

# Revitalize Your Downtown Area through Historic Preservation Actions

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**H**istoric buildings are one of the key features that attract businesses, residents, and visitors to Kentucky's downtown areas. Retaining the character of these buildings can be an important asset to a community revitalization program.

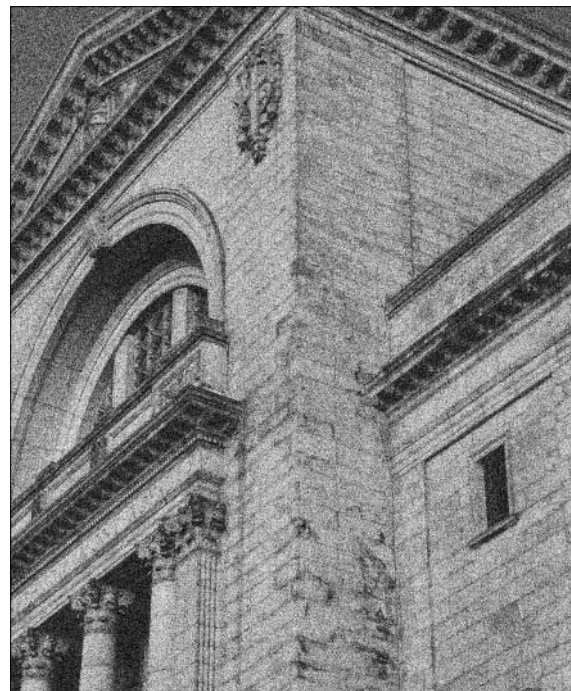
Define your community by making wise decisions regarding the preservation or reuse of its distinctive buildings and historic features. Evaluate the resources at hand and take advantage of your community's unique historic heritage. This can be an important step toward renewing and sustaining economic, social, and cultural benefits for your community and region.

## Preservation and Revitalization for Healthy Downtown Areas and Communities

The wide variety of historic towns and cities throughout the state give a distinctive character to the communities within each region. The business or downtown area is the center of activity for each of these communities. Historic preservation can be an important link to making a community – including the downtown area – stronger, more attractive, and more dynamic.

Although the economy has changed over time and the uses and activities are different than they once were, these communities are still good places for small businesses, residents, and visitors. In addition, visitors to communities that focus on their historic characteristics are often heritage tourists who stay longer, spend more money, and are more likely to return. These visitors and the businesses they support are extremely beneficial to communities.

Buildings play an important role in developing and maintaining a healthy downtown. However, they are only one of the many factors that contribute to a thriving community. Other factors include overall community character, economic vitality, mix of uses, ownership, and streetscape design. To be truly effective economic and social forces, downtown areas must work to improve and maintain all of these characteristics. The challenge is to preserve the distinctive historic characteristics while accommodating growth and change.



1. **Community Character.** Communities should cultivate a distinctive identity that makes them different from other places. Familiar and significant buildings contribute to a town's identity. The preservation of historic buildings is crucial for creating a "sense of place" and making people feel at home. It helps to establish the character of a community.
2. **Economic Vitality.** A strong and diverse economy is vital to maintaining a healthy downtown area. A thorough market analysis and an effective business recruitment and retention program is a priority for towns and cities that wish to have a thriving, sound community.

Most Kentucky communities have characteristics that make them excellent locations for small businesses.

- The small size and distinctive character of older, historic downtown buildings are ideal for businesses that develop and depend on an individual identity.
- Small businesses often function best grouped in a distinctive downtown area where they can better withstand pressure from national chains.

- Rehabilitation of the older downtown buildings can often be less expensive than new construction.

It's important for everyone in local communities to understand the importance of the adaptive reuse potential of historic buildings and to develop an overall plan for their evaluation and reuse. Local governments must then aggressively market them to potential buyers.

3. **Mix of Uses.** Diversity promotes economic stability.

Downtown areas are strongest when there is a mix of residential apartments, retail shops, banks, offices, restaurants, and other services. Residents living on the upper stories of downtown buildings provide activity and street life to downtown areas and give business to shops and services.

This mix provides a compact central area where people can conveniently work and live and keeps the downtown in use 24 hours a day.

Public institutions, such as post offices, libraries, courthouses, and city, county, and state offices are significant members of the downtown community. Policies encouraging these institutions to stay located in the heart of downtown are important to the vitality of the community.

4. **Ownership.** Owner-occupied buildings are an asset to downtown areas because owners have more incentive to maintain and improve their buildings. Local owners have a stronger interest in maintaining the buildings to promote better economy and to benefit their community as a whole. Absentee owners often have less incentive to maintain the buildings and are focused more on immediate economic return rather than long-term benefits. A local preservation program can partner with the community government to enforce local building codes and provide financial incentives for rehabilitation.

