Abstract

Research indicates there is a clear relationship between tourism and historic preservation. Historic areas both draw tourists and create a special need for planning that focuses on the impact, both positive and negative, of tourism on historic areas, as well as the role that historic (heritage) tourism can play in conservation, preservation and economic development. This paper discusses the cultural and spatial history of the historic core of the city of Savannah, Georgia, USA to highlight its relevance or significance for historic preservation. Also, the paper will discuss the preservation movement to date in Savannah placing that movement in the context of the preservation movement in the USA and preservation literature in general. Finally, the paper will discuss a new development agenda within the historic district that will benefit tourists and locals alike, and create a tighter, more integrated tourist district. This agenda will incorporate a blighted and economically depressed part of the historic district that tourists now largely avoid, into the concentrated tourist zone of the city; thus giving tourists a reason to visit the ‘new’ area and adding to the visitor appeal of Savannah.

Zusammenfassung

Denkmalpflege und Tourismusentwicklung in Savannah, Georgia

1. Introduction

Over 6 million tourists visit the city of Savannah, Georgia, USA annually (MCKELTHWAITE 2009). Savannah’s Landmark Historic District is the largest historic district in the USA at 2.5 square miles, and the area is rich in heritage and architectural history and detail. Buildings, architectural styles and other elements of the cultural landscape can be an important part of the visual perception or image of a city for residents and visitors alike (LYNCH 1960). Many first time tourists arrive thus with an embedded landscape image of the city based on popular media including films such as Forrest Gump (1994), and Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil (1997), based on the book by John BERENDT (1994). Savannah has also been featured prominently in the paranormal research community on television shows such as Ghosthunters and Ghost Adventures in recent years, and in various paranormal-themed books (CASKEY 2005; DEBOLT 1984; SILVER 2002), which provide an element of tourist attraction as well. Savannah’s preserved architecture and lush green space – the squares and historic Forsyth Park at the southern end of the Landmark Historic District – however, are the main draw of the city (MCKELTHWAITE 2009). The goals of this paper are to discuss Savannah’s place within the historic preservation movement in the U.S. as well as to show Savannah’s unique significance for preservation, and how the city is planning the expansion of development in the historic district to create a greater sense of community and economic opportunity throughout the entire historic district.

2. Historic Preservation in the U.S

Preservation philosophies and motivation include saving specific older buildings and landmarks, preserving cultural heritage, fostering urban revitalization, green urbanism/sustainability, and also as an alternative planning philosophy to spatial expansion of the city (MURTAUGH 2006; TYLER ET AL. 2009). The preservation of a city’s heritage and cultural landscape supports the goals of a vibrant, sustainable community (ALLISON AND PETERS 2011), but that was not widely understood or supported in the U.S. until well into the 20th century. Early preservation activities in the U.S., focused on the preservation of single buildings or landmarks, Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1816 and Mount Vernon (George Washington’s home) in 1853, being among the first. Much of the early preservation targeted landmarks and buildings that had patriotic attachments more so than architectural interest, and was done almost exclusively with private funding – the federal government had no interest in preservation during the early years.

Colonial Williamsburg (Virginia) was the first major attempt at the restoration of a complete historic district in the U.S., and while respected within the preservation community, many criticize its museum-like quality as it attempts to recreate the life of the times as well as the architecture as an attraction, as opposed to continuing as a residential and integrated commercial community. The first city in the U.S. to establish a historic district with zoning regulatory control was Charleston, South Carolina. As discussed by STIPE (2003) and TYLER ET AL. (2009), Charleston established a zoning ordinance that made it illegal to tear down older buildings or create new buildings or businesses that would detract from the architectural and historical setting of Charleston’s historic core. Those interested in architectural modifications in the area had to apply to the city’s architectural review board for a ‘Certificate of Appropriateness’ for any architectural changes that were in public view. There was really no legal basis for this yet in the U.S., but this became the model followed by other communities, including New Orleans (the second local historic district in the U.S.) and Savannah.

