Abstract

Demolition is deeply embedded in urban systems. It has been explained as both the inevitable churn of the built environment and as a grand gesture of human control of the urban organism.

This thesis examines the three main arguments for demolition: social reform, modernization, and non-conformity. Through the lens of each, it looks at the history of American demolition and points out the flawed reasoning that justifies demolition today. It focuses especially on the history of Boston, Massachusetts.

It proposes that demolition does not serve a legitimate function in city planning, and offers a new rubric for decision-making around demolition.
This thesis is thanks to the wonderful support and guidance of Sam Bass Warner, who was always available, constructive and kind. Also, Brent Ryan demanded a chicken with legs. Alex Krieger, Matthew Kiefer, Sarah Kelly, Dennis Frenchman, Fred Salvucci and Tunney Lee all provided loads of information, ideas and enthusiasm. Most of all, Gabriel Florit made it happen.
Introduction

Justifications for demolishing buildings have always seemed irrefutable in their time. Economic growth, social reform, architectural progress and a series of compelling urban visions have propelled demolition through one hundred destructive years. In retrospect, the demolitions are often considered mistakes, and the thinking behind them always seems dubious or downright indefensible. The lost architectural value is belatedly recognized and mourned. The negative social impact is belatedly acknowledged and rued. The health and safety reports that made the case for demolition are shown to express cultural biases or problematic agendas. The urban theory that employed demolition, or even embraced it as its own end, loses popularity and seems out-of-date. The promised outcomes of demolition, too, consistently disappoint. The economic benefits either do not materialize or prove to be unrelated to the demolitions. The population does not prove to recover, the job rate does not increase and the crime rate does not go down. Over and over again Americans recognize the folly of demolition, but the practice persists as a legitimate urban strategy and routine urban event. Meanwhile, the enormous environmental impact is only now becoming clear.

Fashions in demolition have changed with fashions in accommodating growth and other urban values. It has never proved to be a satisfactory, or even necessary, tool for achieving the goals it is done to support. It has never quite met the need it promised to meet. At present, demolition is in the hands of a few municipal departments (Buildings Inspectors, Public Works, Health, etc.), a system that integrates demolition as a regular urban procedure and reinforces the assumption that demolition is a necessary and inevitable part of urban growth and change. Preservation, on the other hand, is an exceptional event controlled by a few historic commissions and landmark committees. The buildings they refuse to protect are fair game in the urban growth machine or for ritual sacrifice at the altar of a new urban theory. This system does not allow for a proper appraisal of the purpose and tradition of demolition, and has not proved to be a safeguard against the seductive power of urban fashions in justifying demolitions. This points to a need to reexamine the role of demolition in urban policies and plans.

Mary Hommann presents the conventional wisdom behind demolition very succinctly:
Urban redevelopment involves the demolition of existing development and the construction of new development in its place. It is a very important process in (1) preserving natural land and (2) in providing something dramatic and pivotal that will spin off other improvements, sometimes rescuing a city’s entire economy. (Hommann, 101.)

According to this maxim, political and economic interests promote the premature disposal of viable spaces. They believe local economic growth comes from new amenities. “Something dramatic and pivotal”, in the fashion of the time, will rescue the city from oblivion and lead the confident march toward the future. Besides, new construction provides jobs and local voters demand progress. The existing building stock is a minor, though bittersweet, casualty of these greater goods.

Setting aside the flawed assumptions behind each of these statements, and the woefully common omission of the economic influence of things like good jobs, schools and housing, this explanation conflates construction with demolition. It explains the imperative to build new things, not the imperative to demolish what stands. Demolition occurs because of its symbolic power and because of the superstitious belief that it provides some service, and not because demolition is a practical necessity.

The work that follows is an attempt to illustrate the disconnect between the real need for clearing urban fabric, which is very small, and the amount of clearing that actually happens, which is great. It reviews the justifications for demolition in modern America, with a special focus on Boston, Massachusetts, and then points out the weaknesses of each one and the ineffectiveness of the practice in producing the desired outcome.

