

Erie's Self Image Rooted in the Past

The invitation extended by the Erie *Times-News* to frame a more positive self image of Erie should remind us that the essential identity of all great cities is firmly anchored in the past. The image we hold of cities like Charleston, Boston, or San Francisco—the kind of places many of us visit on vacation—begins with the identifiable historic built landscape of those cities. Or think of the positive appeal of one of America's most visited, albeit artificial places: Disney World's Main Street U.S.A. Why do we love it? Because it is a *good place*. Because it represents the sort of community we used to have everywhere in America, where buildings were built with pedestrians in mind and their facades exuded grace and charm, and where people walked streets lined with shops and businesses that were owned by people you knew. Think Parade Street, 1945. Disney built a human-scaled streetscape that evokes, if only pretentiously, the kind of communities that Americans for the past sixty years have seemed intent on utterly obliterating.

Here in Erie, the impulse to execute a makeover of the built environment which is made for cars and not humans has left us with a diminished tangible sense of what we have achieved in this region and the civic values we hold as a people. When we allow century-old commercial buildings studded with ornamental features and embedded with Erie history to be supplanted by cheap, cookie cutter drive-through banks and chain drug stores, we lose some of the character of our region. Demolition of monumental buildings like the Koehler brewery and EMI Gunnite, two of the identifying economic enterprises of this city for over a century, erased vital multigenerational chapters of Erie history from the landscape of our collective memory. By contrast, reconstruction of the *Niagara* and rehabilitation of the former Penelec generating station into the Erie Maritime Museum have fueled regional pride and anchored the revitalization

of the bay front. Other preservation successes—West Sixth Street and the Federal Courthouse complex, for example—stand as tangible expressions of the elevated civic spirit and soaring aesthetic vision held by earlier generations of Erie citizens. We have recognized that these landmarks structures and buildings, owing to their magnificent design and architectural splendor, are literally irreplaceable.

Although Erie's working waterfront lies at the core of our historic identity and self image, the revitalization of the bay front that began a generation ago erased nearly every material remnant of what was once the most productive fresh water fishery on the planet. The buildings that housed the maritime and related industries are gone. Sadly, few interpretive markers and no public sculpture speak to the thousands of men and women who labored in the fishing, ship building and shipping industries for over a century. An historic sense of place centered on the history and character of the working people who are the heart and soul of this region ought to somehow be reflected and revealed on the landscape.

In this vein, a student of mine recently proposed restoration of the Penelec smokestack that would feature an interpretive park illustrating Erie's bay front history. Other cities have embraced landmarks like the smokestack and illuminated them with colored spotlights. Similarly, is it possible that a public-private partnership might emerge that could find a reuse for the century old GAF building, the last remaining industrial structure on the bay front?

Beyond erasing tangible expressions of regional pride grounded in our industrial and social history, the rush to swing the wrecking ball is destroying irreplaceable community assets of great economic value. Cities that invest in the rehabilitation of commercial and industrial buildings parlay those investments into significant returns to the community. Numerous studies have demonstrated that preservation and smart urban design in keeping with a city's historic

character *pays*. Preservation of commercial and industrial buildings, public architecture, and old residential neighborhoods often brings vitality back to neglected and impoverished parts of a city and generates more local jobs than new construction. Historic preservation is also green, consuming fewer resources (and shrinking green space) than new construction. In a number of cities, historic preservation has even bolstered imaginative strategies to diversify regional transportation systems with rail and trolley networks.

Not all buildings can or should be saved. Yet it seems clear that a thoughtful strategy to reinforce what is great about Erie and to improve the quality of life in the region must include a more concerted effort to hold on to those elements of our built environment that still speak to this region's great industrial and cultural history. The buildings, structures, and neighborhoods that distinguish this place, that have made Erie *Erie*, are also important pieces of Erie's future.

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