It wasn’t until the beginning of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) in 1949 that preservation based on architectural significance became popular. The NTHP assumes ownership of selected endangered properties and then identifies potential owners willing to preserve the property. It also brings to public attention properties that are targeted for demolition by publishing an annual list of endangered properties. Two legal cases in the U.S., BERNAN VS. PARKER in 1954 and the PENN CENTRAL TRANSPORTATION COMPANY VS. THE CITY OF NEW YORK in 1978, paved the way for strong legal support for strict zoning and control over historic buildings and districts, which the NTHP has successfully promoted as well.

The economic benefits of historic preservation have now been well documented with respect to
job creation, urban revitalization, property values, image enhancement and tourism specifically (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation 1979; Allison and Peters 2011; Bennett 1996; Binney and Hanna 1978; Chen 1990; Hayes 1987; Kilpatrick 1995; Leichenko et al. 2001; Leith and Tigue 1999; Mintier 1983; Morton 2000; Murtagh 2006; Orbasli 2000; Preservation Alliance of Virginia 1996; Rackham 1977; Rypkema 1994; Sanderson 1994; Schaeffer and Millerick 1991; Scribner 1976; Stipe 2003; Stubb 2009; Tyler et al. 2009; Wojno 1991; Youngblood et al. 1987). However, the early decades of the NTHP were a struggle to educate the public about the economic potential of a preservation philosophy. Additionally, the NTHP was combating federal programs aimed at urban renewal – clearing older properties for development of new buildings. The Housing Act (1949) and the Urban Renewal Act (1954) were created by legislators who had lived through the Great Depression in the U.S. and had the philosophy that ‘old was bad and new was good’ (Tyler et al. 2009, p. 44). These programs made funding available to developers to clear blocks in older, blighted sections of urban areas to build new facilities, stimulate investment, and to create jobs in the construction industry.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, promoted by the NTHP, called for a greater push for the preservation of the sense of community, tax incentives for preservation, guidelines for historical significance, and greater coordination between federal, state and local government in the preservation effort (Murtagh 2006; Stipe 2003; Tyler et al. 2009). It created the National Register of Historic Places designation, supported the creation of State Preservation Offices (SPOs), and focused on the preservation of complete districts more so than individual buildings or landmarks that were preserved as museums. Preservation in Charleston, South Carolina ‘introduced a concept later to be described as the ‘tout ensemble’ – the idea that the character of an area is derived from its entirety, or the sum of its parts, rather than from the character of its individual buildings – an important advance in preservation thinking’ (Stipe 2003, p. 7). The historic districts would preserve the architectural styles of the past within a vibrant residential and commercial community. Historic preservation, particularly of whole neighborhoods or districts is really a reaction against globalization and is helping to create a sense of place, particularly in preserved downtown areas (Ford 2003).

Power for historic preservation was to remain at the local level, where preservation zoning ordinances are easier to establish, and review of architectural changes are more effectively accomplished. ‘In many ways, historic preservation is most meaningful at the local level, where the process of designating historic structures is initiated. Preservation ordinances, regulations, and incentives are drafted at the local level, where authority is given to review and approve or disapprove changes to historic structures. Property owners deal directly with local officials’ (Tyler et al. 2009, p. 58). It was further argued that determining historic significance should also be an authority of the local level. Thus, the National Register of Historic Places honors those that have met the requirements of a national review process (which starts at the local level and continues through the state level to an official nomination for review by the national board), local historic preservation communities can award their own historic designation of properties. The NTHP has suggested that a structure’s significance be based on historical or cultural importance and architectural value and be at least 50 years old, but has rather formal, detailed criteria for being listed on the National Register.