Overview of Demolition’s Justifications and Current Status

Cities demolish buildings for three main reasons including Social Reform, Modernization and Nonconformity. This does not mean that they are always explicit about their reasoning. Cities today are sensitive to the controversial legacy of demolition, and particularly its reflection on government. Cities have grown smarter about deflecting blame for demolition for that reason. There are three main ways they do this. First, through poor maintenance of public buildings, cities are able to blame dilapidation on the march of time and claim that demolition is regrettable but unavoidable. This no-maintenance tactic is especially strategic for schools and other buildings where the city pays for maintenance but the state pays for new construction, or when
the city wants to depress the value of a site to make it more attractive to developers. Second, local ordinances that obligate cities to demolish certain buildings save the municipal government from appearing to make a political choice. Ordinances that mandate the demolition of buildings that have been vacant for one year, for example, cast the government in the role of law enforcer instead of legislator. Third, surveys of the quality of local building stocks continue to be designed and manipulated to justify unnecessary demolitions. This cynical and self-serving tactic, which today is controlled in large part by the building materials industry, has undergone numerous iterations and always seems more outrageous in retrospect, but the subjective nature of determining what buildings to condemn has not changed. “Blight” has described both vacancy and overcrowding. It has described conditions as minor as peeling paint, missing windows and sagging porches. It has described social conditions like the rates of alcoholism and car ownership. Worst of all, blight has described proximity to blight—if some of the buildings in an area are distressed, all of them have to go. None of these conditions reveal much about the viability of the buildings themselves, but that is because demolition is not now and never has been about the buildings themselves.

It is about the three reasons explored in this thesis and summarized below.

**Reason One: Social Reform**

Social reform is the oldest justification for demolition. It began in earnest at the turn of the last century, when cities became the place where most people lived and the social problems of cities were first drawing urgent attention. At that time, poverty, disease, crime and immoral behavior were thought to stem from the particular environments of areas known as slums. Get rid of the environment, reformers thought, and get rid of urban ailments. This turned demolition of slums into a moral and political imperative that soon became a legal obligation as cities adopted minimal standards for tenement buildings. Between 1890 and 1949, most city governments were cautious in their use of demolition because the proper role of government in seizing private property was still uncertain. But slum clearance was often a triumphant gesture by governments asserting themselves in the free market, and was an important component of the New Deal.

The righteous polemics of the social reform that justified the early demolitions were soon scrutinized and tempered. Original language exposing racist, classist and xenophobic motivations was replaced by stand-ins that meant the same thing. Intolerance continues to take on new
disguises and masks, and recognition and renunciation continues to follow close behind. Demolition is the material expression of intolerance, and social reform, now cloaked as social justice, public health and community development, continues to call on demolition to provide an environment free from perceived social threats. Today also, environmentalism seeks to implement urban designs that will change the behavior of city residents, for example, by encouraging them to walk instead of drive. Demolitions done in the name of Smart Growth and other behavior-based environmental designs are also social reform efforts.

Reason Two: Modernization

The second, chronologically-speaking, justification for demolition is the imperative for urban modernization and implementation of new urban visions. The first of these in the United States were the City Beautiful, the Radiant City and other models of ideal cities. These were implemented in the most visible period of demolition’s history: during the Urban Renewal program from 1954 to 1973. The sweeping nature of these visions has fallen out of favor today as Master Planning has given way to incremental planning, but Modernization at smaller scales is still a pervasive argument for demolition. Modernization employs demolition more liberally than social reform because it focuses on two things instead of one: the old and the new. It demands demolition as a means for getting rid of the old and excuses demolition as a step in making room for the new, two separate rationales that do not necessarily come as a pair or even occur on the same site. Modernization was the justification behind the United States’ most destructive phase, the mid-century policies of Urban Renewal and the Federal Highways Act. Today it continues to justify demolitions, sometimes merely to get rid of a reminder of the past or a building that has no current use, and sometimes to upgrade a facility seen as outdated for technological, size or design reasons.

Modernization originally came under scrutiny because of its alignment with powerful private interests. The link between municipal tax revenues and the financial condition of local real estate creates an incentive for Modernization that hurts the poor by targeting their neighborhoods for more lucrative uses or by pricing them out of their homes and businesses. Early Modernization work was attacked for benefitting a few wealthy developers and harming millions of poor people. But even without the private influence, Modernization is a flimsy excuse for demolition. Demolition makes adaptive reuse impossible, reducing the city’s ability to pick from among the
features of old and new. Modernization is a total demand that forces individuals to abandon their personal relationships with time and their personal decisions about the new. As urban ideals fall in and out of favor, their collateral damage is often a bigger regret than their direct products. It is more common for cities to wish they had preserved a building than to wish they had not built a new one. The modernization of small streets by turning them into superblocks, the demolition of small houses to replace them with mansions, of unplanned spaces to replace them with planned ones, and of cluttered urban areas to replace them with sleek new ones have all seemed like indisputably fantastic ideas at some points and horrible mistakes at others. Demolishing shabby or non-stylish buildings because they are not modern or do not lend themselves to modern technologies seems like a good deed to one generation and an unimaginative waste or terrible robbery to the next.

