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# Nothing Should Stand for Something That Never Existed

Joseph S. Wood

Few Midwestern cities have anything resembling such unique or historically important cultural resources as Faneuil Hall Market Place, Independence Square, Vieux Carré, or the Palace of the Governors. Common to Midwestern cities, however, are clusters of old buildings that have been converted into entertainment places. As Robert Riley recently commented, one can flag a taxi in any substantial city and ask to be taken to the local renewed-warehouse entertainment district.<sup>1</sup>

Such districts, which often still house wholesaling or light manufacturing, provide key ingredients for Jane Jacobs' recipe for urban renewal.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the depersonalized, disassociated, megascale structures in central business districts (CBDs), clusters of older buildings near CBDs provide cultural memory, antique texture, human scale, environmental diversity, and the potential for economic gain through adaptive reuse—the elements that Peirce Lewis has identified for functional historic preservation.<sup>3</sup> As a result, investment has spurred preservation or, more correctly, metamorphosis of these districts. Unfortunately, the transformation process has too often produced pseudoplaces—places made over to be something they never were. In large part this product reflects the historicist expectations of owners, developers, and

members of preservation review commissions. But does it need to? The Old Market in Omaha, NE, illustrates how in consciously avoiding contrivance, in not trying to create something that never existed, the act of preservation can still produce an attractive and successful converted warehouse district.

## Converted Warehouse Districts

Plain old buildings hold special attraction for aesthetic as well as economic reasons due to “self-context,” i.e., a clustering of similar buildings creating a coherent but not monotonous landscape. Entire block faces contain structures related in texture and scale which maintain their individuality in their remaining original detailing and in their long and well-used appearance. These districts are not, of course, “old towns” or main streets characterized by “shoppes.” They are not gateways or sites of particularly historic events. What identifies or characterizes these converted clusters is not the past but their modern manifestation. They are not old some-things. They have been metamorphosed. They are warehouse districts that have been converted into new entertainment places.

Because of their current popularity, such places form or may yet form a new symbolic landscape that is analogous to the highway

strip.<sup>4</sup> Converted warehouse districts are not as pervasive as the strip, of course, but certainly they reflect an appeal that is notably symbolic. Donald Meinig argues that symbolic landscapes “arise out of deep cultural processes as a society adapts to new environments, technologies, and opportunities, and as it reformulates its basic concepts relating to family, community, and the good life.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the popularity of converted warehouse districts may be in part a response to the pervasiveness of the strip. Both the highway strip and the warehouse district provide entertainment in its broad connotation. They offer opportunity for mingling with others, for shopping, for dining and drinking, or for just hanging out. In this regard they complement one another, and each attempts to build on its own popular conception. The strip plays on its convenience, its comfort, its cleanliness, and even its newness. When Severance Center was built in Cleveland, OH, 20 years ago, it was noted for its radical departure from shopping-center design. Now it is being renovated to make the complex look “just built.”<sup>6</sup> The warehouse district, in contrast, plays on its nostalgic character, even though it is also a new place.

Old things are attractive because of the prevalence in our society, increasingly

manifest in the landscape, of an implied notion of retrogression—the concept that our predecessors led a life superior to ours. The notion hardly needs elaboration. And, of course, it is ridiculous. But landscapes of nostalgia whether in Disneyland or downtown, can provide solace to anyone who wishes to be fooled. Thus, Robert Riley worries that our fondness for landscapes of nostalgia illustrates how unsatisfactory our relation with contemporary landscapes (including shopping centers and strips) is and how willing we are to fantasize.<sup>7</sup> Thus, converted warehouse districts generally share a sense of being what Grady Clay has called an “epitome district”—a place that “stands for other things,” that “generates metaphors.”<sup>8</sup>

Such contrivance takes the form of preservation polychromy: controlled preservation in which colors, signage, and other ornamentation representing historic motifs are manipulated according to a preconceived system for specific aesthetic ends. Wherever preservation polychromy is emblematic of the past, subtly as in Larimer Square in Denver, or more blatantly as in Iowa Falls, IA, it creates a pseudoplace that never existed before but which alludes to historicism by conscious mimicry or imitation. Historicism means the fostering or adoption



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**1 Larimer Square** Larimer Square in Denver illustrates the use of preservation polychromy. (Photograph by Joseph Wood)



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**2 Iowa Falls, Iowa** Preservation polychromy in Iowa Falls, IA. (Photograph by Joseph Wood)

of undue reliance upon historical forms and styles to the point of fabricating antique ornamentation, or producing conceit. Producing conceit not only precludes easy adaptation but also precludes reworking a design to allow balance of permanence and novelty in response to changing opportunities for use of a structure or a place. Unfortunately, the present practice of historic preservation, especially in pursuit of tax incentives, too often encourages such conceit by invoking preconceived ideas of aesthetic and functional purity. When preservation commissions carry out architectural-design review, for instance, predetermined universal standards of preservation are necessarily imposed.<sup>9</sup> The result of contrivance, whether it is a consequence of design review or simply of historicist notions, is a pseudoplace, a place that stands for something that never existed.

