

Preservation Perspectives



Little brass plaques can motivate entire communities to make preservation a priority.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS
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Rewarding Good Works

Historic preservation is about more than paint, wood, slate, and steel. It's also about image, morale, motivation, and even politics. No house is an island; every building is part of a community, one that can choose to encourage preservation and support the renewal it brings. Anyone involved in restoring a house knows it can be long, costly, lonely work that leads to people feeling isolated, even neglected. Our city of Peekskill, New York, discovered a clever way to help break through this cycle of restoration frustration and stimulate preservation at the same time: a historic plaque awards program. Our program gives old-house restorers an added incentive—a "medal" that's a vivid, permanent symbol of how much the community values their efforts. It has been so successful at promoting preservation—motivating members of the community, generating positive publicity, and assuring residents and outsiders alike that preservation is a top priority in Peekskill—that my wife Celine and I think it can serve as a model for other cities around the country.



An 1895 postcard shows the diversity of Peekskill's architectural inheritance.

Carrots, Sticks, and Plaques

Here in Peekskill, a small city of about 25,000 souls on the Hudson River, we've faced more than our share of preservation challenges. In the 19th century, Peekskill was known as the Gem of the Hudson, a thriving hub of wood-burning stove, brick, and agricultural tool manufacturers. By the 1950s, the de-industrialization of the North had sent Peekskill's economy plummeting. Urban renewal ripped through the city like a



Mayor John Testa awards homeowners a plaque on the porch of their restored 1890 house.



Repairs to Victorian details like gingerbread trim and shingle imbrication often measure a restoration's depth.

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Winners, like this bungalow with unique porch columns, are profiled on a website.

federally funded tornado, annihilating 350 buildings. When city planners bent on redevelopment targeted the Herrick House, a Victorian-era masterpiece designed by William Rutherford Mead of McKim, Mead, and White, preservationists decided that the slaughter had to end. Banding together, they purchased Herrick House in 1976 and turned it into the Peekskill Museum, an act that helped bring the urban renewal era to a close. These same folks dreamed up the city's first historic plaque program, aimed at honoring buildings with history and helping prevent their destruction. It was the starting point for what we have today.

In the beginning, the plaque awards were completely volunteer-driven, but as the program grew, organizers approached the government for sponsorship. Seeing the benefits of stepped-up preservation efforts—including turnarounds in spotty neighborhoods—the government agreed to partner with the program. This opened the door to more funding and grant opportunities, at both the federal and state level, for homeowners doing restoration work.

Peekskill's modern plaque program evolved through Mayor John Testa, who was elected in 2002. Before then, Testa was known around town for the dedicated preservation of his family's 1920s bungalow, going so far as to disassemble each window, repair the components, and put them back together. He brought the same focus and dedication to his mayoralty, beginning a revitalization rooted in preservation that aimed at transforming the city. Testa started working with the Historic Preservation Advisory Commission (HPAC) that oversees the plaque awards—by then a city government-named volunteer board (one my wife, Celine, chaired for years)—to completely revamp the program to honor and encourage the work of historic preservationists, publicize Peekskill among preservation professionals, and showcase the city's extensive historic housing stock.

Publicity and outreach are integral parts of our plaque awards process. Starting each spring, the seven-person HPAC team solicits requests for nominations. Anyone in the commu-



Paint can be another measure of restoration success, as on this polychrome porch.

From stone-accented bungalows to wood-beamed Tudors, house repairs are judged on their faithfulness to individual, original styles.



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Attentive repair of the oriel window and arched entry made this Tudor a shoe-in for a nomination.

nity who has seen preservation work they like can nominate a building. The advisory council usually receives about 30 nominations and whittles these down to 12 finalists on the basis of historic accuracy, quality of work, authenticity of materials, and hurdles overcome in the restoration process. Finalists are then submitted to an independent board of jurors, consisting of four architects, who then vote on nominees. The jurors work in the region but live outside of town—an important qualification that helps avoid complaints of favoritism. The plaques are coveted by the nominees, and the judging is very competitive.

This year, six homeowners received individualized plaques highlighting the year their house was built and the Peekskill Preservation Award logo. Awards are presented in the fall at a gala dinner shown live on the government-run cable channel. As part of their acceptance speech, winners get to discuss their project on TV, adding to their time in the sun. Homeowners are expected to exterior-mount the plaques within a year, which adds to the program's visibility and success.

The value of a good plaque program extends beyond restoration. It can also help attract tourists, define historic districts, and bolster funds available for community grant money. If you're really lucky, it can even get the neighborhood-at-large to start batting around my wife's favorite refrain: "Is that house plaque-worthy?" 🏠



A proud homeowner shows off his plaque, a lasting symbol of his community's appreciation.

Creating a Program

Any community hoping to encourage preservation should create a plaque awards program. Here are some steps to take when starting your own:

1 Decide what you're going to reward. Longevity? Restoration work? Setting strict criteria is a crucial component. Peekskill's current rules say that buildings must predate 1940, should have original windows and siding, and be substantially intact as built.

2 Find a partner, preferably the city government or local independent historical society. Having a partner helps to spread the workload and also gives the awards more clout.

3 Recruit preservationists to your advisory committee. People not involved in preservation often have a difficult time understanding what makes a project special—or terrible. It's crucial to have committee members who know about everything from choosing historically appropriate colors to dealing with recalcitrant contractors.

4 Find local architects with an extensive knowledge of your community and invite them to sit on the judging panel. Communities with significant preservationist movements draw the attention of local and regional architects specializing in preservation. A good resource for finding them is often the local planning department, because the city government is usually involved in the process of granting building permits.

5 Establish contacts with the local media. Publicity is one of the most important aspects of any plaque program. Find out who at

your local paper covers real estate, building, and do-it-yourself activities, and ask them to be a judge—if their papers' policy permits it.

6 Understand the political nature of the program. Preservation involves change, which by its nature involves politics. Programs should reach out to people on all sides of the red/blue divide, and never play favorites. One of the most challenging tasks Peekskill's HPAC had to face was when Mayor Testa's house was nominated for a plaque. Luckily, the independent judges awarded it first place, muting any complaints about special treatment of the city's leader.

7 Budget about \$200 apiece for the plaques. Bronze, full-sized plaques aren't cheap. Some communities reach out to local hardware retailers and contractors for sponsorship dollars to pay for plaques. In Peekskill, the plaque program is important enough that the local government funds it—but all refreshments at the awards dinner are paid for with sponsorship dollars.

8 Schedule a timeline and stick to it. This is critical, given the many elements that need to fit together in a plaque program. Start by setting the date of the awards ceremony, then work backwards. You'll need four to six weeks to get plaques made, two to three weeks to submit nominees to judges and get responses, and about a month to get the initial nominees and evaluate them.

9 Make the awarding of plaques a broadcast and social event. Virtually every city with a cable system also has a government access channel; that's where Peekskill's plaque awards are presented live each year. This helps publicize, and humanize, the preservationist movement.