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Demolition of state hospital will be a loss for Worcester

AS I SEE IT

By Deborah S. Packard



In 1995, we named the hospital complex to our first Most Endangered Structures list. Since then we have continued to advocate for its preservation.

I believe that we as a society need to do a better job maintaining, protecting and actively reusing our historic architectural resources. Our buildings are treasures that tell the story of who we were, who we are, and who we wish to be. Our historic structures are irreplaceable, and their disappearance from the landscape leaves an infallible void.

In the next few weeks, most of the historic structures of the Worcester State Hospital complex will be demolished to make way for a new psychiatric facility.

Built between 1874 and 1877, these handsome stone structures are a local landmark. The

soaring Clock Tower can be seen from miles away. Not only are these buildings striking and architecturally significant, but they are also a dramatic and physical reminder of the important role that Worcester played in the development of the treatment of the mentally ill in this country.

The demolition of this complex will be a momentous loss for Worcester. It will be a loss of beauty, a loss of fine craftsmanship, and the loss of something tangible to remind us of the past.

We in Worcester, as a community, should have stepped forward many years ago to protect these buildings. The historic hospital complex was the victim of a disastrous fire in 1991. Since then, the state of Massachusetts has done virtually nothing, beyond boarding up windows, to maintain these noble structures. Over the years, the buildings have been allowed to deteriorate to a point where the state can accurately state that restoration is impractical and prohibitively expensive.

In the historic preservation world, we call that demolition by neglect.

Preservation Worcester has been concerned about the future of these buildings for many years. In 1995, we named the hospital complex to our first Most Endangered Structures list. Since then we have continued to advocate for its preservation.

During the past two years, we toured the facility with officials and made numerous trips to Boston to argue for locating the proposed new psychiatric facility on another portion of the 300 acres of state-owned property or for reusing some of the historic buildings in the design of the new facility.

Arguments against reusing the old buildings were many. The existing buildings do not fit current treatment models. They represent a dark time in the treatment of the mentally ill. Their demolition is justifiable because the new psychiatric facility will bring jobs to the city, boost our economy, and provide treatment of the mentally ill in a state-of-the-art facility.

In spite of strong resistance, Preservation Worcester's efforts have won some small victories. Through our negotiations with the state, the Clock Tower and the Hooper Turret will remain standing, and the state Division of Capital Asset Management has allocated \$200,000 toward a feasibility study that will develop a marketing plan for them. Preservation Worcester will also have a voice in the design of the new facility.

The sad truth remains that the structures being demolished could have been adaptively reused in the new facility, providing it with unique architectural features and unusually beautiful stonework, or could have been used for an alternate purpose.

And buildings don't come down by themselves. A huge amount of energy and expense will go into demolishing buildings that we cannot afford to build today because both their materials and the level of their craftsmanship are just too expensive. The great stone blocks that make up the walls of the hospital will be ground to gravel for disposal. We are told that stone will not be used for any of the new buildings to be built on the site.

For now, the Clock Tower and the Hooper Turret will remain on the crest of the hill. We hope that a way can be found to renovate them and give them new life.

More urgently, I trust they will serve as a powerful visible reminder that we have a responsibility to do a far better job protecting and adaptively reusing our architectural legacy.

Deborah S. Packard is executive director of Preservation Worcester.