAD structures."[40]

Although the true impact of the college appears to be impossible to measure, there cannot be any question that SCAD has complemented earlier efforts and has enhanced the positive perception of Savannah's historic district. Together, the preservation movement, film industry, tourist trade, and college have stimulated the creation of numerous jobs in the service industry, and have prompted an increase in hotel construction, as well as the building of a new convention center. This has, in turn, brought more visitors to town. The steady increase in the number of visitors has filled the city's coffers and supported the growth of retail, restaurants, and nightlife. Now, on any given day, tourists outnumber residents eight to one.[41]

Gentrification – The Cost of Popularity

The city's successful redevelopment has nevertheless come at a price for its citizens. Many residents bemoan the numerous tour busses and shuttles that congest the inner city streets,[42] and complain about tourists who wander onto private porches to take pictures. They also resent the attitude of some film crews, such as the one working on *Forrest Gump*. The crew working on this blockbuster was particularly insensitive to the needs of city residents. They unloaded equipment in the middle of the night, blocked entire streets, and refused to let residents into their homes for hours on end.[43] These complaints, however, are relatively minor when compared to the financial hardships that have arisen for some of its residents through the city's historic preservation. In 1998, after the city reassessed many buildings in the historic district, the Chatham County Board of Assessors increased property taxes up to 84% for over 5,800 homeowners. Park Callahan, a longtime downtown resident, laments that those who helped restore the historic district are now in danger of being taxed out of the area.[44] Many older people on a fixed income are being driven out of their neighborhood because they cannot pay the high taxes.

The goal of historic preservation is to preserve, conserve, and protect buildings, landmarks, and urban neighborhoods of historic significance from destruction, and to give communities a sense of identity and stability. Gentrification, on the other hand, describes the changes that result when wealthier people acquire or rent property in low income and working class communities. Unfortunately, historic preservation and gentrification often go hand in hand. After the implementation of an ambitious and highly successful preservation strategy in the late 1950s, gentrification has altered Savannah's historic district beyond recognition. "Posh gift shops, many of which used to be slave cottages in back of great mansions," have replaced numerous

40 Kimberly Winson-Geideman, Ph.D.; Dawn Jourdan Esq. Ph.D.; Shan Gao "Preserving Whose Neighborhood? The Effects of Adaptive Reuse by the Savannah College of Art & Design on Property Value and Community Change in Savannah, Georgia," *Lincoln Institute of Land Policy*, 2007.

41 Based on census and city data, about 60,000 tourists visit Savannah each day, while only 8,300 residents live in the historic district.

42 As a result, the city banned larger tour busses from most of the historic district and restricted where smaller trolley busses could stop. Kanner, "Savannah After Midnight."

43 "Midnight – The Good, The Bad and The Ugly," accessed 8 March 2012, http://savannahnow.com/features/goodandevil/MIDgoodbadugly.html.

44 "Up, up and you pay," *Savannah Morning News*, June 26, 1999.

African-American residences.[45] In fact, most of the displacement has taken place in the high poverty/low income African-American community.[46] It thus comes as no surprise that the black population feels that it has been targeted for removal from Savannah's core by laws mandating the upkeep of historic properties. The problem of gentrification is not confined to Savannah, but represents a trend that has spread throughout many older American cities. According to a report by the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research, nearly one third of American households below the poverty line occupy homes that are 50 years or older. Should they be deemed historically significant, these properties could be targeted for preservation, whether their homeowners have the available resources or not.

Preservation's largest impact on the neighborhood community in Savannah can be found in the area south of Liberty between Martin-Luther King and Bull Street (Census Tract #8). By the late 1960s, the white and black populations had almost reached parity, but the census taken a decade later paints a very different picture. In the meantime, most African-American families had left the neighborhood, and both the number of whites and the average household income had soared. Savannah's other census tracts - with the exception of the area paralleling the waterfront - show similar gentrification patterns, albeit at a later time. Wherever whites have replaced black populations, the average household income and property values have risen. The latest such demographic change can be observed in the Victorian historic district (Census Tracts #18 and #19). The late 1970s saw the restoration of the area under the Savannah Landmark Rehabilitation Project (SLRP), which was expressly intended to prevent the displacement of low-income and minority renters from historic districts. Unfortunately, 233 of these units are no longer protected by the 20-year-old federal affordability restrictions, and presently face conversion to market rate.[47] The loss of these protective measures, together with Savannah's below average wages, the prevalence of lower paying service jobs, and the mandated upkeep of historic property - typically at higher prices than contemporary structures - have made owning or renting property in the Victorian historic district impossible for those on a budget.

According to Daniel Lockwood, the income and wealth disparity between the affluent - whether tourists or homeowners - and the neighborhood's impoverished residents is also responsible for much of Savannah's crime. His research has shown that neither ethnic distribution, nor the percentage of renters - another common assumption - can be held responsible for the relatively high level of crime in certain areas. In "Mapping Crime in Savannah: Social Disadvantage, Land Use, and Violent Crimes,"[48] he challenges the commonly accepted assumption that the availability of community assets such as retail or commercial and public institutions reduces crime. Instead he notes that, in Savannah, "socially disadvantaged young males [are] in close proximity to crime targets attracted into their space by land uses such as offices, shops, restaurants, museums, and schools."[49] This explains crime patterns, particularly robbery, in areas that are in the process of being restored.

