WWI memorial in Worcester’s Lincoln Square waits for new neighbors and some TLC

Trash litters the Worcester War Memorial in Lincoln Square. The elegant granite memorial was dedicated in 1935 to the more than 350 men and women of Worcester who gave their lives in the First World War. [T&G Staff Photo/Mark Sullivan]

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WORCESTER - It’s called the “whispering wall.”
If you sit at one end of the semicircular Worcester War Memorial in Lincoln Square and whisper, it’s said you can be heard perfectly by someone at the other end.

The elegant granite memorial, with curving bench and bas reliefs, was dedicated in 1935 to the more than 350 men and women of Worcester who gave their lives in the First World War.

Today, the monument inscribed with the names of great battles of the “War to End All Wars” is used as a needle drop and trash bin.

The neglected memorial is part of a landscape of abandonment in once-stately Lincoln Square, where the former Boys’ Club building, the Worcester Memorial Auditorium and the former Worcester County Courthouse now stand vacant.

On a visit to the site last week, litter was strewn under the curving bench and weeds grew from a decorative hedge. Homeless people have been known to gather at the location. Discarded heroin needles have reportedly been found there.

At the same time, Worcester State University history instructor Linda Hixon is leading a project to research all of the 353 names of Worcester’s First World War fallen that are inscribed in the entry hall of Worcester Memorial Auditorium, across from the outdoor monument.

Ms. Hixon expressed regret at the condition of the “whispering wall,” which like its neighbor, the auditorium, was built in the 1930s to honor those who gave their lives in what President Wilson called a war to make the world safe for democracy.

“It just seems a shame to me that people are not even looking at this as a memorial to the dead of Worcester, people who sacrificed their lives in one of our first big foreign wars,” she said.

“It can break my heart, to be honest with you, and I hope they get it cleaned up.”

A spokesman for City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. said last week the memorial was due for a cleaning by the city’s Parks, Recreation and Cemetery Division.

“In addition to routine maintenance, they do major cleanups twice a year, in advance of Memorial Day and Veterans Day,” spokesman John Hill said Friday. “The cleanup was already on the schedule for this weekend.”

The city has made an effort in the past several years to improve its war memorials, Mr. Hill said. On the Common, restorations have been done on the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Memorial, the Lieut. John Powers Memorial Statue, and the World War II Memorial, he said. At Green Hill Park, the statewide Vietnam Memorial recently underwent a major renovation.

“As the World War I centennial approaches, the city is going to do everything it can to ensure those who fought are remembered in a respectful and appropriate way,” Mr. Hill said.

Last week at the World War Memorial, the hedges had been trimmed.
But graffiti was scrawled in red paint near the inscription recalling the Battle of the Somme. Two soda cans and a sports drink bottle stood on the curving granite bench. On the ground were a pair of white socks, an empty cigarette pack and a crumpled letter from a collection agency demanding payment of a utility bill.

Thousands gathered at the Lincoln Square War Memorial for Armistice Day ceremonies in the 1930s and 1940s. At one time in the early 1950s, the memorial was one of four in the country authorized to fly the flag 24 hours a day on an illuminated flagpole.

The war memorial once stood in the middle of a rotary at Lincoln Square that was removed when the square was reconfigured in the 1980s.

Deterioration of the monument has been a concern for years. An article in the Telegram & Gazette archives from June 2005 describes a cleanup effort by volunteers who scoured graffiti from the stone and were raised in a crane to repaint the flagpole.

Twelve years later the wall again shows signs of neglect.

“A lot of the memorials and monuments across the city aren’t always a high priority,” said Deborah S. Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester.

Ms. Packard said she is hopeful that once the adjacent Boys Club building sells, upkeep of the monument will improve. Winn Development Co. which designed the neighboring Voke Lofts Apartments, has an option to buy the former Boys Club site and has expressed interest in converting the building to 40,000 square feet of office space.

Ms. Packard said the buyer of the former Worcester County Courthouse - Boston-based Trinity Financial - has indicated it will preserve the landmark monument of Civil War General Charles Devens outside the courthouse when it builds 125 apartments there in a $53-million project.

The preservation activist said she expects the World War Monument to also benefit from a renewal of Lincoln Square.

“The (Boys Club) building is in disrepair and it spills over to the monument,” she said. “If the Boys Club were up and running, I think that monument would be better taken care of, and the options for graffiti wouldn’t be quite so readily available because there would be activity around there.”

In the meantime, a Boston nonprofit that came up with a financial model for redeveloping Quincy Market into the Faneuil Hall Marketplace, is working on a plan to re-purpose long-vacant Worcester Memorial Auditorium.

In May, the Architectural Heritage Foundation, which also had a hand in the redevelopment of Boston’s Old City Hall, was given exclusive rights to the city-owned auditorium for one year to conduct a feasibility study for potential redevelopment of the Lincoln Square landmark.
AHF has agreed to spend a minimum of $250,000 on its feasibility study and final development plan. And last Wednesday, a representative of the firm could be seen taking photos and making notes outside the auditorium.