

Lydia Simpson's presentation More Trouble that its Worth? The economics of historic preservation Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 17, 2018)

This is part two of Sue Frederick's review of the visit to Oak Ridge by Lydia Simpson, Program Manager for Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation. Part one of the series reviewed the tour of Oak Ridge provided Lydia and her initial impressions.

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I think these strong statements are especially applicable to the three sites included in the Manhattan Project National Historical Park and as such should be prominent in the thinking of the planners at each individual site.

Further, with regard to the buildings that remain, in whatever state but especially here on the Oak Ridge Reservation and looking ahead, Lydia told us that the greenest building, environmentally, is the one that is already built. It can take anywhere from ten to eighty years for the energy efficiency of **new** buildings to offset the environmental impact of producing and utilizing the materials used in a new building.

On the flip side, construction debris from demolition of existing buildings accounts for about one quarter of waste deposited in U.S. landfills annually. Older buildings include features that are sensitive to climate and site, which you might note when comparing, for example, the neighborhood layout of the older alphabet homes with some of the newer and more modern subdivisions. [An excellent example is the Alexander Guest House! – Ray]

The economic benefits of historic preservation are felt on both community and individual levels. Historic rehabilitation of older buildings requires a skilled workforce. A 2010 report on the subject in Georgia showed that a million-dollar investment in rehabilitating older buildings produced 18.1 jobs and \$750,000 in wages. The same investment in new construction produced only 14.9 jobs and \$616,000 in wages.

A million-dollar investment in automobile manufacturing, a current major thrust of economic development efforts in our state, produced just 3.5 jobs and \$245,000 in wages. A 2014 report by Preservation Green Labs that focused on urban redevelopment of older and smaller buildings, like some of those that we can now see standing vacant on some major Oak Ridge thoroughfares, found that 90.9% of older structures contained non-chain i.e. local small businesses, which have been found nationally to employ seven out of every ten new jobs.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to those who want to continue to call Oak Ridge home for a long time to come, Ms. Simpson provided some "hard data" in the form of monetary figures to support the perhaps unexpected truth when it comes to investing in existing residential structures, as opposed to declaring them as "blight" or "excess" as a precursor to razing them. Further, these results came from residential historic preservation investments made by property owners in two Southern locales.

Specifically, average property value increases among ten historic preservation district neighborhoods in Louisville, KY, from 2000 to 2006 experienced a whopping 58% increase in median assessed value, or \$36,123 per home as compared with those in non-preserved areas where this value increased by only 32%, or \$26,894 per home.

The presentation ended with some examples from Lydia's own hometown of Rome, Georgia, which is also the subject of her PhD dissertation. In that former textile manufacturing town, whose current population stands at 35,000, the city overall experienced a 40%+ decrease in residential property values in the twelve years span between 1976 and 1984.

By way of comparison, residential property values in Rome neighborhoods designated by the state and local historic preservation associations increased by 35-40% between 1980 and 1996. Houses in Rome neighborhoods included on national historic registries experienced just a 4-5% increase in property

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values in the same period, which supports my strong desire to resurrect efforts to designate Oak Ridge as a local and state historic preservation site, similar to what our neighbors in Cookeville and Morristown have created.

Since a recent event in recognition of Oak Ridge's 75th anniversary centered on the future home of the K-25 History Center and was in fact co-sponsored by URS|CH2M Oak Ridge LLC, or UCOR, DOE's lead cleanup contractor, I was curious to find out from Lydia if any of the old textile mills along the West Georgia Textile Heritage Trail would require remediation i.e. clean-up before they could be reopened to the public and/or reused for other purposes, as possibly desired by some Oak Ridge preservationists.

While the old rayon mill in Rome has been re-purposed and is still used for light industrial applications, that particular building doesn't currently have a heritage tourism component, though she hopes her dissertation might help spark something in the future. "If it does happen, she advised, "the remediation part is definitely going to be an obstacle."

She continued, "There are plenty of places where textile mills are part of cultural and heritage tourism initiatives. Some have been turned into shopping areas or breweries, a few museums, and yes any of those initiatives would have involved a good bit of remediation and repurposing."

Another area where Rome and the textile towns in general and Oak Ridge are similar includes the variety of styles and materials utilized as each new residential development rose in support of the local industries. For instance, one of the things that separates the Riverside mill village in Rome is the brick construction of all of the homes that sprung up around that mill.

Most villages of the early 20th century were constructed of wood frame structures, as a ride through other mill villages in Rome would attest. As in the 1920s, national textiles companies began to invest in the northwest Georgia region, they concurrently continued to build mill villages and embraced the spirit of corporate paternalism.

The Northwest Georgia Textile League supported baseball teams for many of the larger mills. From what I've heard, this is very similar to the pattern and fabric of social life in Oak Ridge in its early days.

The post that I referred to earlier in this article is titled *Open Secrets: Preserving a Controversial Past in Oak Ridge, Tennessee*. It includes some challenging thoughts for those of us who want to establish a strong base for permanence and continuity of this community that grew up between 1943 and 1945 but ended up becoming far more permanent than its builders had intended.

Lydia said "Because Oak Ridge was built as a speedy solution to a global problem under the auspices of a project whose size and scope changed dramatically between its inception and culmination, the town's layout is unconventional and unique." Jackson Square was the first commercial "district" in the town, and is generally considered to be the historic "hub" of the city.

During our visit to this historic area, I was surprised to learn from Ray Smith that there were at one time a several other similar commercial strips that held shops, restaurants, and theaters. The skeletons of some of those commercial centers are still standing. Lydia said of Oak Ridge, "Today, the community faces preservation issues unique to its own history as a mid-twentieth century development that has now, in essence, outlived its original intended purpose."

She concluded her presentation with, "In any community, uniqueness comes with both advantages and challenges. For Oak Ridge, the 'Secret City' history provides a ready-made 'brand' to build on. Despite its small size, the town has an international reputation as a place of scientific advancement."

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"On the other hand, the controversial nature of the atomic bomb and the lukewarm attitude of many 'heritage tourists' towards the more modern architecture that characterizes Oak Ridge make it a tough sell to certain crowds. New initiatives to highlight the area's natural resources and modern scientific community promise new hope but must also be sensitive to the city's historic resources so that the site's international significance is not lost to time.

"The greatest advantage in Oak Ridge ... is its people and the sense of community and connectedness they feel about their town and its history. The turnout for my presentation and the enthusiastic participation in the ensuing discussion, which included members of the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association as well as representatives from city, state, and federal entities, demonstrate an energy that, if harnessed well and put to good use, could bring about positive action. I look forward to seeing what secrets the Secret City has yet to reveal." Well, Lydia, I and many of my fellow Oak Ridgers do, too.

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Thanks Sue for bringing us the view of a professional historic preservationist who took a fresh look at the potential for historic preservation in our city.



Mick Wiest presents a copy of "The Oak Ridge Story" to Lydia Simpson

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Lydia Simpson speaks to the public and membership meeting of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association