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WILL SUCCESS SPOIL OUR HISTORIC DISTRICTS?

BY

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ABSTRACT

Historic districts in our nation's older cities continue to enjoy a rehabilitation and revitalization trend which began some 20 years ago, and accelerated as new housing costs and transportation costs soared in the 70's. These districts have become the focal point of destination advertising by chambers of commerce and tourism promoters. Unfortunately, planning for visitor accommodation has been all but ignored in most cities even while more and more dollars are pumped into promotion. Conflicts between visitors and district residents have already reached crisis levels in some cities, and even worse situations are now developing. This paper highlights some of these problem areas, points out some encouraging developments toward potential solutions, and points the way for further study of the problem.

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ROOTS

It usually begins with one person or family, either through economic necessity, sheer love of preservation, or both. In any case, it takes courage, patience and fortitude. Slowly, others join them. From a desire to add protection for themselves and their economic investment (and often simply out of pride for their accomplishments), they begin holding open house and garden tours to attract even more people into the area. They petition the local, state and federal governments for recognized status, and if successful, an "historic district" is formed.

The local historical or preservation society often asks for fees or donations for viewing its holdings as a means of raising the necessary funds--sometimes as a match for additional government funding--to continue development and maintenance of its sites and structures. The society may place property sales advertisements in Preservation News. Local residents plan a "special event"--old fashioned, of course--which also gets notice in EN. The chamber of commerce begins listing the district as one of the "places to see" while visiting the locality. At some point, just as with a nuclear reactor, a critical mass is attained; the historic district becomes a full-fledged attraction.

Articles begin to appear in newspapers and Sunday supplements. Brochures are developed and photos of the district appear in the locality's publicity. Local hoteliers, eager to attract group business, use the district as part of their destination sales spiel. Full spreads in glorious color appear in Southern Living and Better Homes and Gardens, complete with recipes for local or regional dishes. Gray Line or some local charter company adjusts its tour route to include the district, and the first bus loads of tourists arrive.

In general, historic district residents and preservation societies alike are ecstatic over these first major signs of the district's debut on the historical scene; of the recognition by "outsiders" of the importance of this heretofore neglected jewel. Tourism and its economic importance to the community arm district residents with needed ammunition to lever local government into further public improvements in the area, and provide the society with promises of additional lucre for their coffers. All is right with the world!

BUSES, BUSES EVERYWHERE

But, over time the buses keep multiplying as though some Frankensteinian scientist were cloning them in a laboratory in underground Detroit. (In 1975, about 400 chartered buses overnights in Richmond, Virginia. By 1980, that figure had zoomed to more than 3000.) "Diesel" becomes an irksome word to district residents with sensitive noses and ears. In some districts, horse-drawn carriages, private automobiles and bicycles compete with the buses for street space, adding their own unique forms of pollution. Local government councils begin hearing petitions from residents involving such diverse issues as designated bike paths, pedestrian-only areas, and horsediepers. Without doubt, however, the major issues revolve around the 44 passenger behemoths. All is no longer right with the world.

Petitions become more strident and demanding. Eventually another critical mass is reached and open conflict erupts between preservationists and residents on one side and the chamber of commerce and tour operators on the other. (In Charleston, South Carolina a moratorium is declared against all tour buses in the historic district while a newly reconstituted Mayor's Tourism Management Committee attempts to establish guidelines for traffic into the area.)

Historic site and district development and management plans, where they exist at all, seldom squarely address the issue of carrying capacities or potential conflicts of interest between local residents and visitors. It is only when an area has become successful in attracting significant numbers of visitors that these issues surface.

The National Park Service has had a long and moderately successful history of dealing with tourists in large numbers, including those arriving by motorcoach. But this experience has been limited, for the most part, to western parks with large land areas, allowing for development expansion. In most recent years, the NPS has assumed responsibility for dozens of historic sites--sometimes individual structures--located predominately in the East and usually in more dense surroundings with little room for such amenities as bus parking facilities. As with the official historic district designation,

managment by the NFS seems to spur both the recognition and attractiveness of a site as a tourist destination, and the NFS can fully expect to begin experiencing the problems now being faced by other historic districts. Although the NFS has been battling the "Gettysburg Problem" for years, it may be supplied with its first truly critical bus carrying capacity test with the opening of the Maggie Walker house in Richmond, Virginia.

CRITICAL MASS

The point in time at which conflict between historic district residents and tour buses erupts is essentially determined by three major criteria: the physical size of the district, its trafficways and its architecture; its proximity to other compatible attractions; and the success of its promotional efforts--or those of its neighbors--in attracting visitors. The synergistic effect of these three is, of course, modified to some degree by larger outside influences, such as the economy, general weather conditions and demographics. Group travel, especially by motorcoach, is on the rise, and all indications are that the above influences tend to support a continuation of these increases, particularly in the sunbelt.

Charleston, which exemplifies the critical mass conflict theory, also illustrates the effect of the three-criteria formula mentioned earlier. Its historic district is relatively small and isolated on a peninsula with limited access and egress points. Its streets are narrow and its architecture generally fine-grained and close-packed. The successful development and promotion of Historic Savannah to the south helped create a "historic tour route" in the region, with Charleston a prime stop. Charleston's development of the enormously successful Spoleto Festival, feature articles in every major tourism promotion publication in the country, efforts of the chamber and the Charleston County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission-- including the Miss USA pageant--all combined to bring more and still more visitors to the area. In the mid-1970's, Kiawah Island resort opened. Subsequent resort development of other area islands brought heretofore undreamed of numbers of visitors to the Charleston area. This was particularly evident in the summer, which had always been a rather slack season in Charleston.