### Omaha's Old Market Historic District

In contrast to places experiencing preservation

polychromy is the rejuvenation of Omaha's Old Market Historic District.<sup>10</sup> The name suggests that the Market is similar to Denver's Larimer Square, but that is not the case. In Omaha's Market old structures are being successfully reused and renewed, not restored or preserved; they are complemented by innovative and attractive modern design.

Omaha's Market is located in the eastern section of downtown Omaha about five blocks from the Missouri River. The five and one-half blocks of the present National Register District are characterized by wholesale jobbing houses which were developed from the 1870s to the early 1900s as part of a distribution center for goods that were shipped on the Union Pacific Railroad and its branch lines. Omaha took advantage of its location as the eastern terminus of the transcontinental railroad to develop itself as a major distribution center when Nebraska experienced an unparalleled boom during the 1880s. Warehouses and

associated structures to house this wholesaling activity replaced an existing residential neighborhood.

Firms in the Market specialized in dry goods, hardware, agricultural implements, liquor, and produce. Commission merchants who handled mainly fruits and vegetables were especially concentrated along Howard Street from 10th to 11th Streets and north and south from 11th and Howard, where some still operate. These produce dealers were next to the Public Market, from which the area derives its current name. A few wholesalers were also manufacturers. Retail and service activities were relatively scarce, but several hotels, small restaurants, and a number of saloons served the workers in the Market. Some buildings have been adapted to modern transportation requirements, but, as would be expected, wholesaling and its related activities have been declining for many years in the Market, and the nature of the place has been considerably altered in the last generation.

Bird's Eye View of Wholesale District,  
Omaha, Neb.



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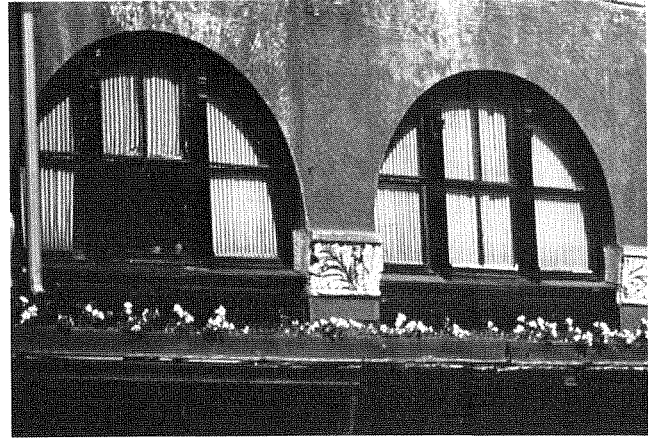
The Market's remaining buildings exist as substantial and representative structures of the late nineteenth century. The utilitarian nature of these buildings dictated their form: Variations on masonry bearing walls and wooden-floor joist-construction—often with interior columns of wood or cast iron in place of masonry walls to allow more open loft space. Architects turned to historicism (ironically, for the lesson here!) to create distinctive street façades, using familiar styles, especially those then prevalent in Chicago.

Although the vast majority of the building exteriors in the Market are made of brick, cast-iron fronts, metal cornices, stone trim, and metal sidewalk canopies (attached to several buildings where produce was marketed) also contribute to the Market's architectural character. Today the structures retain their integrity, and the number of intrusions is small. Alterations have been limited mostly to first floors, and several buildings have full façades that are essentially intact.

Although the Market was a wholesale jobbing district, it has become a fashionable and prosperous retail shopping and entertainment place. In the mid-1960s after the decline of food wholesaling the Mercer family, which had owned a number of buildings in the Market since the 1880s, sought new enterprises. First the Market attracted "head" shops, then it drew art galleries, theaters, restaurants, bars, boutiques, bookstores, import shops, and apartments. Commercial rejuvenation and residential development in the Market have spread beyond the original four blocks as the Market has become a significant local attraction. The Market is vital and capable of expanding further; it has become one of the most attractive of many such districts in cities across the country.

### The Old Market Concept

A good part of the success of the Market is due to its character and to the philosophy behind its redevelopment. The Market was not contrived or



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fabricated. Although a National Register District, little explicit historical reference is invoked and contemporary design has been widely incorporated in renovation. Nevertheless, continuity with the past is important and has been maintained by remnants of the past, by the structures themselves, of course, and also by the presence of light manufacturing, petty wholesalers, and commission merchants. Remnant graphics also establish a continuity with the past. New graphics in historical styles are discouraged.

