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As I See It: Preserving Notre Dame and city's other landmarks

By Timothy P. Corrinet / And Deborah S. Packard
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Take a minute and imagine Worcester without Mechanics Hall.

Preservation Worcester was established in 1969 in response to the threat urban renewal posed to the Mechanics Hall. At that time, there was great public sentiment that one of Worcester's most noteworthy structures was beyond salvation. But the fledgling group managed to save Mechanics Hall - today it is hard to picture Worcester without it.

Since then, Preservation Worcester has safe-guarded many of the city's historic structures by working collaboratively and inventively with a variety of public and private partners. A short list of successes includes the Fire Alarm & Telegraph Building, Union Station, the Chestnut Street Church, and most recently Stearns Tavern.

We are again faced with the loss of a landmark structure and again, Preservation Worcester has taken a stand that an iconic Worcester building is too important to lose.

For the past two years, a dedicated group of individuals interested in re-purposing rather than destroying Notre Dame des Canadiens Church has been meeting weekly with Preservation Worcester staff to "Re-imagine Notre Dame." The large group of professors, architects, a developer, historians, business owners, preservationists, and concerned citizens joined together with a shared vision that a repurposed Notre Dame would complement the exciting downtown development and benefit the city economically. The group also fervently opposes demolishing the highly visible downtown landmark, which is an architectural masterpiece and a visual testament to Worcester's rich cultural heritage.

Fortunately, Worcester's Demolition Delay Ordinance exists "to preserve and protect historically significant buildings, landmarks and places within the city and to encourage owners of such buildings to seek out persons who might be willing to purchase, preserve, rehabilitate or restore such buildings rather than demolish them."

In line with the ordinance spirit, the group's goal is and has always been to work with the owner, Hanover Insurance, in order to preserve Notre Dame. Understanding that passion alone could not save the imperiled structure, the group determined that it was important to be informed, professional, and realistic in its efforts. It explored adaptive re-uses of comparable churches worldwide, created a presentation packet, and developed a detailed schematic plan including full architectural drawings, descriptions and a realistic rehabilitation cost analysis.

The group researched funding options and historic tax credits, and drafted a National Register nomination. Importantly, a prominent structural engineer conducted an extensive structural inspection, which confirmed that the steel-framed building, although showing signs of age, remains structurally sound.

Having completed their due diligence and in the spirit of the demolition delay ordinance, the group and Preservation Worcester developed a Notre Dame Re-imagined Facebook page and an online petition. The group reached out to the City Council and received strong support from the body urging “all parties controlling the future of Notre Dame des Canadiens Church to delay its demolition for a reasonable additional period of time to allow for potential developers to pursue its development.” Approximately 70 people supported us at the council meeting and we illuminated “Save Me” on the church that night.

We also started reaching out to developers. We traveled to Boston to meet with developers and made calls throughout the country and beyond. There was interest, and most recently two offers were made from a practiced group of investors who have experience restoring historic buildings and a vision for creating a downtown amenity with breweries, a restaurant and a marketplace. With no counter-offers or established sale price for the building, the investors backed away, convinced that the building is not for sale.

In the absence of plans beyond creating an unencumbered lot, there is still time for another outcome beyond demolition.

The building owners applied for Demolition Permit, but do not need to execute it in order to comply with the Demolition Delay Ordinance. Their permit is good for six months, and it can be extended for at least another six months. That time could be used to save the church if the owner and local power holders joined hands with grassroots organizations to save the building. We encourage Hanover Insurance, a company that in many ways spurred the downtown renaissance by supporting the restoration of The Hanover Theatre, to once again support our community through the restoration and repurposing of Notre Dame.

We have the opportunity to decide, as great cities do, that preserving and repurposing our architectural heritage is a priority. The creative use of historic buildings will grow our economy, increase tourism, instill community pride and maintain our uniqueness.

There are concrete steps that should be taken to protect our architectural legacy.

1. We can strengthen regulations that prevent demolition by neglect. Too often, buildings sit and decompose in place, rendering their restoration economically infeasible.
2. We can rework our Demolition Delay Ordinance so that property owners are unable to wait out the delay period without working to safeguard the property.
3. We can create additional Local Historic Districts in the city. Properties in those districts are subject to stronger regulations.

4. We can encourage the city to designate a select number of structures with a landmark designation. The city of Cambridge bestows that honor on important buildings in order to permanently protect their unique qualities.
5. We can pass the Community Preservation Act, and receive local and state funds to support historic preservation.
6. We can join informed communities and require development plans be approved before a demolition permit for a historic building is issued.

There are many voices in this process, and they all have an interest in the future of our city. It is incumbent on the city leadership to bring together these interests in respectful discussion and a spirit of collaboration and Preservation Worcester remains ready to champion our architectural heritage and economic development. As famed architect Frank Gehry noted, “In the end, the character of a civilization is encased in its structures.”

Timothy P. Corrinet and Deborah S. Packard, both of Worcester, are the president and executive director, respectively, of Preservation Worcester.