

# Is nothing sacred?



by [Charles Marohn](#)

As Holy Week -- the end of the Christian period of Lent -- proceeds, I had the opportunity to chat with Joyce Mandell of Worcester, Massachusetts. That discussion will be an upcoming [podcast](#) episode -- a great conversation, stay tuned -- but I didn't want another moment to go by before I shared some images of a church in Worcester that is about to be razed.

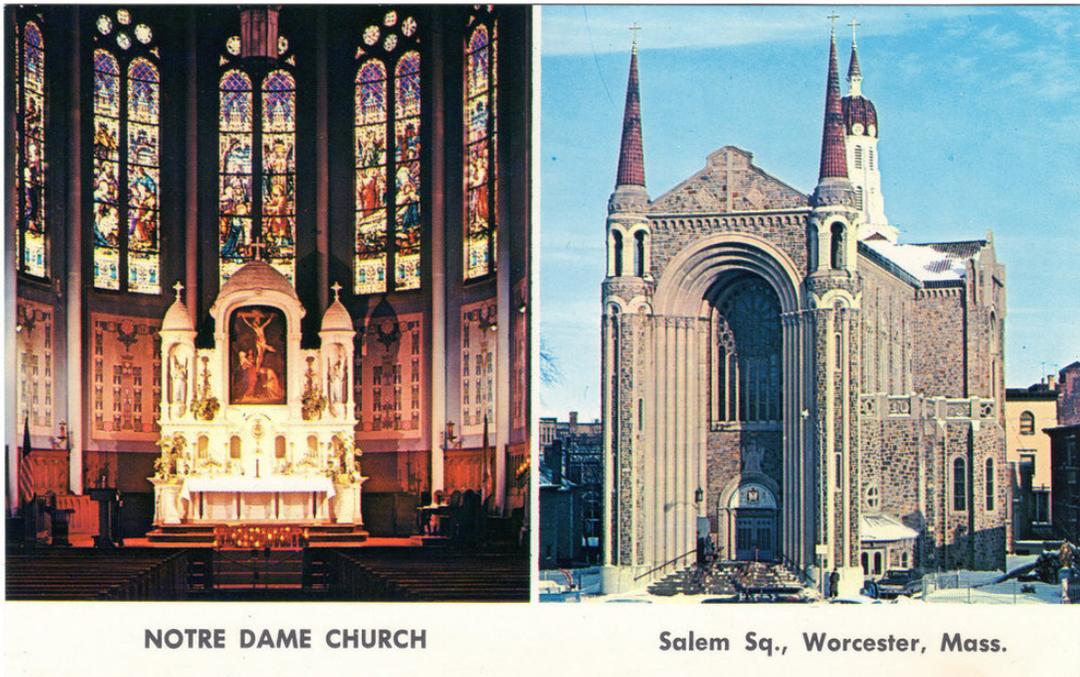
Here it is, Notre Dame des Canadiens Church.



Here's how [Stephen St-Denis describes in on Flickr](#):

*The present Notre Dame Church was built in 1926. The parish was formed in 1869 as one of the earliest francophone Roman Catholic parishes in southern New England. The full name of the church is Notre dame de l'Assomption des Canadiens. Notre Dame parish has a distinguished history and was once considered the mother church for French Canadiens both Acadians and Quebecois in Worcester County. This downtown Worcester landmark closed in July of 2008.*

Another photo:



I'm sharing these photos because I'd like you to join with me and the many good people of Worcester as we mourn the passing of this amazing building. The year-long restriction on demolition expires in the coming days and this building is going to be razed. Here's [how it was reported on by Worcester's Telegram & Gazette last year](#):

*Developers of the multimillion-dollar CitySquare project said they would apply to the Worcester Building Department Friday for a permit to demolish the enormous empty edifice at 5 Salem Square that stands, deteriorating, in the footprint of their downtown development.*

*"It is with a great deal of reluctance that we find ourselves in this position," said Donald W. Birch, executive vice president of Leggat McCall Properties, the Boston firm overseeing the CitySquare development.*

*"We've always said from the very beginning that our preference has been to find an appropriate adaptive reuse of the church. After five-plus years of trying, we don't have a viable plan."*

In [an op-ed for the Worcester Sun republished on our site](#), Joyce Mandell advocated for a reuse, not a demolition, of this beautiful church:

*Smart cities know the real truth: that adaptive reuse of historic buildings makes dollars and sense, and translates into tangible economic benefits like job creation, increases in tourism, resource cost savings, downtown revitalization, niche business incubation and community branding opportunities.*

*The famous urban theorist Jane Jacobs noted, "Cities need old buildings so badly, it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them."*

But the church was sold in 2010 to the Hanover Insurance Group for \$875,000, and the insurance company remains unable to find a "viable plan" for the building—ostensibly something that would make their \$875,000 investment worthwhile. You can [explore the site on Google Maps](#).

As someone who has seen amazing things happen throughout the country on shoestring budgets, it's hard to accept a limited range of "viable" options for a site of such significance, in such a location acquired for such a reasonable price. It reminds me of the Tennessee Brewery in Memphis, a significant building that a group of traditional developers -- motivated as they might have been -- just could not make work using their limited toolbox. The building was on the verge of being demolished when a group of local entrepreneurs stepped in to try something unconventional: actually using the building today for what it could be and incrementally developing it over time. Thousands of beers (and plenty of profit) later, the building was saved and a [viable, phased-in plan for redevelopment](#) is underway.

It's amazing what can be done with some paint, a few plastic chairs and a different attitude toward what is possible.

I have to believe that the executives at the Hanover Insurance Group do not want the destruction of this building to be part of their legacy. If they are having second thoughts -- how can they not? -- I'd be happy to connect them to the really smart people in Memphis who pulled off the Tennessee Brewery site.

If not, this beautiful piece of history and potential economic gem of the downtown is going to be gone. There will be no resurrection on the third day. I'm not the sentimental type, but the lack of imagination and vision just makes me sad.

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