3. Tourism and Historic Preservation

Orbasli (2000) contends there is a strong relationship between culture, heritage and tourist development, particularly in historic towns or districts. Over the last few decades, architecture has become an important focus for tourists and tourist destinations (Lasansky and McLaren 2004; Ockman and Frausto 2007), and the preservation of nature and heritage has been well documented in the literature as well (Longstreth 2008). ‘When the inherent historic character of an older downtown is preserved, it can become a tourist attraction, enhancing both the local economy and the sense of community pride’ (Tyler et al. 2009, p. 278). Studies have shown that ‘heritage tourists’ stay longer in the destination and tend to spend more money while on holiday; therefore they are an important part of a city’s economic planning. While heritage/
historic tourism does have a strong positive economic impact, it is important to note the potential danger of ‘unrestrained commercial exploitation of historic towns, buildings, and sites, especially in developing countries’ (STUBBS 2009, p. 60), and thus heritage/historic tourism must be managed well. Historic districts provide a concentrated area of interest for tourists, and the historic district of Savannah, Georgia is a combination of the preservation of elegant architecture, the preservation of an historic port that was a very important part of the nation’s economy, and the preservation of a unique urban plan. Savannah’s ‘tout ensemble’ is rather unique in the tourist landscape of the U.S.

4. The Spatial Layout of Historic Savannah

Savannah was founded in 1733 by James Edward OGLETHORPE who arrived by ship from England with 114 other settlers. He picked a site that was about ‘ten miles from the sea… which the banks are about forty foot high and upon top a flat which they call a bluff’ (OGLETHORPE in 1733 quoted in JONES 2005, p. viii). This location along the top of the Yamacraw Bluff of the Savannah River was preferred by the early colonists because it would be easy to defend and they could easily handle the docking of the larger ships of the day. The city was the first in the British colony of Georgia, and was carefully mapped out in a unique geometric design. Today, OGLETHORPE’S design is recognized as a National Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers, and the city was classified as a National Historic Landmark (in 1966) by the National Trust for Historic Preservation not actually for the wealth of historic architecture that has been preserved, but for OGLETHORPE’S urban plan that is still present in the landscape of Savannah today.

OGLETHORPE’S design was based on a grid of 8 blocks surrounding a large open square (green space) in the center (Fig. 1). This layout, which he called a ward, could then be repeated over and over as the city grew in population and area. Four large blocks, called tything blocks, lie at the northern and southern fringes of the ward, while four trust lots front the western and eastern sides of the square. Streets and smaller lanes are interspersed with the parcels of land. Generally, tything blocks were to be used for residential purposes with 10 house lots each, while governmental and business structures would be housed on the trust lots (BLAND 2010). Some argue that OGLETHORPE was inspired for his design from English, Roman or Chinese designs (HILL 2004), and others mention specifically that his influence was Robert CASTELL, a famous

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**Fig. 1: Ward layout in Historic Savannah (Source: H. CORDOBA, Florida Atlantic University 2011)**
English architect or possibly Prince Eugene of Savoy (Jones 2005).

Oglethorpe’s original plan of 4 squares (today known as Johnson, Wright, Ellis and Telfair Squares) eventually grew to 24 by 1851, 22 of which exist today (Fig. 2). The original plan of the town was begun at the top of the Yamacraw Bluff, overlooking the Savannah River bounded by Bay Street in the north and Gaston Street to the south, which is why many in Savannah are snobbish about living North of Gaston today and refer to themselves as NOGS, meaning that they reside North of Gaston Street, which is thought of as ‘Oglethorpe’s Savannah’ (Berendt 1994). Variations of Oglethorpe’s plan were used in other Georgian communities such as Ebenezer, Darien and Frederica and later Sunbury, Hardwick and Brunswick, but none to the extent or longevity as in Savannah (Jones 2005).

