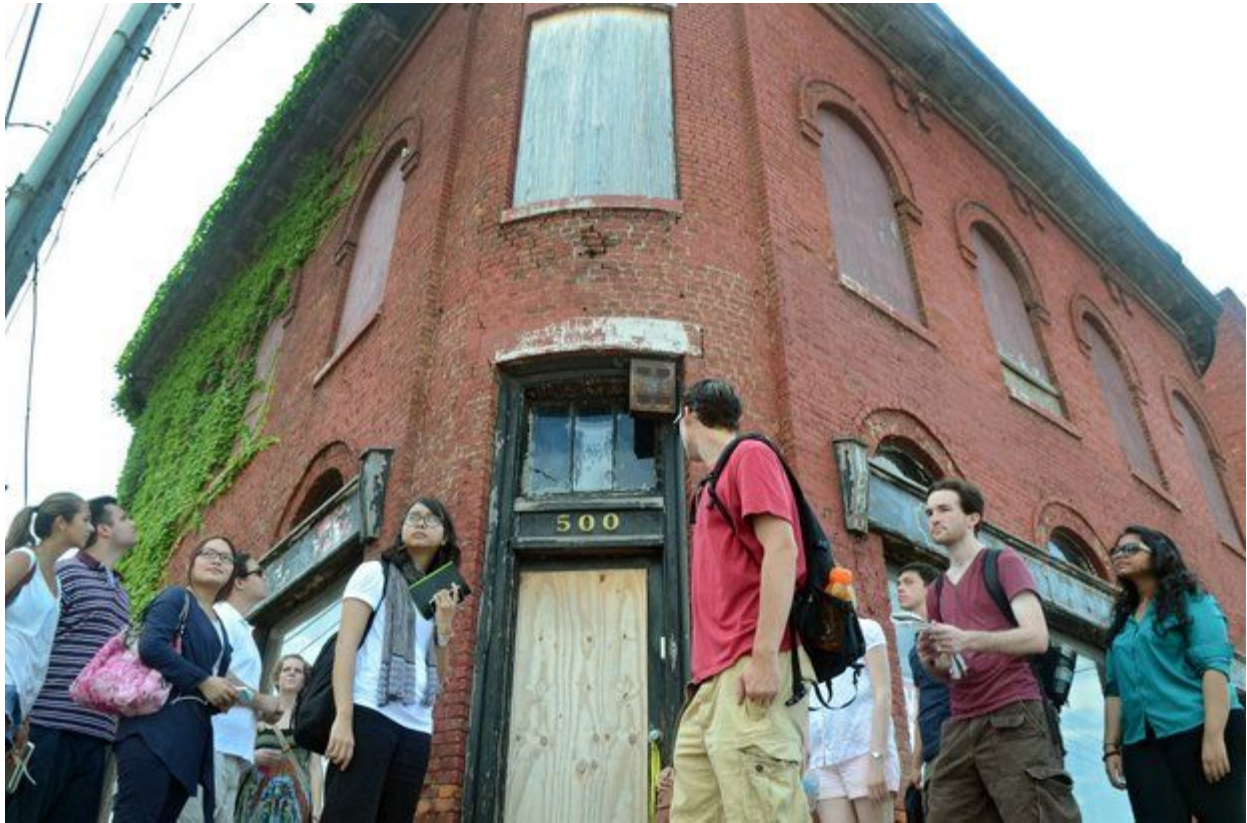


# In Syracuse, fresh eyes on an old problem: Save these aging landmarks, or knock them down?



Last week, students in the Goldring Arts Journalism program at Syracuse University pondered a tough civic choice: Can the old Brennan industrial complex be saved, or must it be demolished, despite its unique features? (*David Lassman* / [dlassman@syracuse.com](mailto:dlassman@syracuse.com))

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Alejandra Acuna is new to our town. She arrived Monday to take part in the year-long [Goldring Arts Journalism program](#) at Syracuse University. Acuna had no reason to be aware of the uncertainty surrounding the old Brennan Motor complex buildings on the eastern edge of downtown, but she stood Friday beneath the ivy-laden walls and offered an absolutely logical perspective.

Acuna was in born in Colombia. In her homeland, which often feels the push and pull of new growth, similar buildings would almost certainly be leveled, she said. Acuna was told about

concerns involving structural decay in the Brennan buildings, a situation that has caused some neighboring merchants to say:

[Knock them down. They're unsafe.](#)

In Syracuse, a town that has lost so many landmarks, couldn't there be options within options, Acuna asked?