5. **Streetscape.** The appearance of the downtown area gives an immediate image of the community character. A high-quality streetscape is a key to a unique and identifiable community image. It helps to create a sense of place. Building facades are an important element to the streetscape design. Other components include sidewalk and street design, landscaping, street furniture, and lighting. Streets should be attractive, easy to navigate, accommodate other forms of transportation in addition to automobiles, and provide space for larger public events and gatherings. Good sidewalks, adequate lighting, convenient parking, attractive landscaping, interesting historic buildings, and user friendly surroundings that create an inviting atmosphere for pedestrians and bring more people to the area.

Historic preservation of existing resources contributes to a viable, healthy community. The existing character is maintained, and economic opportunities suited to downtown areas can be utilized. Over a period of time, small changes can vastly improve the community without a loss of individual identity and character.

Every community has a rich history that can be used to inspire a range of suitable design ideas. Incorporating these existing features into an overall development plan often results in more interesting solutions than those that come from the standard development practices that are often used. A successful community goal should be to preserve as much historic character as possible and turn this into a distinctive asset.

When working with the historic personality of an area, remember that flexibility in developing solutions is important for long-term success in revitalizing the community. Know when and where it is appropriate to apply preservation, rehabilitation, or restoration measures. Rather than trying to restore downtown buildings to their appearance at a particular date or point in time, look instead for sensitive, present-day solutions that fit in with the older buildings. For instance, keep the authentic historic building structure and features where possible, save a record of any changes to a building, and avoid the temptation to add faux "historic" features. If new construction is necessary, design in a contemporary but complementary manner.

Each community differs in the process and partnerships that deal with community revitalization issues. Local government agencies or the city council may be the decisive factor in some communities while others have a local historic preservation or Main Street group taking the lead. The involvement and interests of local businesses are very important. When business owners are concerned about their town's appearance and identity, they are more willing to invest time and money into developing and maintaining the town's historic character. Keep in mind that partnerships between public and private interests in the community are often the most successful method for reaching long-term goals.

List your community assets and plan actions to enhance them. Take advantage of the organizations and agencies that assist or provide information for working with historic resources. Find out what other communities have done and discuss ideas with others. Learn more about Main Street and other programs offered through the Kentucky Heritage Council. Investigate local and regional programs that offer assistance.

Work with others and encourage community groups to develop a set of guidelines for identifying and emphasizing the distinguishing features of your area. Consider each of the characteristics of a healthy downtown: distinctive community characteristics, factors involved with an ongoing economic vitality, a good mix of residential and business spaces, invested interest in building a thriving community, and an appealing, convenient streetscape. Carefully consider options in the restoration, reuse, and new construction of buildings. Use these guidelines as a tool for decision making and issues that may come up now and in the future of your program.

Contact your county Extension office or any of the following agencies and organizations for more information on revitalizing your community and working with historic resources. Listed below are some selected national and state organizations. Investigate organizations and municipal departments that work with and make decisions about historic resources in your area or region.

## National and State Organizations

### Association for Preservation Technology International

4513 Lincoln Avenue, Suite 213

Lisle, IL 60532

Phone: (630) 968-6400

Fax: (888) 723-4242

<http://www.apti.org/>

### Kentucky Heritage Council

Kentucky State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and

Kentucky Main Street Program

300 Washington Street

Frankfort, KY 40601

Phone: (502) 564-7005

Fax: (502) 564-5820

<http://www.kyheritage.org>

### National Park Service

National Center for Preservation Technology and Training

645 College Avenue

Natchitoches, LA 71457

Phone: (318) 356-7444

Fax: (318) 356-9119

<http://www.ncptt.nps.gov/>

### National Trust for Historic Preservation

National Main Street Center

1785 Massachusetts Avenue NW

Washington, DC 20036

Phone: (202) 588-6219

Fax: (202) 588-6050

<http://www.mainst.org>

### National Trust Statewide Initiative

Preservation Kentucky

P.O. Box 5123

Frankfort, KY 40602

Phone: (856) 236-0236

<http://www.preservationkentucky.org/>

Web site information regarding the Preserve America program and award winners: <http://www.preserveamerica.gov/index.html>

For more information regarding Renaissance Kentucky program: <http://www.gold.ky.gov/renmain/>

Governor's Office for Local Development.

Phone: (502) 573-2382

Toll-free Phone: (800) 346-5606.

For more information on a variety of historic resources, grants assistance, how-to advice on care and preservation of older buildings, travel to historic places, and more on people, objects, etc. – a wealth of information!

National Parks Service Web Site

Links to the Past

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/>

## References:

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Kentucky Main Street – The first 20 Years 1979-1999. Kentucky Heritage Council/The State Historic Preservation Office, Frankfort, KY. Printed by the Downtown Henderson Project. November 1999.

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