Tab. 1 shows the timeline and geographic expansion of the squares, current name of the square (some squares changed names over time), and the person or the event inspiring the name of the square. Each square contains old trees with Spanish moss, azaleas, brick sidewalks and often a monument to some important figure in the history of the city or state, a prominent fountain or a gazebo (Hanley 2001; Hill 2004; Sieg 1996). Elbert and Liberty Squares were

![Fig. 2: Final layout of Historic Savannah (Source: H. Cordoba, Florida Atlantic University 2011)](image-url)
lost, Elbert to make room for the Civic Center and part of a modern highway and Liberty to house the Chatham County Courthouse and Jail complex (SIEG 1996; SPRACHER 2002). Ellis Square, which housed the historic City Market, was destroyed in 1954 to build a multi-level parking garage (SIEG 1996; SPRACHER 2002), but that garage was demolished in 2005 and the lot was finally returned to green space in 2010 with a modern fountain and a life-sized statue of Johnny Mercer, famed lyricist who was born in Savannah. Today, residents and tourists alike flock to the squares that locals refer to as ‘outdoor living rooms’ (COOPER and ELDRIDGE 2010, p. 5).

5. The Architectural Landscape of Historic Savannah

While some consider Savannah’s first architect to be William Bull of South Carolina, the first in the city who styled himself as an architect, Adrian Bouchier, came to Savannah in 1797 and was followed by others such as William Jay, John Holden Greene, Charles Cluskey, John Hogg and Alfred Eichberg (JONES 2005; RIBBENS 2000). Many different architectural styles prevail in the buildings of historic Savannah (McALESTER and McALESTER 1984; STALCUP 2008), including Georgian, Greek Revival, Queen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Square</th>
<th>Year Founded</th>
<th>Named After</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Johnson Square</td>
<td>1733</td>
<td>Royal Governor of South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telfair Square</td>
<td>1733</td>
<td>GA Governor Edward Telfair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright Square</td>
<td>1733</td>
<td>Last Royal Governor of Georgia (James Wright)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellis Square</td>
<td>1733</td>
<td>Henry Ellis, Second Royal Governor of Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oglethorpe Square</td>
<td>1734</td>
<td>General James Oglethorpe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reynolds Square</td>
<td>1734</td>
<td>First Royal Governor of Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin Square</td>
<td>1790</td>
<td>Benjamin Franklin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warren Square</td>
<td>1790</td>
<td>General Joseph Warren</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington Square</td>
<td>1790</td>
<td>George Washington</td>
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<tr>
<td>Columbia Square</td>
<td>1799</td>
<td>Columbia—female personage of American freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greene Square</td>
<td>1799</td>
<td>American Revolutionary General Nathaneal Greene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty Square</td>
<td>1799</td>
<td>Sons of Liberty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elbert Square</td>
<td>1801</td>
<td>Samuel Elbert, Savannah’s Council of Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chippewa Square</td>
<td>1815</td>
<td>Major General Brown’s victory at the Battle of Chippewa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orleans Square</td>
<td>1815</td>
<td>Andrew Jackson’s victory at the Battle of New Orleans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lafayette Square</td>
<td>1837</td>
<td>Marquis de Lafayette</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madison Square</td>
<td>1837</td>
<td>James Madison</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pulaski Square</td>
<td>1837</td>
<td>Count Casimir Pulaski</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crawford Square</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>William Harris Crawford, former Governor of Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chatham Square</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>William Pitt, Earl of Chatham and former UK Prime Minister</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calhoun Square</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>John C. Calhoun, Vice President from South Carolina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monterey Square</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>Battle of Monterey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troup Square</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>George Michael Troup, Senator and Governor of Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitefield Square</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>Reverend George Whitefield</td>
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Note: Elbert and Liberty Squares were lost to highway development and demolition for governmental building space.

Tab. 1: Squares of Historic Savannah. (HANLEY 2001; MILL 2004; SIEG 1996)
Anne and Italianate, however, ironwork is the common denominator in fountains, cast iron balconies and stair railings (Ribbens 2000). Mitchell (1991) argues that the style of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Georgian England is the primary architectural heritage of Savannah.

