



Dennis Connors stands in Hanover Square with the Gridley Building behind him. The beautiful building was threatened by urban renewal and a vision for "modern" design in downtown Syracuse in the 1960s. (Ellen M. Blalock / eblalock@syracuse.com)

How we almost lost Hanover Square

By Sean Kirst
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You have to take a look at what we almost lost to fully appreciate those who intervened. Monday, photographer Ellen Blalock and I met Dennis Connors at Hanover Square in Syracuse. We admired the elaborate stone facade of the Gridley Building, built in 1867, and the ornate detail of another elegant building, just next door.

In a plan from the mid-1960s, they were supposed to become rubble.

No kidding. That's straight from the "Central Syracuse Illustrative Plan." I brought it along when I went to speak with Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association. David Harding, an old friend and a landscape architect with QPK Design, came across that plan not long ago. He marveled at this once-prominent civic vision for a downtown that never happened — fortu-

nately — and then sent me a copy.

Examine the document, and the immediate reaction is sweeping relief that we barely avoided a mind-boggling sequence of errors.

Barely.

If the plan had gone through, Armory Square would have vanished, demolished before it ever had a chance to boom. Hanover Square — including such treasures as the Gridley Building — would have been leveled. Instead of ornate landmarks, the predominant look of our "new downtown" would have involved a box-like architectural style perceived, 45 or 50 years ago, as crisp and "modern."

An example? Envision a city center filled with clones of the Syracuse Public Safety Building.

That's no joke. That's where we were headed. Federal money poured in for "remaking" downtown in the 1960s, and many civic leaders thought the bulldozer was our best answer. We came frighteningly close to losing historic districts that today provide character and stability in the heart of Syracuse.

Connors remembers. He was part of the struggle to change that course. I showed him the map because he was, and is, a central figure in the campaign in Syracuse to save buildings that matter, the brick-and-mortar heritage that helps sustain beauty in our city.

"Over 40 years," Connors said. "I think we've established that historic preservation plays a major role not only in cultural vitality, but in economic vitality."

Thursday, he'll take part in a 5:30 p.m. panel discussion at the Palace Theatre, where the Preservation Association of Central New York will celebrate its 40th anniversary. Admission is \$20, or \$12 for PACNY members.

Connors will be joined by other prominent voices of that movement, including Jay King, founding president of the organization that became PACNY.

While there'll certainly be reflection about the victories and defeats of the past, the panel will also have a chance to contemplate what's coming next.

Many grand or important buildings in Syracuse are crumbling. Connors offered examples from around the city: speaking of downtown, he mentioned the heartbreaking disintegration of both the old Central High School and the Mizpah Tower. He worries about the fate of the Brennan Motors complex, especially a canal-era building of striking detail at South Townsend and Water streets.

Yet he finds hope in the way developers can't keep up with the demand for downtown residential space, which Connors attributes to growing appreciation — especially among the young — for the value and ambience of historic buildings.

The atmosphere was entirely different in 1974, when Connors — then a preservation planner in his early 20s — came here as a staff person for the fledgling Central New York preservation group.

Hanover Square, when he arrived, was at high risk. At the time, the small wedge between South Salina and South Warren streets was notorious for prostitution and hard drinking; its nickname was "Hangover Square." Many city leaders embraced the idea that demolishing the streetscape would solve the larger problems.

Even the magnificent Gridley Building wasn't safe, Connors said, a threat staved off when QPK Design restored the structure — working with a city administration just beginning to see the potential of its landmarks.

The danger wasn't over. Civic leaders wanted to close Erie Boulevard at Clinton Square and funnel heavy traffic onto Water Street, through Hanover Square. Think of it, Connors said: Any charm, any sense of heritage or neighborhood, would have been lost to a flood of motorists.

Preservation advocates dug in. They aligned themselves with community groups opposed to closing the boulevard. In a tumultuous hearing

before the Common Council, Connors recalls how a representative of the Children's Consortium rolled a petition — containing the signatures of those against the plan — toward the councilors, in their seats.

That passion won the day. Hanover Square was saved.

There was no time to relax: Another challenge erupted two blocks to the south, when the Loews theater chain pulled out of its palatial downtown theater. Once again, advocates for preservation mobilized. It took a desperate fundraising effort — and relentless work by such advocates as King — to save the downtown jewel we now call the Landmark Theatre.

Those stories will be told again at the Palace, where Connors and King will be joined on stage by Sam Gruber, one of PACNY's longtime leaders; Helen Dewey, a former executive director at the Parke S. Avery Historical House Museum; Randy Crawford, a veteran preservation architect; and Joanne Arany, of the New York State Historic Preservation Advisory Board.

They'll have plenty of material for conversation: Can the Hotel Syracuse be renovated — and succeed? Is there hope for such last-chance landmarks as the crumbling Gothic cottage, on South Salina Street? What effect will a razed or rebuilt Interstate 81 have on the buildings around it?

Beyond all else, the gathering will be a reminder of civic victories — hard-won at the time — that become too easy, years later, to take for granted. Without collective memory, you lose the greatest lesson: Sometimes the roll of money and emotion toward big public decisions can overwhelm the simple logic of the wisest thing to do.

For proof, I walked Monday through Hanover Square. In the shadow of buildings of grace and artistry, I thought of how a few brave voices told their city:

Don't bring these landmarks down.

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