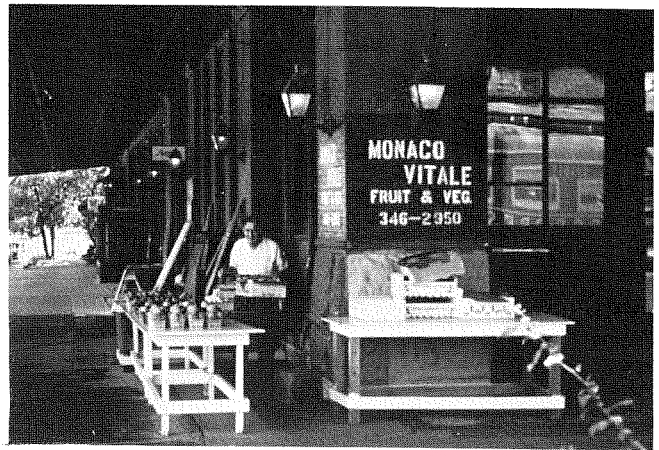
The center of the market can be identified, but no single structure takes attention away from the contribution that each structure makes to the overall sense of place. No particular structure epitomizes the Market, although certain complexes, such as those structures near the center of the Market interconnected by the metal canopies, and certain interiors, such as an enclosed passageway that blends modern touches with old brick, elicit recognition. Effect counts. Buildings are

**3 Bird's Eye View** Omaha's Old Market about 1910. (Postcard courtesy of Mrs. John Farr, Omaha, NE)

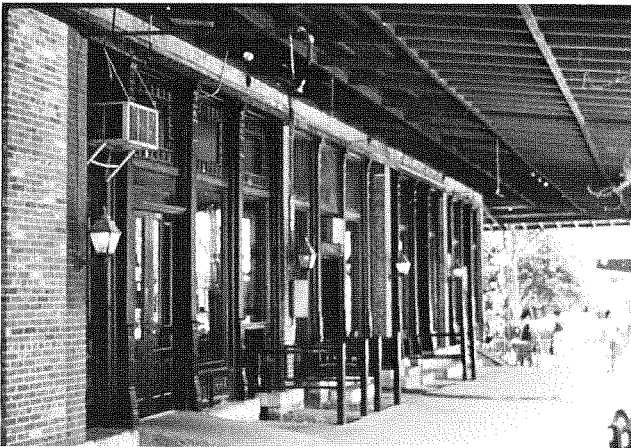
**4 Character** The Market's nineteenth-century warehouses were utilitarian in function, and historicism served to create distinction. The metal canopy was a functional addition. (Photograph courtesy of the Omaha City Planning Department)



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**5 Howard Street** This view west along Howard Street on a weekday morning illustrates the liveliness, character, and essential charm of the Market.  
(Photograph by Joseph Wood)

**6 Interconnection** Metal canopies provide inter-connection from bay to bay, but no attempt is made to hide function or to make over a structure into something it never was.  
(Photograph by Joseph Wood)

**7 Monaco Vitale** Historical connection in the Market is manifested by the continued presence of produce merchants, here at the corner of 11th and Howard Streets, the geographical center of the Market.  
(Photograph by Joseph Wood)

**8 Passageway** The Market's enclosed passageway houses a number of restaurants and shops and serves as a distinctively identifiable element within the Market that harmoniously blends new and old.  
(Photograph by Joseph Wood)

associated with one another, and the entire district is used. Texture, human scale, and interrelated commercial and residential activities provide a universalizing coherence to the Market.

The Market's effect is further enhanced by attempts to avoid a sharp boundary or edge. For instance, cars have complete access to the Market around the clock. Streets are not set aside or cut off from the rest of the downtown area for pedestrian use. The presence of cars gives a sense of activity and access and security, just as a full parking lot at a suburban shopping mall invites use. To close off streets would create a false environment.

Finally, the Market is not kept especially clean. Dirt, grime, and the personality (and personalities) of its location near the CBD redeem the Market and make it a real place. Conspicuous and unrealistic standards of upkeep, as in a museum, hardly reflect an environment meant to be used.

The philosophical underpinning of the Market's conversion reflects this lack of contrivance in the landscape: Nothing should stand for something that never existed. The head of the Mercer Management Company, the major property owner and the prime force in conversion, articulates this philosophy. To a variable degree

neighbors have adopted the philosophy. Mark Mercer believes that preconceived ideas should not be imposed on buildings. He prefers "to use the building to suggest solutions—to enter into a conversation with the building and to draw responses from it." He strives to retain the basic style of buildings, to establish harmony with the original design. He also recognizes that the use of modern touches can conform quite well to his principles as the buildings and the spaces within and around them are converted to new commercial and residential uses.