Bull’s architectural imprint is largely gone, due to two major fires, in 1796 and 1820 (Jones 2005; Lane 2001; Mitchell 1991). His buildings were a simple design and primarily constructed from wood due to the great abundance of timber, and the lack of abundance of brick. In fact, early visitors to the colony from England are documented as describing Savannah as ugly and unattractive due to the blandness of the architecture (Jones 2005). Savannah’s economic advantages exploded in the late 1700s and early 1800s, however, and the result of that boom in wealth is largely what we see preserved today in the architectural landscape of the historic district, a city of brick and stone, particularly the Savannah gray bricks that were made locally, and tabby, a mixture of lime and local oyster shells.

The abundance of large Georgian and Victorian mansions and their gardens make it obvious that tremendous wealth was part of the city’s history. First rice production, timber production, and then the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and the resulting boom in the cotton industry in the Southeast U.S. changed the fortunes of many southern cities, Savannah and its port being no exception. In fact, Savannah’s role in the U.S. economy at that time was almost entirely as a cotton-shipping port, with the Central of Georgia Railroad bringing cotton from interior plantations to Savannah to be shipped to England and beyond. During this time when cotton was ‘king’, an elegant, prosperous society prospered and Savannah became a world class seaport (Hanley 2001) exporting over 2 million bales of cotton per year at its peak. Thus, from the 1830s through the beginning of the U.S. Civil War (known as the antebellum period) was the ‘golden age’ for Savannah architecture (Jones 2005; Lane 2001).

While the wealth of the antebellum period allowed Savannah residents the luxury of spacious mansions of brick, stone, and intricate ironwork, that wealth also influenced the expansion and architecture of the port area itself, and in fact, the historic design of the port area is indeed one of the main tourist attractions of the city today.

‘Brick and stone warehouses built below the bluff were designed with lower floors opening to the wharves, convenient for loading goods onto ships on the river side. The upper floors were at street level at the top of the bluff. Between the buildings and a wall built to retain the bluff, a narrow lane was maintained for carts carrying products to the warehouses from plantations and the railroad station. To connect the warehouses with the bluff and the rest of the city, bridges were constructed with iron supports and railings across this lane. This ingenious system was referred to as the ‘factors walk’ because factors – the accountants or brokers for companies owning the businesses – used the bridges to get to and from their offices on the upper levels’ (Cooper and Eldridge 2010, p. 9).

6. Decline in Historic Savannah

The decline of cotton and its subsequent movement westward in the U.S., as well as the general economic decline of the South associated with the Civil War, brought an abrupt end to prosperity in Savannah. The city quickly felt the impact of having amassed tremendous wealth from nothing they produced themselves, only by taking advantage of their geographic proximity to a productive interior (Lane 2001). Decline in the market price of cotton, exhaustion of the soils, and the correction of the social injustice of slave labor of blacks dried up the productivity of the Georgian interior and thus Savannah as well.

Savannah escaped being burned to the ground during Sherman’s March to the Sea in 1864 when Olmstead surrendered the city to Sherman in order to escape the same fate as other cities in the South during the Civil War Era. However, the economic spiral downward coupled with the later trend of urban decentralization and suburbanization in the U.S. that has been well documented (Kaplan et al. 2004; Knox and McCarthy 2005) created a general abandonment of the historic district. The early 20th century, along with the rise of the automobile, saw a growth in multi-story commercial buildings, skyscrapers of the day, along with widened streets and expansion southward of suburbs, many of these early suburbs are today historical districts them-
selves (Mitchell 1991), such as Ardsley Park (Jones 2005). The large old homes in the historic district that were not destroyed were vacated or subdivided into cheap apartments or rooming houses for the poorer residents of the city who could not afford to escape to the suburbs (Southside Savannah). Some houses were knocked down simply to sell the famous ‘Savannah gray bricks’ from which they were originally constructed. River Street and the port area fell into disrepair as well and became a haven for crime in the city. All of the buildings associated with the port activity of the past were abandoned and boarded up, and some even demolished in the 1960s, as the major port functions that remained for Savannah moved to new facilities further up river, about 17 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Lady Astor of Britain visited the city in 1946 and referred to Savannah as a ‘beautiful woman with a dirty face’ (Cooper and Eldridge 2010, p. 5).