Reason Three: Nonconformity

Modernization’s gigantic footprint after the implementation of its two famous policies led to a backlash against architectural Modernism and a new justification for demolition. Nonconformity or aesthetic justifications are the third lens through which demolition has seemed like a useful, righteous and proper deed. Demolitions of buildings and amenities that do not fit aesthetic preferences or a chosen historic narrative, or that are not consistent with the desired urban fabric or experiential pattern, are undertaken to achieve collective peace-of-mind and symbolize the public’s control over the built environment during a pluralistic era. Under the Nonconformity justification, demolition is an empowering tool to allow cities to choose the environment and history they want, a seemingly democratic and humanistic argument. It differs from Modernization because the object is rarely to modernize the city, but more often to refashion its visual impact and historic narrative. Nonconformity justifications prize ideals of social and aesthetic cohesion, usually based on a prescriptive design code or a chosen architectural style.

The sanctity of public opinion, however, becomes easy to challenge as the generations continue on and the blind spots of each are revealed to the next. Architectural and historic merits are frequently recognized too late to save the local examples. Painful memories and symbolism associated with urban places fade within a single adult life, and demolition, like capital punishment, is a drastic and ultimately unsatisfying way of dealing with them. The
Nonconformity justification depends upon local decisions about the desired aesthetic or history, but each revision inevitably changes the criteria for preservation or demolition. These changes then limit the options for the next cycle, so that each new iteration of the democratic will of the people undermines the democratic opportunities of future years. Thus, the Nonconformity justification depends as heavily upon fashion as the other two justifications. Furthermore, Nonconformity has serious non-spatial consequences, including economic exclusivity or stagnation. Nonconformity’s focus on architectural and historical censorship continually runs into trouble for social justice reasons, and also leads to undesirable holes in the architectural narrative and a diluting of the local culture. It continually faces revisions, like the social reform justification, for this reason, but by definition, the blind spots are always identified in the past, and never in the present.

This kind of constant revision is ideal in many aspects of public and urban life, but for demolition the stakes are too high. Demolition is the only urban event that is one hundred percent irreversible, and the lesson keeps repeating itself that demolition is a mistake.

Note about Why This Thesis is Not about Economics, Health or Safety

Economic development is a major concern of cities, but the argument that “economics” (meaning the financial profile of a project or site) is the reason for demolition and redevelopment projects is false. In practice, cities identify a project they wish to do (usually in the broader interest of economic development) and then find a way to make the economics work, either by raising money, creating a public-private partnership, or cutting costs. The financial profile of a project must favor doing it, but the financial profile is not a reason for doing it.

At the site level, the economics argument is used to explain the necessity of replacing one building with another. “The economics” of property values and redevelopment pressure makes the threatened site an inevitable target for demolition. But this is disingenuous because every city has thousands of sites with a “higher and better” economic use potential, including sites that are never considered for redevelopment at all. The factors that make some sites more vulnerable to redevelopment than others are only partly economic. Furthermore, cities direct site selection through zoning. In this way, municipal governments do not have to take on demolition projects on their own in order to encourage redevelopment. The decisions behind local zoning maps reflect many interests, but not the beckoning finger of the invisible hand.
In short, there are too many examples of cities steering their economic data to accept the argument that the economics steers the decisions cities make.

Next, every epoch of redevelopment in American history has been driven by reform movements that were fighting the economic realities of their day. Demolition movements see themselves as targeting the results of the economic expediency that created slums, blighted areas, grim or uninspiring city forms and socially or environmentally irresponsible architecture and development patterns. Massive interventions become necessary, advocates argue, to reverse the tendencies of the economy, not to fulfill them.

The last reason this thesis is not about economics is that demolition is not always coupled with redevelopment. Demolition is often its own event, and even though promises of redevelopment often, though not always, accompany it, these promises are belied by the absence of shovel-ready redevelopment plans.

As for health and safety, many parallel arguments apply. Occasional instances of true health hazards may justify some demolitions, such as in the cases of extreme rot, mold or poisonous material like those polluted by laboratories for crystal meth. Health hazards can usually be ameliorated through renovation, but cities often demolish buildings instead. Asbestos removal, for example, is a procedure that countless cities have successfully performed for years, yet they still cite asbestos as a justification for demolition. More often, the health hazards cited do not relate directly to the structures under study. Cities condemn buildings based on the health conditions of the people living in them, another indication that health is not the real motivator in demolition.

