

As I See It: Notre Dame -- Saving an iconic landmark

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By Deborah PackardAnd Denis Kennedy

Change is everywhere in Worcester. Cranes rise over downtown as investment and life return to the city's urban core. The most emblematic of these developments, CitySquare, wiped the urban renewal slate clean: In place of a shopping mall, we will soon have mixed-use, human-scale development.

As we undo past mistakes, let us learn from them.

In the shadow of the CitySquare construction, one of the city's iconic landmarks stands threatened by the changes taking place around it. Notre Dame des Canadiens, a handsome Romanesque Revival style building that once served as the cultural heart of Worcester's second largest immigrant community, the French Canadians, may be lost.

Once there were five religious structures on the Common; today only Notre Dame remains, but hangs in the balance. In April 2017, when the demolition delay expires, the owner plans to demolish the building.

Pundits have referred to Worcester's ongoing 'renaissance' or 'renewal.' We share their enthusiasm. But we also warn that our rush to embrace the future must not preclude a clear-eyed look at the past, and a realistic assessment of how best to use the city's historical and architectural resources. Renaissance means rebirth; in Western history, it signified a rediscovery of, and a renewed appreciation for, the wisdom of the ancients. Absent the lessons of the past, Worcester's path is development, but it is not renaissance, and we risk repeating the decisions that have sterilized and hollowed out parts of our city.

We write as part of a group of committed citizens meeting regularly to re-imagine Notre Dame. We act within the limited window of opportunity granted by the city's Demolition Delay Ordinance, which was enacted to protect and preserve significant buildings. During the mandatory one-year delay period, owners of buildings like Notre Dame are encouraged to sell, preserve, rehabilitate or restore their buildings rather than demolish them. It's a limited, but effective tool. In Worcester, demolition delay saved the former United Congregational Church (Chestnut Street), Stearns Tavern, Kimball House (292 Lincoln Street), and the First Swedish Church/Our Lady of Fatima (Belmont Street). Each structure found new life; each contributes to the fabric of our community.

Great cities throughout the world re-use and restore landmark architecture.

Those communities understand that historic preservation provides a city with a unique and rich identity, reflects local heritage, and promotes community pride. With all due respect to contemporary architecture, Worcester is Worcester not because of generic apartment buildings and brick and wood structures that can be found in any place. Such structures complement a city, but they don't make it.

We are quick to demolish, and yet the structures we celebrate are those we have saved – Union Station, the Hanover Theatre, Mechanics Hall. Notre Dame has already been saved, once. In the 1960s, a wave of 'urban renewal' prompted the razing of 450 buildings. The Worcester Center Galleria was built in their place. Today, the shopping mall is no more, while Notre Dame survives, thanks to the advocacy of its supporters.

Preserving Notre Dame will come at a cost, but so too will demolishing it. The Hanover Theatre and Union Station restoration projects required significant investments; but can you imagine Worcester without them? Internationally, historic preservation is increasingly recognized as a highly effective tool for economic development. Preservation has moved from being an end in itself to being a vehicle for broader community benefits – city revitalization, job creation, small business incubation, housing, tourism, and resource conservation. Repair an existing structure, and those benefits stay in the community; new construction relies on imported materials. While Notre Dame languishes, others have seen the value of historic preservation. Just across the street, MG2 is renovating six buildings as part of its ambitious "Grid District."

We ask you to help us think outside of the (brick and wood) box of contemporary architecture. Notre Dame is threatened, and there are no plans for its property past demolition.

Is a surface lot truly the extent of our collective imagination – an empty space, past erased, future uncertain?

Imagine, instead, a restored Notre Dame at the heart of an 18-hour, walkable downtown. How might such a space contribute to Worcester's social, cultural, and economic life? What would bring you downtown – boutique retail, commercial space, a Worcester Market along the lines of Quincy Market, a rock venue? We encourage citizens to use this mandatory waiting period to voice their opinions on a re-imagined Notre Dame.

Once demolished, there will be no renaissance for Notre Dame.

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