7. Historic Preservation in Savannah

The proposed destruction of the Isaiah Davenport House (home of one of Savannah’s most prominent builders during the antebellum period) along Columbia Square to make a parking lot for a nearby funeral home (today the Kehoe House) was the final stimulus needed to begin Savannah’s preservation movement in 1955. The seven women who founded the Historic Savannah Foundation (HSF) created the ‘revolving fund program’ originally based on donations of approximately $200,000. Funds are used to purchase endangered homes and find buyers for the homes who are committed to preservation and restoration. Proceeds from one sale then provide the money for the next purchase (Cooper and Eldridge 2010; Jones 2005; Murtagh 2006). Again, properties are not restored by the HSF (which would tie up a tremendous amount of financial resources), but are sold to individuals with the assurance that restoration will begin shortly after purchase and completed within a specified time period, discouraging ‘stagnant speculation’ (Jones 2005). Tyler et al. (2009) argue that historic preservation is a ‘grass roots’ movement most often started at the local level, and thus Savannah was no exception.

The Foundation works today not only to preserve individual buildings, but to help preserve and revitalize entire neighborhoods. The purpose of the HSF is to reawaken interest in Savannah’s heritage and to educate the public on the cultural, social and economic benefits of historic preservation (Jones 2005). They operate under the philosophy that restoration and economic progress can indeed go hand in hand, and over the years, the foundation has changed from a ‘crisis-oriented’ preservation group reacting to the news of the potential demolition of a building to an organization committed to the planned preservation of the entire city. The City of Savannah passed a historic zoning ordinance in 1973, largely influenced by the HSF’s education of the public on the benefits of historic preservation.

Fellows (2004) notes that many preservation movements around the nation are credited to women of leisure and influence in their local community, also discussed by Murtagh (2006) and Tyler et al. (2009), although Fellows further argues that many men, particularly gay men, have played significant roles in historic preservation, even from the early years. Savannah’s Jim Williams is perhaps the most prominent, and was involved in Savannah’s restoration movement for more than 30 years saving over 50 buildings (Kingerly 1999). Also, the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), a private arts college established in 1978, has been responsible for the restoration of over 60 buildings in and around the Landmark Historic District, and many argue that the presence of SCAD has been of equal importance to the HSF, or at any rate, a great partner for the HSF (Pinkerton and Burke 2004).

According to Tyler et al. (2009), there are 5 main reasons to establish a historic district: 1) to protect historic properties from destruction, 2) to control new development, 3) to create a redevelopment incentive, 4) to stabilize or increase property values, and 5) to foster public relations and promotion of the historic district and preservation in general. The HSF and the Historic District Board of Review for the City of Savannah protects the historic structures within the Landmark Historic District (approximately 1,100) by reviewing all proposed building changes, to make sure they are appropriate and preserve the historic character of the district.

Oglethorpe’s historic area was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966 (locally known as the Landmark Historic District), followed by the Victorian Historic District in 1974 and eventu-
ally the Eastside Historic District, Thomas Square Streetcar Historic District, Central of Georgia Railroad Historic Landmark District, Cuyler-Brownville Historic District, the Ardsley Park-Chatham Crescent Historic District, the Daffin Park-Parkside Historic District and the Gordonston Historic District; thus, making a total of 9 historic districts in Savannah on the National Register of Historic Places (Jones 2005).

River Street and the port area is now one of the liveliest areas in the city for tourists with the buildings housing bars, restaurants and gift shops. The original architecture of the buildings in the old port area has largely been maintained, as well as the iron bridges along ‘Factor’s Walk’ and the ballast stone streets and ramps. Savannah’s new port area (up the river from the historic port) is still important today – 3rd largest in the USA and large container ships are a prominent feature along River Street. Thus the restored residential and historic port areas of Savannah combine to make one of the most successful historic tourist destinations in the nation, creating streetscapes of visual cohesiveness.