Safety too, is a common reason given for demolition. It is easier and cheaper to seal dangerous buildings than to demolish them and cities have standard protocols for handling this, but they demolish buildings nonetheless. Clearly, the safety issue is not the only reason for action in these cases.

Health and safety codes often exempt buildings that predate the codes’ adoption, and even when they do not, many buildings can be brought up to code using common retrofit technologies. Health and safety are both offered as reasons for demolition, but the true need for such a drastic solution is rare.
As the thesis shall illustrate, economics, health and safety masquerade as justifications for demolitions when the real reasons are less palatable or salable. The real reasons for demolition are the reasons explored below: Social Reform, Modernization and Nonconformity.

Note about Why This Thesis Focuses on Boston

Boston provides an excellent case for studying the history of demolition in the United States and the reasons propelling it. As a large and important city, it could not miss the influence of planning ideas and trends as they emerged, but its unique political character grounds its history in people, not theories. Even before the rise of public participation, Boston’s public was a force to be reckoned with. Its role in Boston history provides special insight into the relative merits of the different phases of American planning and their associated demolitions. Often, the public prevented demolition from happening at all, sometimes without even a voiced objection. Other times, the Boston public led the national mood, either as victims of demolition, organizers against it, or successful negotiators in the face of it. Many times Boston’s city leadership took pains to avoid confrontation, thwart public attempts to organize, silence their protests or respond to their demands. Events like these appear to have shaped Boston much more than planning fashions did, but the relationship between the public and their government pushed planning theory forward, making Boston’s history, in many ways, a miniature version of the national story.

Boston’s government also grappled with abstract theories and their implications in tangible ways. Boston explored the eternal American question, the proper role for government, in every conceivable way because the unique history of relations between city hall and the private sector forced it to experiment. It was a pioneer in placing restrictions on private real estate, and has often revisited that decision. It took on major building projects of its own and later revised that decision too. It sometimes shunned, sometimes teamed up with and sometimes solicited private investments for public services. It slowly warmed up to the idea of having powerful city planners and then backed away from that model. All of these decisions were driven by specific local situations, but they reflect the nation’s general historical framework very nicely.

Boston also expresses planning history so well because its mayoral transitions coincided with the philosophical transitions in American planning, so that each new personality was an almost cartoonish personification of his historic moment. James Michael Curley (served on-and-off
1914-1949), the corrupt Progressive Era mayor, was a charismatic political boss who wore spats and double-breasted coats, chewed cigars and snuck alcohol into City Hall despite Prohibition. He inflamed ethnic rivalries to promote his own career and put more stock in populism than progress. To the reformers eager to replace him, he represented everything that was wrong with city politics in the United States. He finally lost the mayoral election in the same year the Federal Housing Act was passed, 1949, ushering in the new era of Rationalist planning. It was the moment city planners had been waiting for. The federal government paid unprecedented attention to cities and city governments gave unprecedented power to planners. Mayors John B. Hynes (served 1950-1960) and John F. Collins (served 1960-1968) were upstanding, civic-minded and eager to build coalitions, but they faded behind the real power at City Hall, Edward Logue of the Boston Renewal Authority (served 1961-1968). Logue embodied Rationalist planning by bringing the fashion of Modernism, new standards of professionalism, and faith in expertise and efficiency to City Hall. Logue ran for mayor himself in 1967, and Boston’s rejection of him coincided with the transition into the current era of pluralism, which has been characterized by a neighborhood focus, decentralized local decision-making, and a planning model of “bureaucratic proceduralism.”

Last, Boston is the home of one of the most controversial building in the United States, Boston City Hall. Periodic discussions about demolishing it provide ample material for examining the way public demolition debates take shape and what kind of arguments are offered. As a prominent artifact of a Modernization effort in Boston, the building has heavy symbolic weight, and the discussion around the symbolism reveals much about Bostonians’ sense of history and identity, and their view of demolition.

Reasons to Stop Demolition

Before getting into the reasons demolition is a flawed tool, it is important to review the reasons preservation is better.

Reason One: The Environment

From an environmental perspective, the consequences of demolition negate any supposed merits. Preservation is inherently about sustainability because it promotes conservation of resources and extending the useful life of products for as long as possible. Like
environmentalism, preservation adheres to the “precautionary principle” of ethics, which has a low risk-tolerance according to the thinking, “better safe than sorry”. Err on the side of preservation, it says, rather than risk losing a resource. Environmentalism has the same attitude.

