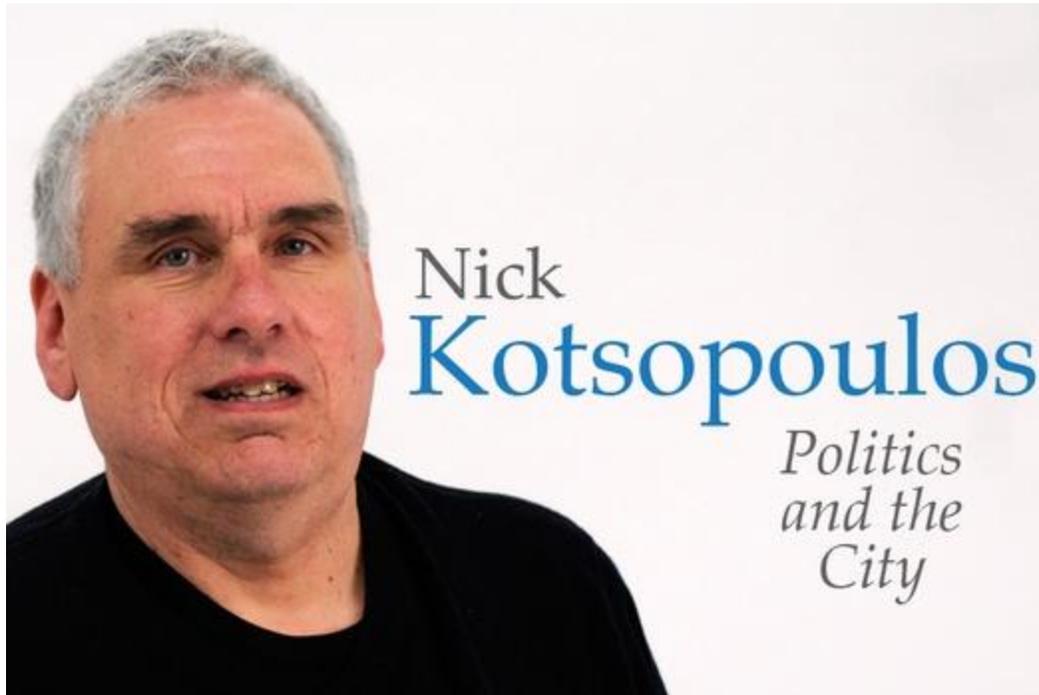


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## Politics and the City: Keeping city's past out of picture frame



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Bit by bit, Worcester's past is becoming, well, a thing of the past - something you will only be able to see in photographs.

Buildings that were once prominent features to the city's landscape or played an important role in its social fabric, culture and economic growth are disappearing.

They are being taken down to make way for new buildings and uses that are meant to better meet the needs of today and move Worcester forward.

Some call that progress, others call it a shame.

"A city that disrespects its past and tramples on its past, it has no soul," said City Councilor-at-Large Konstantina B. Lukes.

Susan Ceccacci, education director at Preservation Worcester, expressed similar concerns at a recent meeting of the Historical Commission.

“Worcester has been so easy to lose buildings of significance and buildings that have unusual character,” she said.

Just within the past month, the long-vacant Paris Cinema on Franklin Street, formerly known as the Capitol Theatre and a downtown fixture since 1926, has been razed to make way for an indoor/outdoor Brew Garden as part of the ongoing evolution of a 6-acre area downtown known as the Grid District.

It will bring a more productive life to an area that has been an eyesore for years.

Not far from where that theater used to be, the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church is on a wrecking-ball watch after the Planning Board earlier this month approved plans for a mixed-use development with 84 apartment units on that site.

That action virtually sealed the fate of the longtime downtown landmark that has overlooked the east end of the Common since 1929. To make way for the development, the vacant church building is going to be razed, despite outcries from the community to keep it standing and repurpose it for other uses.

Just recently, the Historical Commission reluctantly gave the owner of part of the historic Washburn and Moen North Works Manufacturing District on Grove Street permission to demolish two underutilized buildings, totaling some 60,000 square feet in size, to make way for additional parking there.

One of the buildings, which dates back to 1869, was one of the earliest wire-manufacturing sites in the city.

This was a unique case, however. Those buildings are going to be taken down so two other more prominent buildings in the North Works districts can be preserved. Without additional parking there, the owner said those efforts will not be feasible and will threaten the viability of the remaining historic buildings.

Andrew Shveda, chairman of the Historical Commission, went so far as to call the planned demolition of the two North Works buildings “a necessary evil.”

Other buildings also have very uncertain futures, including Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church on Mulberry Street and some older downtown buildings that are included as part of the Worcester Redevelopment Authority’s Downtown Urban Revitalization Plan.

While some historic and important buildings have been lost in Worcester recent years in the name of progress, there have been some successes to keep other such buildings standing through the city’s demolition-delay ordinance.

The ordinance puts an automatic one-year hold on the demolition of historic buildings so there can be time to explore other potential uses or find new owners for the property.

One of the most recent successes was the Central Building on Main Street. The eight-story office building was built around 1925 and has been a longtime downtown landmark.

But when the building became vacant several years ago, the owner sought a waiver to the demolition-delay ordinance in 2013. The Historical Commission strongly felt, however, that losing the building would be detrimental to the city's historical and architectural resources and it denied the waiver request.

Since then, the owner of the Central Building has been able to develop plans to convert the former office building into 55 residential units with commercial spaces on the street level.

Building saved.

"This is a perfect example of how the demolition-delay ordinance is supposed to work," Mr. Shveda recently said.

There was also Stearns Tavern, believed to be one of the oldest structures in the city. A previous owner wanted to tear down the two-story, 205-year-old building when it was located on Park Avenue near Webster Square.

But the Historical Commission turned down a request for a waiver to the demolition-delay ordinance.

During the one-year delay period, an agreement was reached to transfer ownership of the building to Preservation Worcester. City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. subsequently reached an agreement with Preservation Worcester to relocate the tavern to the new Coes Park and eventually have the Seven Hills Foundation occupy the first floor.

Instead of being demolished, Stearns Tavern is going to become the centerpiece of the 4.37-acre Coes Park, a new multigenerational park that features a universally accessible playground. It will have year-round programming, recreation and workforce training for people with disabilities.

Another building saved.

There have been other similar success stories as well, including some old mill buildings in the Main South area that have been converted into housing.

Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, said the role of her group is not to be obstructionists but rather work toward achieving a winning outcome.

She said it is important to have a balance of the old and the new in Worcester, but added that the city's past should not always have to be sacrificed to make way for the new. She said there needs to be more of an effort made to repurpose older buildings.

“Preservation Worcester has a history of working with the city and private developers on goals that are positive for the community,” Ms. Packard said. “We are excited about the downtown renaissance but feel that it is important to have a mix of the old with new residential and commercial buildings.

“Going forward, we really need a better process for planning and for development – a process with a shared community vision that welcomes public participation,” she added.

Indeed, not every older building can or should be saved. Cities cannot live in the past; times change and they must adapt if they are to move forward.

But they also cannot overlook the historical or architectural significance of some of their older buildings because once they are gone they are gone for good. You can only see them in photographs.

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