8. Savannah Development and Renewal Authority

The Savannah Development and Renewal Authority (SDRA) was created in 1992 with the mission to strengthen Greater Downtown Savannah and to renew, revitalize, and beautify distressed areas of Savannah (www.sdra.net). Historic preservation of residences, the port area along River Street, the buildings that are part of the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) and the growth of tourism-related businesses scattered throughout the area have certainly changed the image and economic livelihood of much of the historic district shown in Fig. 2. However, some parts of the district, and areas adjacent to the district, have clearly been left behind. When walking through the area, it is obvious that some parts of the district are not successfully woven into the sense of community or economic prosperity of the district. These areas often are blighted and the architecture often does not blend in with the rest of the historic district. In other words, they stand out as areas of poverty (and possibly crime) that tourists generally avoid – they don’t always feel safe in these areas and more to the point, don’t feel that the areas have anything to offer them. These areas are largely along Broughton Street, the original ‘main street’ of downtown Savannah that runs east to west through the historic district, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (formerly known as West Broad Street) framing the western end of the historic district (Fig. 2).

As indicated on their website (www.sdra.net), the SDRA is the City of Savannah’s economic development, marketing and outreach, and planning and plan implementation arm for Greater Downtown Savannah; and oversees revitalization and redevelopment of these two critical redevelopment Corridors – the Broughton Street Urban Redevelopment Area and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (MLK) Corridor. Currently, more than 160 citizens volunteer their time and expertise to serve on SDRA Boards, committees and task forces to address issues facing Greater Downtown Savannah. Broughton Street was the main shopping area of the city before the rise of the suburban mall that came along with the movement of the city southward with suburbanization. There was a long period of decline in the downtown, and most shops that survived were smaller low end retail shops – bargain clothing and accessories, etc. Minimal upkeep and repairs were made to the buildings along Broughton to keep property investment low. When repairs were made, they were certainly made with cost-cutting as the highest priority because rents were generally low. There was no concern for maintaining the architectural integrity of the old downtown. Common along Broughton Street was the covering of the outside façade of the upper stories of the buildings – single layering of bland stucco covering all of the windows of the upper floors as well as any architectural detail around the windows or the edges of the roofs. The first floors of the buildings were typically fronted with cheap glass plate windows and as mentioned, the upper floors (usually vacant) were completely covered with an outside wall of stucco, making for a very unappealing streetscape. Successful tourism districts normally have at least one high-end shopping district, and while some high-end shops can certainly be found in historic Savannah, and indeed even scattered along Broughton, Broughton Street has often been cited by tourists as a shopping disappointment (Mickeithwaite 2009).
Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, formerly known as West Broad Street, was also a lively commercial district in its day, particularly for businesses owned by and catering to Savannah’s black community. This was also the area that housed Savannah’s beautiful Union Station train terminal that was demolished for ‘urban progress’ (Spracher 2002). The construction of the flyover for Interstate 16 (road ramp bringing traffic from Interstate 16 into the downtown area) cuts through this area of Savannah now, which necessitated the demolition of several blocks of architectural interest, and moved traffic away from most of the businesses along the street. This area did not survive the period of economic decline as well as Broughton, and many commercial and residential buildings were cleared – appearing today as gas stations, fast food restaurants and even vacant lots. Buildings that remain from the earlier period are in much worse condition than those largely neglected on Broughton.

Thus, the SDRA has endeavored to revive these areas economically, make them more aesthetically pleasing, and in the case of the Martin Luther King, Jr. corridor, return the area’s sense of community that existed in its heyday. In accomplishing these tasks, the areas should be easier to tie to the tourism core of the historic district as well; giving tourists a reason to come to these streets. Some of the major programs of the SDRA have been: 1) the MLK Streetscape Improvement program; 2) the Digital Divide program; 3) the Targeted Business Assistance program; and 4) the Downtown Brand and Marketing program.

