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Buildings tell the story of past, present and future Worcester

AS I SEE IT

By Deborah Packard

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I have always been drawn to buildings — most often, but not always, to older ones. The great ones are works of art that reflect the ideas, culture, and values of the times in which they were built.

Worcester is blessed with a wealth of signature structures — Union Station, Mechanics Hall, the Worcester Memorial Auditorium, City Hall and others. They harken back to an era when Worcester was thriving and buildings were grand and ambitious. They are expressions of who we were and what we aspired to be. They incorporated excellent designs, used the finest materials, and were built by gifted craftspeople.

Worcester's first schoolhouse was a simple wooden structure built in 1738 and measuring 24 feet by 16 feet. It is marked by a plaque along the sidewalk in front of the Lincoln Square courthouse. Our country's second president, John Adams, taught there. The earliest Worcester school building still standing is the former Oxford Street School. Built in 1847 at the corner of Oxford and Pleasant streets, it is a simple Greek revival structure, which unfortunately had a modern entrance added. It is now the Rob Roy Academy. The Ash Street School, the second oldest school standing today, was designed by prominent local architect Elbridge Boyden, who also designed Mechanics Hall. Built in the Italianate style with a square, low-hipped roof and decorative brickwork, the building now houses condominiums and commercial space.

In Worcester's heyday, school buildings received all the attention and care that went into other important buildings. They were built in the style of their times and often designed by prominent architects. But during the Depression and World War II, school construction nearly came to a halt. Since then, most school buildings have been low, utilitarian structures with ribbons of windows.

As times change, grand old school buildings inevitably become obsolete. Nineteenth-century schools did not have gymnasiums, auditoriums, libraries, lunchrooms and other amenities now considered essential. Choices need to be made: Does it make sense to alter them or phase them out? Ultimately, quality of education and economics dictate those decisions.

As schools change roles, it is critical that they remain an active part of the community and architectural landscape. Two historic schools are currently going through the city's planning process. The Dartmouth Street School, designed by noted architect George Clemence, and the Adams Street School are being proposed for condominium complexes. They will make unique and wonderful residences, as have the former North High and Bloomingdale schools.

This ongoing process will continue to present opportunities to make decisions to meet current needs while preserving the long-term value of historic buildings.

Past experience offers valuable lessons. The Quinsigamond School is a modern building with a historic legacy. In the planning stages, an 1889 school building and a Carnegie Library were slated for demolition to make way for a new building. But in 1995, after a heated community debate and with strong intervention from local preservationists, Worcester's Lamoureux-Pagano Associates designed an innovative new structure that included the old school building, the historic library, and new construction. A controversial decision resulted in a fine example of contemporary design enriched by incorporating the past.

But there have been losses as well. Designed by Henry Hobson Richardson, considered one of America's greatest architects, the original Classical High School was built in 1870 and converted to the High School of Commerce in 1914. Classical High School was an elegant High Victorian Gothic building at the corner of Maple and Walnut streets, with tall towers, sweeping stairways, and multicolored decorated surfaces. It was a building that reflected the terrific pride and ambition of the city. It was demolished in 1961. Whatever the merits of that decision, the result was that one of Worcester's finest buildings is gone from the city's architectural landscape.

As a preservationist, I hope schools continue to function as schools until they no longer suit the need, and then find relevant new roles. Just as important, when new schools are built, it is crucial that they are as ambitious and long-lasting as the best historic buildings. Our new Worcester Technical High School certainly is all of that. It is a building we can take pride in — a well-designed, handsome building, and a vital institution training the skilled workers who will drive Worcester's economy in the 21st century.

Beyond school architecture, Worcester has a rich array of wonderful buildings that deserve our attention and respect. We need to be sure they are properly maintained and serve useful functions. They are our link to our past. They remind us and future generations of the ideas and ideals of our city and its residents when they were built. We need to think long and hard before we allow any of these buildings to be destroyed or drastically altered. Equally important, we need to be aware of what we are building today. What will our buildings say about our generation, our culture, and our values?

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