Currently, historic preservation still leads to gentrification and often displaces many of a neighborhood's original residents. Those who move into Savannah's historic district are generally younger professionals with higher income levels and smaller households. In 2004 Savannah established a *Gentrification Task Force* to address this issue. It has identified five neighborhoods in which gentrification is evident, as well as nine others that will most likely experience it in the near future.[50] Local governments might be able to reverse this trend by offering relief to those

45 Black Neighborhoods - Village Profile," Spring 2010, accessed 2 February 2012, http://southernscene.net/VillageProfile.html.

46 Malik R. Watkins and Melissa Jest, *Exploring the Contribution of Historic Preservation to the Persistence of Poverty: Affordable Housing in Savannah, Georgia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, Center for Poverty Research, 2006), 80.

47 Ibid., 104.

48 *Social Science Computer Review* 25 (2007), 194.

49 Ibid., 207.

50 Pearl Ford (ed.), *African Americans in Georgia: a Reflection of Politics and Policy in the New South* (Savannah: University Press, 2010), 180.

who cannot afford higher taxes, by spearheading affordable housing initiatives, or by financially supporting the cost of preservation. Without such measures, it stands to fear that gentrification will continue unchecked, and will ultimately destroy Savannah's main asset: the unique character of its historic neighborhoods.

Lessons Learned

The city of Savannah is ideally positioned to reap the profits from a historic downtown fabric. Its unique layout, based on neighborhood squares, has been saved from destruction numerous times. In 1865, it surrendered and was spared by General Sherman's Union soldiers. After the Second World War, it avoided urban renewal pressures because it was not connected to the nation's highway system and was thus deemed unimportant. Several years later, seven elderly women decided to save its antebellum mansion from destruction and chartered the *Historic Savannah Foundation* to preserve Savannah's historic buildings. Although the city has lost four of its squares to make way for highways and parking lots and almost one third of its buildings to modernization, most of its 2.2 square mile historic area has remained largely intact. Today, due to the concerted effort of preservation groups, city hall, and SCAD, Savannah is home to the largest preservation district in the nation.

Savannah's decision to preserve its downtown as a historic district has clearly paid off. What started as an exercise in civic unrest has blossomed into a multi-million dollar economic revitalization project that now encompasses nearly the entire city. Using the revolving fund model, clusters of previously under-utilized buildings have been returned to the property tax rolls. This has increased property values and, as a result, improved property tax intake. Moreover, the rehabilitation of numerous historic properties has created construction jobs at a greater rate than new construction would have produced. Finally, by preserving rather than demolishing the historic district, the city has halted the exodus of middle class residents. Work remains, however. These efforts have not been able to return population numbers to the 'pre-flight' levels necessary to sustain daily operations, repairs, and reconstruction. Fortunately, other revenue streams have been found.

The downtown-wide restoration of properties has provided the visual backdrop for the heritage tourism and film productions that have brought much needed capital to the city's coffers. Visitors now outnumber district residents eight to one. In addition, SCAD students and faculty now help sustain the district's cultural and economic landscape. The city's shift from local economy to tourist destination, however, demands constant reinforcement. It takes more than a bestseller and blockbuster movies to sustain a vibrant downtown. Reinforced through the college, a convention center and a business-park, the historic district now has a better chance to withstand the whims of the tourist trade.

Large-scale preservation is not without consequences. The restoration of downtown mansions and townhouses comes at the expense of affordable housing. Homeownership in this district has become impossible for many low-income residents for several reasons. Protective covenants require property upkeep, and the cost of renovating historic homes can be quite high. In addition, increasing property values have led to property tax hikes, often more than many residents can pay. Unless Savannah takes on the task of maintaining historic properties, economic segregation and gentrification will continue to be the consequence of further preservation initiatives.

Savannah's success as a tourist destination carries additional liabilities. While adding over 14,000 jobs to the economy, tourism tends to cement the shift from manufacturing to lower paying service jobs. Savannah's median family income of circa $33,000 will most likely remain $10,000 below the state's average. Ownership of a historic home will remain largely impossible for the majority of its residents, and, in order to keep tourists coming, the historic district's policies, activities, and amenities will remain geared toward its visitors.

Unfortunately, no acceptable solution to this problem appears to exist at this time. Savannah's historic district would have undoubtedly deteriorated into a slum without the continued preservation efforts of the past years. Yet in spite of these efforts, the city could not have sustained a thriving district more than one tenth of its current size had the tourists, the film industry and the college not provided the needed revenues. Examples abound of other cities that have been less committed than Savannah. They have shown that once a historic district has been derelict for too long, or lost too much of its fabric, it is next to impossible to turn it around. It is essential that we address the problem of our historic cities. Citizens and governments, however, should take a long hard look at the efforts, costs, and commitment necessary to succeed in historic preservation before deciding on this route. Anything less than total commitment to the cause is bound to fail.