

It's time to slow down that wrecking ball

Bill Cantwell 12 hrs ago



"Urban Renewal."

Yuck.

It's a phrase that reeks of what some call "bureaucratese" — the language of politicians and other government types.

It's not a phrase used by regular folks, but I introduce it here to make a point.

The words might not roll off the tongue, but their meaning is worth a look.

Those of us who were around in the 1960s or have studied local history will remember Urban Renewal was a government effort to, indeed, renew urban areas. It demolished older buildings, places like the then-Haverhill City Hall, to clear the way for new development.

But the program lacked two things — an appreciation of older architecture and a lack of vision toward the future.

Places that today would be valued for their style and historical significance went the way of the wrecking ball. Pieces of history were lost forever.

Fast forward to today. Thankfully, the philosophy behind Urban Renewal is no longer embraced by communities like Haverhill.

Older buildings with style are often preserved, as long as they are structurally sound.

Take the old Cogswell School, for example. It has outlived its usefulness as a school, but still has a place in the community.

Rather than letting the wrecking ball swing away at the brick building that was a beloved neighborhood school for generations, the city is supporting a plan to convert it to a community arts center.

Look elsewhere around Haverhill and you'll see other examples of imagination turning buildings that appeared to be obsolete into something useful.

Did you know the Heav'nly Donuts shop in Bradford was originally a bank? The same is true for the Lucky Corner restaurant on Route 125 near the Plaistow line.

Consider the old Smiley School, which happens to be near the Lucky Corner restaurant. The Smiley is another of those century-or-so-old brick neighborhood schools that has found a new use.

How about the old shoe factories that have been turned into hundreds of apartments in the last decade or so? That trend has brought several positive results — reuse of the buildings instead of demolishing them, eliminating eyesores that were stunting the downtown's comeback, and bringing in new residents who have become customers for inner-city restaurants and other businesses.

Sure, there are times it makes sense to demolish an old building and clear the way for something new.

Take the new downtown Harbor Place project. Who could argue against the decision to demolish the old Woolworth building, which sat empty and falling apart for decades at the eastern end of downtown?

The building was an embarrassment to the city, a turn-off to visitors as Haverhill tried to attract shoppers and new businesses to the area.

Now that the Woolworth and a few other old buildings are gone in favor of Harbor Place, it won't be long before that new development welcomes a UMass Lowell satellite campus, a variety of businesses, and tenants in apartments overlooking the downtown.

Haverhill is banking on Harbor Place to inject new life into the economy in the eastern end of downtown.

Perhaps the lesson learned between the 1960s Urban Renewal period and today is to avoid a blanket approach. A widespread philosophy of tearing down old buildings in favor of new development is not healthy.

Better to pick and choose — and to save a historic building that offers some promise of reuse.

Once it's torn down, it's gone forever.

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