She reacted with passion to the main entrance to the complex, with its soft brick, rounded corners, arched windows and cupola. Even if the core is beyond restoration, she wondered, couldn't a partial demolition leave behind a safe and reinforced facade?

And once that happened, she said, wouldn't it make sense to hold a design competition that would generate proposals for integrating residual charm with 21st century design and materials?

That is what you call the value of fresh eyes.

The Goldring program is a unique initiative. A small group of students, many coming from points around the world, gather for a year of intensive graduate study that melds the arts with traditional journalism. The emphasis includes architectural heritage, and there's no better example of why it matters than the checkered history of the city around the university.

[S.U. Students Visit the Brennan Motor Co. Building](#) Masters students from the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University take a look at the former Brennan Motor Co. complex at Townsend and Water streets. It's an old historic building that's falling down a bit. Columnist Sean Kirst asks the question: What do cities do with old buildings that are no longer being used ?

Every year, joined by [David Rubin](#) - dean emeritus of the Newhouse School of Public Communications - I take the Goldring scholars on a downtown walking tour. We talk about Interstate 81, [and the choices for its future](#). We discuss why [Onondaga Creek is finally being seen as a resource](#). We wander through Armory Square, [recalling the visionaries](#) who understood how and why that district could succeed.

This year, I ended the walk at the Brennan complex, at Townsend and Water streets, where I explained the problem and asked the students:

What do you think we should do?

Built in 1865, the buildings hold a deep place in civic history. The Crouse-Hinds Electric Co., which would expand into a sprawling Syracuse industry, was founded on the second floor. For many years, the Brennan company used the complex to make marine engines - including motors for vessels on the Erie Canal, whose waters were a short walk from the front door.

While the red-brick exterior retains distinctive character, much of the place is falling apart. Its owner, Carnegie Management of Brooklyn, owes \$34,000 in back taxes. Managers at the nearby Smith Restaurant Supply say the Brennan complex represents potential tragedy: Neighbors worry about falling bricks, hazardous materials and the chance of a collapse.

Yet [the complex is also considered compelling and unique](#) - even irreplaceable - by historians and architects with a passion for history.

"The mayor's preference is to save those buildings, but we also have to be realistic," said Andy Maxwell, the city's director of planning and sustainability. He said the city will send engineers into the structure, soon, to decide whether all or part of the complex can be saved.

With the future of a landmark in the balance, I asked the Goldring scholars - newcomers with an absolutely fresh perspective - for their spontaneous impression of the buildings.

A shared reaction came from Anita Xu, of China, Angela Zonunpari, of India, and Olivia Yang, of Taiwan: Older buildings are typically demolished in their countries, they said, simply because the pace of expansion is so fast.

But there is a growing realization in their communities, they said, that history - and a sense of place - is vital to what might be called the civic soul.



**An old image of the historic Brennan industrial buildings; the Crouse-Hinds Co. was founded on the second floor.** *Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association*

Melanie Lustig, the only Central New Yorker in the group, emphasized the imperative of a striking contrast between the old and the new, in any city center. Insher Pan, of China, said the real issue is what the buildings, as they are right now, mean to Syracuse: Does the Brennan complex have a story of meaning and significance? Do the brick walls trigger memories and affection?

In other words, if we knock down those buildings, does it represent another choice that could lead to regret?

Jack Williams, of Boulder, Colo., spoke of the importance of an achievable plan: He warned against saving the complex unless there is a specific commitment to new use and restoration. Without a true vision, Williams said, we'd only postpone the painful loss of landmarks whose continuing disintegration would generate more heartbreak, if not outright danger, down the road.

Jessica Cabe, of Illinois, said our nation remains so relatively young that Americans too often underestimate our own heritage; the allure of Europe, she said, lies in its embrace of the past. Max O'Connell, of Wisconsin, said the Brennan decision equates to a fundamental question: We should weigh the value - and cost - of saving the buildings against whatever would take their place.

If the goal is simply to open up parking, O'Connell said, that should be easy to create somewhere else.

As for Nick Reichert, of Tennessee, he reacted passionately to the ivy-covered walls and to a green, secluded courtyard behind the main building. "There's huge potential here," said Reichert, who wondered out loud if the faith required to restore the Brennan complex might touch off a block-by-block turnaround similar to what happened at Armory Square.

Like the other students, what he brings to us is fearless imagination. Maybe the best revelation of the day, built on that quality, is the one offered by Acuna:

Does all or nothing, with our heritage, have to be the only way?

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