

Rochester a pendulum of old and new design

The City of Rochester has not been kind to its existing building stock. The Urban Renewal trend of the mid-60s and '70s favored car-centric development, and Rochester—being a wealthy enough city at the time to participate—took advantage of that. Neighborhoods and buildings were sacrificed for the convenience of expressways and parking lots, leaving holes in the urban fabric that echo today.

The Genesee Crossroads Urban Renewal project (1965-1977) dramatically swept away buildings along the riverfront. The Main Street bridge, once lined with buildings and reminiscent of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, was a by-product of that effort. Sprawl and suburban flight contributed to downtown's vacancy and emptiness in the '80s and '90s.

After decades of continuous removal and abandonment, the tide is shifting at last. Instead, new developments' focus and energy appear to be mending the holes we intentionally made. Despite the trend of removal, our city is still blessed with an amazing stock of buildings. These remaining holes of vacant buildings, expressways and parking lots offer an exciting opportunity for reuse and rebuild, waiting for the right time to be developed.

It's hard to ignore the amount of development either in construction or in the works for our city center and beyond. For the past decade, residential loft conversions have conquered headlines. Rochester, perhaps a few years late on the trend, suddenly offered an abundance of historic buildings with brick-lined walls and open space. It was this residential trend of adaptive reuse, coupled with the resurgence of urban, walkable spaces, that brought attention back to downtown and all its possibilities. The rediscovery of these types of buildings has fueled many exciting renovations and rehabilitations with an increased appreciation for Rochester's historical architecture.

While these types of projects continue, a new type of development is also surging ahead. New building projects, fueled in part by the Inner Loop East fill-in, represent a counter-offering in the downtown market. While both types of development are contributing to a more vibrant downtown experience, they offer two different trajectories in Rochester's future. Has the trend of "what's old is new" given way to "what's new is now"?

With so many holes to fill, how will Rochester fill in? And does whatever direction it takes offer a reflection of how Rochester views its future self?

Caitlin Meives, preservation planner at Landmark Society of Western New York and director of the Young Urban Preservationists, sees the fu-



VIEWPOINT

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ture trend of re-use projects "requiring a more nuanced conversation." While it's exciting to see vacant, underutilized buildings being brought back to life, Meives says she worries some projects lack diversity and inclusion.

The trend of these projects to date has been focused on market-rate residential projects targeting baby boomers and millennials. The Button Lofts, Academy Building, Sibley Building, Tower 280 and the Metropolitan are a few examples. She sees the downtown adaptive reuse market eventually reaching a peak and moving geographically out of City Center and towards city neighborhoods—perhaps where they need it the most. This, she clarifies, is not a negative, referencing recent comprehensive planning where preservation is playing a larger role.

Wayne Goodman, director of the Landmark Society, is gearing up for its State-Wide Preservation Conference held here in Rochester this April.

"Preservation must help tell the stories of people from all racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, gender, and generational backgrounds," he said.

As for the new construction projects, Meives said she hopes for less parking-oriented developments. She adds that new projects should do a better job of connecting people, and keep in mind who the population is that they're serving. She also stressed that the design of newer projects should not attempt to mimic historic buildings, as it typically results in a false representation of styles and era. Ken Glazer, architect and developer of Buckingham Properties, said he doesn't necessarily see one trend winning over the other. Instead, he sees both types of development being popular if they're done correctly.

Rochester's stock of older historic buildings is still desirable for many. Glazer said he does see a huge uptick in new build projects, which until recently, is new territory for Buckingham Properties. He highlighted the success of projects such as Tower 280 and the Sibley building that showed what was possible downtown. He said he also sees the residential market fueling much of the development for both reuse and new build projects.

"The residential market is still hot and going fast," said Glazer, noting quick turnover and low vacancy in his projects.

Glazer credits the success of the past decade of the reuse residential market for allowing the new build projects to happen.

"People saw what was possible with the rents downtown, and that allowed for new ground-up projects to happen," he said.

While the financial risk for new build projects is greater, the demand for downtown living certainly isn't a fad. This has allowed developers and investors to take on new, riskier projects. Critical for both types of development is creating a uniqueness that offers amenities, a focus on walkability and attracting the next generation of city dwellers.

Activating the streets and neighborhoods is a huge focus for Glazer; as an architect, he feels it is just as important as the building itself. Having dog/pet-friendly buildings means people need to take them out for walks and that creates street presence.

Glazer takes pride in the design of his projects. "It's my job to understand what's successfully going on elsewhere and understand if it fits in," he said. "It can't just be a fad; it needs to work for the next 20 years."

Although the retail and office markets are still slow to develop, he said he sees them picking up in the future. And he hopes to see more music and art projects, specifically craving a downtown piano bar.

Staying power is key for Rochester, and that may come down to finding a balance between what's worked and what's fresh and new.

Glazer said his vision for Rochester includes innovation in technology and design. He believes the Tower District in the City Center is the most exciting area in the city—now and in the future.

"Buildings that make a statement, that make you stop and notice them, are lacking in new construction projects," he said.

This is partly due to Rochester's historically conservative nature and penchant for safe bets. That's changing, according to Glazer. But opportunity zones are allowing new concepts for investors, ultimately creating projects capable of more edgy, innovative designs.

It appears that Rochester isn't limited to just one path for its future. The future is built by preserving our history, expressing our shared values through innovative design and building a city that is uniquely Rochester.

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