

Historic Preservation Needed to Boost Economic Development

Lisa Austin and Chris Magoc

Decades ago, the demolition of the elegant Lawrence Hotel and the scrapping of the *USS Wolverine* helped inspire a local historic preservation effort. As a result, the city still boasts many historic properties including the Warner Theater, the Watson-Curtze Mansion and Lovell Place. The ivy-covered Reed Manufacturing building on West 12th, the Chestnut Street Pumping Station, and many other treasures are still with us.

Recently, however, the wrecking ball has been on a rampage through this great city. The loss of the Riley Stoker industrial complex on Raspberry is another reminder that if you own something old in Erie, you are free—and often encouraged—to knock it down. Our grandchildren will see many Erie landmarks only in photographs: the massive Erie Malleable Iron (EMI) foundry on West 12th Street, GAF, the Koehler Brewery, and the nineteenth century home on West 21st Street—the latter two listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The massive Cold Storage building at East 15th and German is slated to be demolished. Other threatened properties include Roosevelt Middle School, the Watson Paper Factory and Stack on East 15th and Holland as well the beloved Villa Maria Chapel at West 9th and Plum.

Many in Erie believe that demolition and more parking lots represent the best way to foster redevelopment of our urban core. All too often, little consideration is given to creative redevelopment strategies that might attract private investment. Six years ago, regional leaders claimed the EMI demolition would attract a tax-paying manufacturer and good jobs. Instead, we have a nice football field in the heart of Erie's historic industrial corridor, with few jobs, and zero tax dollars. Could part of the GAF complex been converted to a retail space, one with historic character? We will never know.

The demolition-as-jobs strategy ignores the well-documented fact that across the country, preservation-restoration projects generate many more local jobs than new construction projects. If Erie's political and economic development leaders are seeking to create jobs, they should do what so many other cities have done so effectively: formulate a policy-driven and multi-faceted strategy to adaptively reuse the industrial, commercial, civic, sacred and residential buildings that have been part of our city and this region for generations.

Preservation also promotes heritage tourism, which in turn creates jobs. At a former industrial site in Germany, designers created a heritage park attracting thousands of tourists. Trade fairs, corporate

events, exhibits, festivals, concerts, theatrical and dance performances are held at ***Land-schaftspark Duisburg-Nord***. A climbing garden attracts athletic adventurers. Inside of old tanks, a diving school was established. British artist Jonathan Park transformed massive rusted industrial pipes into gorgeous light sculptures that attract visitors from around the world.

Or consider North Adams, Massachusetts, which was a dying mill town until visionaries embraced the vacant industrial architecture and created a new art world destination - MASS MOCA. Their 80% vacancy rate plummeted with the influx of artist pioneers, galleries and other businesses. In Pittsburgh, the Mattress Factory Art Museum has led the city's Northside revitalization, and the Brewhouse Space 101 Gallery has spurred the evolution of hip Carson Street, a magnet for young urban professionals. Southeast of Pittsburgh, the Turtle Creek Westinghouse factory has been reborn as Keystone Commons and houses dozens of businesses. In eastern Pennsylvania, the sprawling Bethlehem Steel Corporation site is being reborn as an arts and cultural center called SteelStacks.

Erie should view century-old buildings as assets, not as obstacles to the region's development. We need a professional Historic Buildings Review Board, empowered to work constructively and proactively with property owners to advance adaptive reuse strategies. The board needs authority to curb short-sighted and self-interested decision making that does not advance the region's best interests. The city's tax structure also runs counter to urban redevelopment. Erie presently offers incentives that encourage demolition and the construction of new buildings—many of them poorly designed for an urban setting and assembled with inferior, impermanent, and non-sustainable materials. Think of the monumental stone and masonry multi-story banks and commercial buildings that have been replaced with drive-through banks or cheap, suburban drug stores. Erie deserves better.

We need to incentivize adaptive reuse plans that can revitalize distressed areas of the city and reaffirm Erie's pride of place. We need a Homesteading Program, as Buffalo has, which allows residents to reclaim vacant property for \$1 in exchange for the responsibility of living on the property and bringing it up to code. Think of how such a program could create jobs, retain our graduates, lure young professionals to stay in Erie, and empower Erie's large immigrant population.

Erie's demolition epidemic hurts the economy and harms our regional identity. Smart, imaginative policies are needed to catalyze redevelopment and rejuvenate northwest Pennsylvania.

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