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The HSBC Building in Jeopardy

Posted by **Mark** on May 13th, 2011

Staff Reports

The City of Utica announced that it may pursue demolition of the former HSBC Building for surface parking. Would the

demolition of a major urban landmark be a positive for the future development of the downtown business district?



In Utica, N.Y. demolition has been the primary tool of redevelopment for close to 60 years. Beginning in the 1950's, city government has chosen to clear hundreds of buildings that may have otherwise been redeveloped and put to adaptive reuse.

One only need compare modern Google maps to old aerial shots from the late 1940's to see a clearer picture of the city that once was. On lower Genesee St., an entire section of downtown has been wiped clean of structures from the 19th and earlier 20th century.

Monumental buildings like the Devereux block, The Hotel Hamilton, numerous movie theaters and residential blocks were wiped away in the Urban Renewal period of the 1960's and 70's. Some of these blocks were replaced with new construction like the Radisson Hotel and the Utica National Building.

Most of these lots unfortunately remain unimproved surface parking lots, bordered by weed-choked, broken sidewalks and rusted sign posts.

The HSBC Building was spared this fate. It was, however, completely transformed in the early 1970's with a complete makeover that changed its look in a rather dramatic way.

The original building was built in the Beaux Arts style with flourishes of the Renaissance revival that was favored for financial institutions in 1910. Its iconic arched windows were surrounded with beautifully carved limestone lintels and panels. Security was provided for the bank with ornate wrought iron window and door grills.

Eventually becoming the home office for The Marine Midland Bank and Trust Company in late 1969, the Board of Trustees of the bank decided that this staid old facade needed an "update."

The old limestone was stripped from the iron frame of the building and a million dollar cararra marble facade was put up in its place. The building was fully renovated in its interior spaces as well and was, at the time, touted as "Utica's newest and most modern bank."

After the takeover of Marine Midland by HSBC, the bank remained in operation but quickly shed many of the back office jobs that once were based out of the location. It was purchased in 1998 with much fanfare by the Utica Chamber of Commerce and it's then President Robert Fowler.

The old banking offices were leased out to companies like Allied Abstract and Oneida County, that rented space for some of its departments. Several years into its stewardship, with Fowler gone, the Chamber, now known as "Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce," decided in 2006 that it did not want to be in the landlord business after all. Citing rising expenses and maintenance costs, it sold the building and moved into rented space at the Radisson.

After HSBC decided not to renew its lease and moved, and long-time tenant Allied Abstract also vacated the building, the corner of Genesee and Columbia Streets was vacant for the first time in nearly 100 years.

In 2009, Ron Prince, from Los Angeles, purchased the building for \$250,000. According to Robert Sullivan, who was then Commissioner of Economic Development, Prince contacted the City about potential for future development. According to Sullivan, "Mr. Prince and an associate met with me to discuss a Victorian Fair concept that he wanted to create and stage somewhere in Upstate N.Y. He was curious to see if the HSBC Building could be used as the headquarters for the business operations of the fair."

And, as Sullivan explained, an offer of assistance from the City was declined at the time. “I explained that there could be federal money available for job creation, but it was politely declined.”

Sullivan also added that it is “unthinkable that the city would even be considering demolition of a building that occupies such a major footprint in downtown and is assessed at \$650,000. The potential loss to the tax-base will be another nail in the coffin of downtown.”

And what does Sullivan think about his successor, Randy Soggs’ plan for more surface lots in downtown? “Unbelievable,” said Sullivan. “He just doesn’t get it. Most of Soggs’ experience lies in suburban shopping malls, and he is now in charge of urban downtown development. Surface parking does not create vibrancy and life in any city. Adaptive reuse of old buildings does. I think Soggs’ agenda will be disastrous for the City.”

David Bonacci, a local architect and Chairman of the Scenic and Historic Commission feels that the building is a “major contributor to the Scenic and Historic District,” calling it a “classic modern” design. Bonacci also questioned the city’s assessment that the building is so structurally unsound as to need demolition. “It does not appear, from the exterior, that the building is compromised to the point of demolition” Bonacci said. “Without a thorough and complete structural analysis, it would be hard for me, or anyone to render a judgment. But just because a building is leaking does not mean it is unsound.”

And, the debate about the need for additional parking downtown rages on. According to Sullivan, “If you look at an aerial map of downtown taken today, you will find a city with more parking than buildings. The original parking garage concept that had been promoted by the Roefaro Administration has been on the east side of Genesee St., arguably where the most need exists. Why then, in the 11th hour, Why then, in the 11th hour, with a lame duck administration, would the concept now be changed to the west side of Genesee St., with its abundance of empty lots and the Radisson and Kennedy garages seeming to fill the need?

“That’s a question only the Mayor, Soggs, and maybe Dominick Pavia, a local commercial real estate broker and broker for the HSBC Building can answer,” said Sullivan. “These guys are obviously all working together on big projects like the Harbor Point Project. Now, HSBC and the parking garage project have been co-mingled together. Who knows what their vision is?”

Whatever the vision is, they now have roughly 6 months to make it happen.

Commissioner of UED, Randy Soggs, has stated that, “We need more downtown parking,” and suggested that the “potentially unsafe” HSBC building may be demolished to make room for a surface parking lot. In a subsequent interview with the Phoenix, he was non-committal. “There are no agreements or understandings in regards to HSBC at this time,” Soggs said.

It seems that for now, the future of the HSBC building is up in the air. David Farina, Utica Codes Commissioner and Robert Almy, a structural engineer based in downtown Utica, were to inspect the building for structural deficiencies. Dan Cozza, a Building inspector who went on the tour as well, stated that there was water in the building.

“You could not really tell where it was coming from,” he said. “It could be a broken pipe or it could be the roof.” He then declined further comment stating that the structural report would have the necessary information.

Building Managers Ed and Danni Williams were not available for comment.

Downtown Utica has been under siege for close to 60 years. A lack of vision, planning, uncoordinated demolitions and non-cohesive development has left a patchwork of vacant lots, empty buildings and derelict storefronts juxtaposed with vibrant

businesses and successful regional cultural assets. The example that the city is setting with its handling of HSBC is exactly the kind of approach that has been proven to be the root cause of the decline of Downtown Utica.

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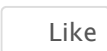
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