Quantitative studies of the life-cycles of building material support the claim that preservation is the most sustainable policy for the built environment. “Life-cycle analysis” is the body of research from Materials Science that traces the pollution, resource consumption and energy input associated with the production, distribution, useful life, and recycling or disposal of a material. This is the science that has contributed to policies that ban certain materials from consumer products (like polystyrene and chlorofluorocarbons) and makes it possible to determine which materials are best for the environment. Better and better calculations continually point to a higher and higher environmental impact during the production of building materials like concrete and steel, and these estimates are often conservative because of the limited availability of information for specific buildings. Once these materials reach the street, literally, it makes environmental sense to make the most of them. Preservationists call this “embodied energy.” In other words, the final product, the building, represents an environmental investment that cities can choose to make returns on, or not. Furthermore, while Life-cycle analysis cannot measure the nature or intensity of the use of any product, it can measure how much use the product can withstand, and calculations repeatedly find that buildings have much more potential for use than they can possibly exhaust over the typical length of their “life.”

Put simply, it makes no environmental sense to recycle cans and bottles but not buildings and streets.

Many preservationists go beyond the material composition of the building stock to point out that many old buildings have built-in energy efficiency features to maximize insulation, air circulation, shade, natural light, or whatever the local environment called for. One architect noted, "The original buildings had no choice but to be green. Otherwise, you'd die of heat stroke in the summer, or freeze to death in the winter." LEED and other guides to sustainable building design are actually merely reviving construction techniques that faded with the rise of cheap energy. Frustrated preservationists, threatened by what they call the “conspicuous conservation” that has justified so many recent demolitions, have made some dramatic comparisons:

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1 Florida architect Steve Mouzon, founder of the New Urban Guild, quoted in Curtis.
One might be tempted to compare the recent green wave with the rise of modernism more than a half-century ago. Planners and architects back then didn't just want buildings to look different; they also wanted to change the direction society was headed. The old ways of thinking were outmoded. Yesterday's buildings solved yesterday's problems; new buildings were needed to solve the problems of today—and tomorrow. Of course, many people will recall what happened to America's historic fabric the last time we undertook a nationwide revamping of the built landscape. The result was urban renewal, and it left many of our best urban areas in tatters and many of our historic buildings in piles of rubble.²

This might seem more histrionic if it were not for the continued ignorance on the part of national policy, which is lately supporting “green collar” jobs that work against the green features of standing buildings, and has slashed the national preservation budget by twenty-five percent.

Preservationists disagree on the degree to which buildings should maintain their original state. Many focus on the historic character of buildings and neighborhoods and aim to restrict visible changes such as additional floors and wings, new properties, or changes to the landscape. For historic districts, they are concerned with the “noncontributing properties” and may even support their demolition. From an environmental perspective, the best practice is to use the buildings as they are while supporting any improvement of efficiency or increase in density or capacity. The visual impact is secondary to the efficient use of materials and space, and they support mixing materials and eras for maximum environmental responsibility. Preservation in this sense has less to do with history than with environmental thrift.

Reason Two: Economics

The economics of preservation are enticing as well. Others have performed careful and extensive research on the subject, and have found that, “Dollar for dollar, historic preservation is one of the highest job-generating economic development options available,”³ that historic preservation keeps more development money in the community, that it has more multiplier effects, and can both stimulate and stabilize the economy. In Massachusetts in the year 2000, building rehabilitation was a $6.9 billion industry.⁴ The one-third of that spent on historic

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³ Rypkema, 13.
properties (defined as properties on or eligible for historic registers), created more than 33,000 construction jobs. It is fair to assume that this is a higher number than $2.3 billion of new construction would have created. Economic studies of places that have adopted strong preservation policies have found flourishing development sectors that welcome the stabilizing influence of preservation in providing continuous work. All of these studies only look at buildings that are officially (in some capacity) “historic”. Preservation and maintenance of all existing building stock has a greater economic impact than these studies can tell.

Preservation has benefits for the economy as a whole as well. The National Trust’s Main Streets program has had success in dozens of states and more than 1200 program sites in reviving the economies of commercial districts using the existing building stock. Through maintenance and restoration, cultural programming and small improvements and investments, the program has demonstrated that commercial districts do not need “something dramatic and pivotal” to revitalize.