Time has allowed and continues to allow for such innovation in design. The Market is a concept, to be sure, but its design was never conceived as a whole package, the market was never cut from whole cloth. The material manifestation of the concept is constantly being reworked as structures are adapted and converted. The concept, in Mercer's words, is simple:

The Old Market depends for its success on having a different character from suburban communities or shopping centers, from commercial strips and from today's downtown sections, different even from too quaint restorations. The character we see in it and would like to enhance is that of a residential and commercial community

which is also a cultural center. It should, for example, be a focal point for such civilized activities as the arts, fashion, cuisine, etc. The atmosphere we wish is one of creativity, simplicity and style.

Consequently, Mercer Management imposes its own design review on lessees:

Each individual business adds to or detracts from the whole effect and feeling of the area. For this reason, in addition to seeking businesses of a nature which contributes to our goal, we find it essential, in order to preserve and improve in the character of the Old Market, to restrict our tenants in the matter of decoration.

Restrictions apply largely to principal façade changes, garish signs, flashing lights, and other "undesirable elements" which might otherwise appear. The code is largely subjective. Too objective a code would stifle imagination.

### Meaning of the Market

Ironically, the success of the Mercers and the relative success at redevelopment of the adjacent CBD has encouraged imitation—the worst form of flattery. Mercer says that recent historicist decoration of a hotel in the Market trivializes the building by

forcing associations, much as advertisers appeal to consumers with a positive image that has nothing to do with a product. On the other hand, while Mercer does not approve the use of a pagoda canopy for a new oriental restaurant in an original structure in the Market, at least it is frank. In addition, the current zeal for redevelopment in downtown Omaha, which was spurred by the apparent success of Omaha's new Central Park Mall and related adaptive reuse projects a few blocks away, has had a bittersweet effect on the Market. Pedestrian traffic to the Market has increased as mall-goers search out entertainment. However, the expansion of office-building construction and provision for parking threatens the stock of older buildings available between the Market and the Mall and within the designated National Register District.

As a result of such varied but wholly expectable intrusions and assaults in and about the Market, for the first time since the passage of Omaha's preservation ordinance in 1977 Market owners have expressed very real interest for local designation of the Market as a historic district. The owners wish to impose design review on the alteration of any more structures, to preserve the contemporary character of the Market as a converted warehouse district, not to certify history. This design-





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**9 Frankness** The addition of a pagoda canopy to the front of a Market warehouse on Howard Street is at least frank. (Photograph by Joseph Wood)

review process had previously been the impediment to owner concurrence for local designation. It will become the vehicle for imposing guidelines to protect the Market from preservation polychromy, pagoda canopies, demolition, and historic preservation.

Because the Market is unique, universal standards—no matter how flexible in intent—are inappropriate. Again, too objective a code would stifle imaginative design. Thus, the Omaha Preservation Commission has worked closely with Market owners to produce a set of guidelines that enhance conversion, not necessarily preservation, by requiring public hearing and commission and city council approval for demolition. The guidelines suggest appropriate and inappropriate ways to convert structures and place strict limits only on signage. The guidelines, in effect, reflect what Mercer Management has long practiced: Nothing should stand for something that never existed.

### Conclusion

The experience of Omaha's Old Market raises serious questions about the practice of historic preservation. People are clearly attracted to converted warehouse districts. That will not change. What causes the attraction? Authenticity, antiquarianism, historicism,

or the feel of a place? Need design of converted warehouse districts, or for that matter any historic districts, be contrived to ensure authenticity or antiquarianism or historicism? Need standards for preservation be so explicit and be applied so rigorously that they produce conceit?

It is one thing to outlaw sandblasting of brick exteriors and to require that mullions conform to original plans. It is quite another to deny imaginative design that maintains a structure's integrity while harmoniously employing modern design touches that may alter appearance and create something new and bold that avoids contrivance. Avoiding contrivance, as Omaha's Old Market does, encourages the integration and association of structures and elements within structures that transcend historical period or architectural style. Avoiding contrivance allows for rethinking and reworking designs, for continued conversion. Avoiding contrivance means not invoking a history that never was and does not create pseudoplaces.

NOTES

- 1 Robert B. Riley, "Speculations on the New American Landscapes," 24 *Landscape* 3(1980), p. 6.
- 2 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, NY: Random House, 1961), p. 187.
- 3 Peirce F. Lewis, "The Future of the Past: Our Clouded Vision of Historic Preservation," 7 *Pioneer America* 2(July, 1975), pp. 1–20.
- 4 John Fraser Hart, "The Bypass Strip as an Ideal Landscape," 72 *Geographical Review* 2(April, 1982), pp. 218–223.
- 5 Donald W. Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by D. W. Meinig (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 184.
- 6 Press release on Severence Center, July, 1984.
- 7 Riley, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- 8 Grady Clay, *Close-up: How to Read the American City* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1973), p. 38.
- 9 See W. Brown Morton and Gary L. Hume, *The Secretary of Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation Projects* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1980), which are not intended to be so inflexibly applied.
- 10 National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Old Market Historic District (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1979).