The MLK Streetscape Improvement program is a multi-phased program that extends to areas of the street well beyond (southward) the historic district (52 blocks in total). The project phase within the historic district is focused on creating a well-blend-ed, integrated and aesthetically pleasing commercial and mixed use area that should be attractive to tourists and residents alike. ‘In keeping with the land-use strategies for the corridor, this segment has historically been considered the primary commercial and mixed use district of the corridor. Recognizing the importance of retaining and encouraging this primary use designation, the concept for this segment promotes walkability and mobility, while ensuring traffic calming through key design elements. In addition to new sidewalks, pedestrian crosswalks, ornamental lamp posts and enhanced landscaping, this concept includes substantial street trees, first floor retail uses pulled up to the sidewalk, upper story residential and/or office space and vibrant institutional uses’ (www.sdra.net).

The Digital Divide program is focused on bringing the internet to MLK businesses and residents. Various grant programs have financed the equipment and training for Internet access to those living and operating business along the corridor. Additionally, fiber has been installed along MLK to bring cheap and easy Internet access to the area.

The Targeted Business Assistance program provides financial assistance to small businesses along Broughton and the MLK Corridor. The Façade Improvement Loan Program and Façade Improvement Grant Programs for the rehabilitation of the exterior of properties (removing the old stucco façades and restoring the original architecture of the building, for example); the Design Assistance Program providing free design services for proposed renovation projects; the Sprinkler Cost Assistance Program which helps defray the costs of updating fire systems; the Edge Grant Program providing support for improving vacant lots and parking lots; and the Greater Downtown Improvement Loan Program which is a general loan program to help sustain or grow businesses in the area, have all been successful ventures of the SDRA’s Targeted Business Assistance program.

The Downtown Brand and Marketing program is largely a campaign to inform Savannah’s residents and visitors about the changes in downtown. This includes the beautification projects, new restaurants and other vibrant business and the linkage of Broughton Street and the MLK corridor to the River Street/port area of the historic district (north of Bay Street). This linkage has been achieved through trolley car transportation linking the entire area, tourist information centers scattered throughout Broughton, MLK and the well-established tourist areas of the historic district, and a series of parking garages now making all areas of the historic district easy access and no hassle for residents and tourists. The goal is to increase awareness about these little visited areas of the historic district to increase foot traffic, sales and business investment in downtown Savannah. The program has featured a local cable television
program and a website devoted to the promotion of the area.

9. Outlook

Savannah’s unique history as a major cotton port, wealthy residential area and the center of a well-planned geometric urban design has been preserved on the urban landscape. This preservation largely followed the path of other major urban preservation projects in the U.S., such as Savannah’s neighbor to the north, Charleston, South Carolina. The preservation movement was begun by a group of women of economic and political influence in the city who were appalled at how quickly architectural treasures were being demolished in the name of ‘urban progress’. Through their efforts, the Historic Savannah Foundation was founded, and public support for preservation grew. Though many buildings were lost, more in total were saved. The result today is a vibrant historic district that blends preserved residential and commercial structures with green space that was designed in the 1700s and 1800s.

Because Savannah’s Landmark Historic District coincides with what is often referred to as ‘OLGETHORPE’S Savannah’, the boundaries are easy to trace; north to the Bay Street/River Street/Savannah River area, south to Gaston Street, west to West Broad Street (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard), and east to East Broad Street. Thus, it is easy to think of the entire historic district as an integrated tourist area. Visitor studies have shown, however, that tourists largely avoid the Broughton Street and Martin Luther King Corridors, feeling those areas have nothing to offer tourists and really viewing these areas as outliers to their tourist experience in the city. These areas, particularly the MLK Boulevard, are not aesthetically pleasing and many tourists and locals feel unsafe traveling around both streets, especially on foot and at night. The efforts of the SDRA, in progress, are attempting not only to revitalize these streets economically, but return their aesthetics and sense of community through landscaping, promotion of building restoration, and where buildings have been lost, promoting the establishment of appealing architecture that blends with the region. These areas were once a vibrant part of the downtown area that was linked with the rest of what is now the historic district. Returning that integration will be an important part of Savannah’s ‘tout ensemble’ as a major tourist attraction in the U.S.

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