The lessons of history also teach that the built environment is not the problem or the solution during times of municipal economic hardship. Physical changes are only symbols of revitalization, but time and again cities have pegged their hopes on the symbolic power of construction, demolition and redevelopment to revitalize the economy, create jobs, reduce crime, lure the middle class back from the suburbs, and, even today, improve the morals of the populace. They overlook the importance of things like job creation and the potential for small improvements, in the spirit of the Main Streets program, for making existing neighborhoods attractive places to be. In the middle of the century, Boston achieved an economic comeback through policies and tax breaks for the burgeoning computer and information industry and the academic and financial sectors. Boston, as well as Minneapolis, Denver and other cities, is a testament to the substantive power of a diversified economy, good jobs and good schools to increase and ensure city revenues. Massachusetts continues to be a growing economy, even though the government sector is only the sixth largest contributor to the economy, an unusually low rank for American states. Unfortunately, diversifying the economy did not leave a direct physical mark, and because it began at the same time as the Federal Urban Renewal program, many planners today still credit the Urban Renewal projects with rescuing Boston. They cling to

5 Rypkema, 14.
6 http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-center/
7 http://econpost.com/massachusettseconomy/massachusetts-economic-development-and-gdp
this belief in the face of Detroit, Buffalo, and the rest of the failing cities that all underwent similar urban renewal projects, received the same federal funding, and still continue to decline.

During economic challenges, cities often turn the built environment into a scapegoat or decide that their struggle comes from a need to modernize or make a statement. American cities have certainly tried this tactic enough times to know better by now.

Reason Three: The Unknowable Future

Demolition seems like a democratic activity in the moment it is undertaken. Not only do cities get to choose what they like and do not like, they believe demolition is an imperative for progress. By choosing what to preserve, cities can feel like they are choosing history. Demolition provides the rare sensation of editing history to match contemporary desires so that present and future residents do not have to face, work with or even know about the past.

Countless times, this has proved to be a mistake. The irreversible nature of demolition makes a choice for the present a choice for all time. Every city has painful memories of lost buildings. The precautionary principle should discourage cities from making decisions that reduce the environmental richness that future generations can draw upon. Architectural merit, especially, is subject to style preferences of generations. Boston architect and preservationist David Fixler has pointed out that, “Architectural styles tend to suffer the heaviest criticism 30 to 50 years after their introduction.” Most buildings do not last nearly long enough. By wiping out the architectural legacy of their own years, generations prevent future generations from assessing their buildings with a fresh perspective.

Historic significance is also sensitive to generational change. Association with significant events and people (commonly required for historic designation) does not stand a chance when buildings cannot survive their own eras. Most historic registers require buildings to be approaching fifty years in age to be considered. Since the average American building does not survive more than thirty years, most buildings do not get the chance to age to historic significance.

This is not to overstate the benefits of the historic register system. For one thing, the system skews evaluation of buildings toward the past and overlooks the importance of the present and future. For the purpose of urban planning, this is a significant limitation to the system, even

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though, as John Kenneth Galbraith said, “The preservation movement has one great curiosity. There is never retrospective controversy or regret. Preservationists are the only people in the world who are invariably confirmed in their wisdom after the fact.”\textsuperscript{9} The point is merely to draw attention to the arrogance of believing that if the current generation does not like or cannot use a building, no future generation will be able to either, and demolition is therefore a service to everyone.

\textsuperscript{9} Rypkema, 11.
Chapter One
Demolition for Social Reform: Slum Clearance, Scapegoats and New Urbanism

Slums of the Progressive Era

Dismay over the tenement houses and slum areas of the industrial city led to the first modern movements for social reform, and to the first modern demolitions. While the pioneering social reformer Jane Addams scoffed at what she called “geographical salvation”\textsuperscript{10} and her contemporaries in the labor movement posited that the best way to help the poor was to raise their wages, the social reform movement as a whole embraced demolition as a social solution. Some social activists were genuinely alarmed by the plight of the poor, but many more people were preoccupied by their visibility. Both groups borrowed ideas and language from germ theory to argue that the cure for the urban problems of poverty and moral decline was to expunge their physical indicators, in other words, to demolish. As the prominent New York housing reformer Lawrence Veiller put it, poverty was:

\begin{quote}
...a germ disease, contagious even at times; that it thrives amid the same conditions as those under which the germs of tuberculosis flourish—in darkness, filth and sordid surroundings; and that when the light has been let in the first step towards its cure has been taken.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

