

Ada Louise Huxtable's warning to Syracuse: How to avoid creating a downtown 'wasteland'



By [Sean Kirst, The Post-Standard](#)
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Clinton Square in Syracuse, 1958, as Ada Louise Huxtable saw it a few years later - before the demolition of the Urban Renewal era. Courtesy Onondaga Historical Association

You can read Ada Louise Huxtable's critique of Syracuse from 1964, and a response from John R. Searles Jr. of the Metropolitan Development Association, at the conclusion of this column.

Theresa Rusho has always loved a piece about our city written by [Ada Louise Huxtable](#), a piece that in Syracuse becomes Huxtable's epitaph. Rusho has cited it several times in a terrific blog called [Syracuse B-4](#), which uses long-forgotten newspaper clippings — primarily from the decades after World War II — to nail down the moments and decisions that created Syracuse as we know it today.

The idea is that we only learn from our mistakes by confronting the way we made them. Huxtable, [who died this month at 91](#), left us with a clear list. She was a pioneering architectural critic for The New York Times. Her insight and ferocity were enough to win international acclaim and a Pulitzer Prize.

Almost 50 years ago, Huxtable came to Syracuse to judge the progress of a federal program called Urban Renewal.

Her conclusion: “Ugly Cities and How They Grow,” reprinted in The Post-Standard of March 28, 1964.

To Rusho, that appraisal remains critically important. After Huxtable's death, Rusho [used her blog to bring back the piece](#) from 1964. It was a timely reminder amid heated debates in Syracuse about good planning and the best way of sustaining our downtown.

“After I read (Huxtable's work), it was like: ‘Whoa. What else do you need to say about what happened in Syracuse?’” recalled Rusho, an Onondaga Hill native who now works for the Rhode Island School of Design. “She saw the potential, and the great architecture that we had, and she wasn't dismissive of great new buildings. But she knew we needed a cohesive vision that wasn't piecemeal.”

For all her concerns, Huxtable found much to appreciate in Syracuse. She was excited about renowned architect I.M. Pei's vision for what would be the [Everson Museum of Art](#). She called the old [Syracuse Savings Bank](#) a “Victorian Gothic masterpiece.” She described the art deco [Niagara Mohawk Building](#) “as the most magnificent ‘modernistic fruitcake’ ... this observer has ever seen,” a love affair that would continue: Years later, Huxtable would name the building, now used by National Grid, as one of the great deco landmarks in the nation.



The National Grid Building, formerly the Niagara Mohawk Building: The late Ada Louise Huxtable, renowned architectural critic, called it one of the great art deco buildings in the nation. David Lassman/The Post-Standard

Still, Huxtable prophesied that downtown Syracuse was bulldozing its way toward being “a dreary wasteland.” She noted how Urban Renewal planners were all too ready to level precious landmarks. Huxtable liked Clinton Square, and she worried about the fate of the distinguished [Third Onondaga County Courthouse](#) — a building that was soon to be demolished.

She was also dumbfounded at the way city leaders allowed a “flat, pusillanamous” [state office building](#) to go up alongside our beautiful and graceful [City Hall](#) on Washington Street.

“In cities like Syracuse,” Huxtable wrote, “new and old coexist as bellicose, resentful strangers.”

To Rusho, the value of the piece lies not only in what it says, but in its timing. Almost a half-century later, it is easy to remember Urban Renewal as a vague and irresistible force visited upon Syracuse by federal money. The truth is that some prominent voices did speak against it, usually to no avail.

And certainly, Huxtable gave voice to what many everyday Central New Yorkers were feeling.

Her take on Syracuse, Rusho writes, received a printed rebuttal from [John R. Searles Jr.](#), executive vice president of the old Metropolitan Development Association. He argued that preservation often made no sense: “Owners of obsolescent but historic property cannot be expected to let sentiment outweigh economic considerations for any substantial period of time,” wrote Searles, a succinct description of the philosophy behind Urban Renewal.

In 1964, Huxtable warned Syracuse about the risk of “civic self-destruction.” She praised [a book — newly published at that time](#) — that highlighted the importance of landmarks in Onondaga County, and she predicted civic policies “that reject the past and fail to deal in continuity ... will make a nightmare mix.”

Today, many of us are expressing cautious optimism about a wave of downtown restoration. Rusho, for her part, implies that what really matters is who uses downtown once all the work is done. She wonders, for instance, how Huxtable would have felt about [the transfer of the Centro bus station to Adams Street](#), which pushed a crowd of daily riders from the heart of downtown to its southern edge.

Huxtable, Rusho said, once wrote that architecture matters primarily as a celebration of the “collective spirit that we call society.”

She saw that mesh as the only way to make a downtown work, which is exactly what so many graying Central New Yorkers remember about ... well, about Syracuse B-4.

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