Local development and construction boomed. Lodging establishments in Charleston County increased the number of rooms by 146 percent during the decade of the seventies, and in 1980 alone another 35 percent. The City of Charleston has received proposals for new construction to 1984 of 3456 rooms, or an increase of 71 percent from the current number. From 1974 to 1979, the Festival of Houses almost doubled in tour attendance. Few planners or forecasters were prepared for this.

Although Charleston may appear to be one of the first to reach a perceived level of critical mass which caused it to take some drastic measure, it is not alone, nor is it even the first in taking some of the actions. New Orleans has banned tour buses in the French Quarter pending completion of a new transportation study. Baltimore is proposing the licensing of all sightseeing guides to at least control the types and quality of tours, even if not the quantity. St Augustine has developed a unique public/private parking lot system surrounding its historic core, and Savannah is proposing regulation of horse-drawn vehicles. These

cities, plus Annapolis, Maryland and Monterey, California, are all considering alternative transportation modes to tour bus entry into their historic districts--alternatives which include mini-buses, shuttles and trolleys. Most are also looking to some form of licensing and quotas to control traffic volumes.

THE GUILTY PARTY?

Too often, preservationists depict the historic district as the pristine virgin and the tour bus operator as the rapacious ogre in this tale of conflict. In fact there are no ogres, only conflicts of legitimate interests. These conflicts are just another twist on the basic mission conflict which has plagued the National Park Service for years--preservation versus use. Without the ability to be viewed and appreciated by the public, historic districts lose most of their "raison d'être", not to mention revenues. In today's economic and short energy situation, tour buses provide one of the most cost-effective and energy-efficient modes of travel. To certain groups, such as senior citizens or some foreign visitors, group touring by motorcoach is the only viable mode. The National Tour Brokers Association, and more recently the newer American Bus Association, are both aware of this growing conflict and the need for an equitable, non-emotional resolution. For years, they have concentrated on consumer protection in both safety and quality of experience through stringent membership requirements, by offering educational programs for their members, and by lobbying for responsible federal government regulations. Now they realize that even further involvement with local governments, resident action groups and historical societies is necessary as their growing business begins to strain local resources and handling capabilities of destination communities. Rather than approaching these problems on a piece-meal basis, the NTBA has just established a non-profit foundation dedicated to furtherance of research into all aspects of touring, including study directed toward possible solutions to the conflict under discussion.

If villainy must be assigned, it should appear in the guise of neglect by city and regional planners and officials who have failed to consider tourism planning and development as part of their duties. Transportation, a major element in tourism, has been restricted by most planners to "satisficing" local resident commuter needs. Most master plans of land use and transportation at the local level do not even address the issue of tourism, although many give it "lip service" in their goal statements.

CAVALRY TO THE RESCUE?

It is obvious that tourism growth, including the rapid acceleration in the group tour area, will not disappear by being ignored. It will only lead to larger problems, more strident conflict and in some extreme cases, to destruction of the attraction which generates it. Donald Appleyard, in *The Conservation of European Cities*, decries what tourism overload has done to many of the historic districts such as in Venice, where residents and artisans have been driven away, and tourists view merely "dummy" craftsmen in a make-believe play, similar to Williamsburg

and Sturbridge in this country. The value to many in visiting historic districts is the realization that real people live and work there; that there is an alternative to the cookie cutter suburban style of architecture and endless daily freeway commutings.

Fortunately, private industry in the form of the NTBA Foundation and other emerging groups is not the only sector involved in much needed research and study of these problems. The subject of tourism planning may shortly be one of the topics addressed by the National Policy Coordinating Committee of the American Planning Association. The National Park Service has recently declared travel and accessibility to its sites a priority issue. Universities across the country are developing curricula and research schedules which include travel and tourism.

ROOTS REVISITED

We have long recognized in this country that freedom to travel is a basic right. Now we are finally recognizing that right carries responsibilities; to the traveler, to the transporter, and to the residents of the areas visited. This recognition is the first step toward solving many of the conflicts now surfacing in the burgeoning travel industry, not the least of which is the continued redevelopment and preservation of our nation's historic districts, and their appropriate and compatible use as destination areas.

Because historic district revitalization is generally an internal "grass roots" operation or the result of gentrification, it is difficult to establish any master planning methodology prior to the district beginning to revitalize. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that not all towns and cities have the same municipal structure nor the same relationships between public and private sector organizations. In one location a municipal department of tourism may exist; in another the chamber of commerce may be the more appropriate agency to play the "watchdog" role in tourism development. And in many instances, the historic district may never reach the stage of attraction which creates major problems. In any case, an "intervention strategy" should be developed among all concerned agencies, with one designated as having primary responsibility for oversight and coordination of tourism data collection and dissemination.

While there is no formula for determining how many buses entering a district constitute too many, somewhat objective limits may be established using the three major criteria described under the "Critical Mass" section of this paper. In addition to developing these limits in the district's bus carrying capacity, the locality should investigate and decide upon the most appropriate mix of actions to be taken should these limits be approached or exceeded. These actions may include a quota system on a first-come basis, peripheral bus parking facilities, special vehicles for the district (trams, streetcars, mini-buses) or designated time slots for district access. The optimum solution will undoubtedly evolve as a compromise between perceived needs and the locality's ability to support such infrastructure facilities and services. Most important is the early identification of an agreement on the critical mass limitations and actions to be taken prior to reaching those limits and their subsequent conflicts.

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