For Veiller, letting the light in meant building in the style of the New Law tenements of the Bronx, which were innovative for their fifty feet of air space. For most reformers in most cities, it meant the literal demolition of slums. Social reformers believed that physical environments had the power to sway the morals and well-being of the masses. Many saw cities in their entirety, not only slums, as “pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of men” and the source of “every danger that threatened American democracy: poverty and crime, socialism and corruption, immigration and Catholicism.”\textsuperscript{12} F.J. Kingsbury, president of the American Social Science Association, half-joked in 1895 that, “nothing short of the treatment applied to Sodom and Gomorrah will meet the necessities of the case.”\textsuperscript{13} That same year, the New York City

\textsuperscript{10} Hall, 46.
\textsuperscript{12} Hall, 36.
\textsuperscript{13} Hall, 37.
government auctioned off ninety-nine tenements in the Lower East Side’s Mulberry Bend to private citizens, who became responsible for demolishing and clearing the sites, and evicting the surprised Italian immigrants who lived there.\textsuperscript{14} Anti-urban rhetoric promoted the idea that cities should be decentralized and dense populations disbanded. Urban designs aimed to achieve that end, particularly with the new emphasis on city parks, whose social services, said Frederick Law Olmsted, included a, “harmonizing and refining influence...favorable to courtesy, self-control and temperance.”\textsuperscript{15} Mulberry Bend was converted into Columbus Park.

In Boston, Mayor Josiah Quincy (the third, served 1896-1899), called “the last of Boston’s Brahmin Democrats,”\textsuperscript{16} handled Boston’s overcrowding and sanitary concerns by demolishing more than 230 residential buildings and building more than forty playgrounds.\textsuperscript{17} This shows that demolition served two purposes social reform: first, it got rid of the present evil and second, it could redevelop with a morally superior use. These did not always come as a pair. One reason was that in Boston, New York and other cities, demolitions by the public sector did not mean land seizure by the public sector. The law was such that the government removed the nuisance but the property owner kept the land.

Despite the moral convictions of reformers, demolition as a tool for social change was slow to catch on because of its disruptive potential. Urban demolition of this type was a new phenomenon, both technologically (dynamite was invented in 1867) and politically. Progressive Era decision-makers were aware of the enormous power of demolition as an emotional and social change agent. That generation appreciated the drama of the event far more than any group of leaders since. To reformers outside the government, the disruption was part of the appeal, but it made demolition risky for politicians, more and more of whom represented the new immigrant majority and came from tenements themselves.

Demolition served a symbolic function as a herald of the philosophical transition about the role of government. American urban activists, who still relied largely on volunteerism, admired London’s model of “interventionist bureaucracy.” They were fast losing trust in the free market’s ability to solve the urban problem and fast losing patience with the immigrant influence. By demolishing tenements, the nexus of the free market and the immigrants, cities could signal that

\textsuperscript{14} Byles, 34-35.  
\textsuperscript{15} Hall, 46.  
\textsuperscript{16} Kennedy, 102.  
\textsuperscript{17} Kennedy, 104.
the unsupervised spree of industrialization and immigration was over. The new era (which, like all eras, made targets of recent-past buildings to amplify the break with the past) promised to control both evils.

The tenuous legal position of the action, however, meant many more slum areas were identified for demolition than were actually demolished, a loose end that played a defining role in the history of American demolition.

The social critique of demolition for slum clearance makes itself in that history. The so-called slums had a way of stabilizing on their own when they were left alone and leaving residents worse off when they were forced to leave. In areas where they were left alone, crowding decreased, transience lessened, pride increased and the immigrant populations integrated with the rest of the city. The pattern of demolitions in the 20th century offers insight into the disruptive effects of repeated forced moves. Poor neighborhoods have many needs, but demolition is not one of them.

The physical critique is that arguments against the problems of slums conflate the structures with the social evils. Communicable diseases and crime, the quaint social ailments of Catholicism and Communism, and the new social ailments of hopelessness and apathy (observed in the nation’s poor neighborhoods today) are all borne through people, not buildings. Areas that survived the scourge are functional, desirable locations today, and the chief difference is that they house an appropriate number of people.

Scapegoats for Modernization and Economic Development

Before 1910, demolition as a social solution proved to have the desired effects, including reducing tuberculosis rates and the visibility of the poor. Since that time, the measurable social benefits have disappeared, and the early observations are now the object of scrutiny and doubt. (It is now known that both effects occurred because of demolition’s tendency to scatter the displaced.) Nevertheless, the apparent social benefits of demolition made, and continue to make, social reform a strategic argument for those who wanted demolition for other reasons, including Modernization. At that time, City Beautiful was the modern new urban vision, and proponents of its implementation promised that it would, “creat[e] the physical prerequisite for the emergence
of a harmonious social order.” The kind of demolition that City Beautiful called for required a governmental intervention at a scale unheard of in the nation at that time. By playing up the social benefits of the concept, proponents achieved modest success in capitalizing on the general atmosphere of reform.

In Massachusetts, in fact, it was the social reform movement that gave the physical planning movement its first real legitimacy. A 1913 report on Massachusetts housing conditions repeated the familiar arguments that the squalor was unwholesome and a threat to democracy, but it also revealed disturbing new statistics on child mortality. Instead of recommending social solutions to the social problem (such as clinics, prenatal care and other social services), the report recommended that planning boards be required in cities with populations exceeding 10,000. The state legislature complied, and the Boston Planning Board was established in 1914.20

Economic interests have also cloaked themselves in social reform. As the public sector took on more authority over the built environment, the use of demolition for social reform increased. Anti-urban rhetoric reached the federal level, and the Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt Administrations both created slum clearance programs. The New Deal included demolition in several ways, but its most notable role in the history of demolition was the 1934 introduction of “blight.” As one historian explains it:

[Blight] had more to do with the ways in which populations and enterprises had moved—or had not moved—than with the age and condition of the localities themselves. The failure of business enterprises to expand into certain areas where they had been expected to go; the movement of factories and industrial plants into residential areas and fashionable districts; the shift of well-to-do segments of the population into more promising communities; the exodus of racial and ethnic groups out of traditional neighborhoods—all these factors often created pockets of potentially valuable property that were no longer regarded as profitable, productive, or livable.21

The process was a self-fulfilling prophesy. The Federal Housing Authority mandated the mapping of American cities for blighted areas in 1934 and the Works Progress Administration conducted housing inventories during the New Deal. Many buildings in the designated areas

19 Hall, 192.
20 Kennedy, 126.
21 O’Connor, 66-67.
were demolished within the decade. In Boston, for example, over 550 buildings were demolished in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{22} Those areas left standing were marginalized and imperiled forever after, as banks followed these guidelines and refused to grant mortgages or loans for investments in the identified areas. This forced homebuyers into the suburbs, which further depressed the “redlined” neighborhoods and contributed to the ongoing economic difficulties of municipal economies through World War II.

The 1954 amendment to the 1949 Federal Housing Act freed cities from having to build affordable housing in federally funded projects. The new legislation, called Urban Renewal, had strong economic appeal for cities, which needed the tax revenue of more profitable real estate. This was an economic situation, and blight was an economic term, but at the project level, cities backed up their arguments with social data as a scapegoat for demolition. In all eras, social reform makes the case for demolition, even when it is not the primary objective.

Boston’s West End neighborhood is the most famous example. It had been proposed for demolition in 1907 and again in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{23} It was an old immigrant neighborhood and former slum that appealed to the government and developers as a redevelopment site because of its proximity to downtown and its views of the water. It was a redlined area that, like many of the identified areas of the Progressive Era, had finally settled into what many considered a thriving urban neighborhood. By the time the Hynes administration applied for Urban Renewal funding for its demolition, the neighborhood was a poor but stable place with nothing particularly wrong with it. Some reports on the area found that crime and disease rates were on par with Boston as a whole and that residents had developed deep and multi-generational connections to the area. The Boston Redevelopment Authority’s own reports found that the overcrowding problem was solving itself. Nevertheless, city inspectors concluded that eighty percent of the structures were substandard or marginal and almost the entire area (minus a couple churches and historic sites) should be razed. They based their conclusions on deficiencies such as the lack of rear stairways and outside fire escapes.\textsuperscript{24} The city bolstered its position in exactly the way it excuses demolition today: with the sure-fire strategy of neglect:

\textsuperscript{22} Christian Science Monitor, March 16, 1939, pg 1.
\textsuperscript{23} O’Connor, 125.
\textsuperscript{24} O’Connor, 130.
Once it had been decided that the area would be demolished, the city stopped cleaning the streets and collecting the garbage; landlords stopped making repairs on their property; and the district truly began to look like the kind of slum described in the reports of the city inspectors.\textsuperscript{25}

This type of manipulative practice became infamous and stirred the public's anger toward demolition. At another project in another neighborhood almost ten years later, the Boston Redevelopment Authority responded to the public outcry and promised to preserve as much of the built environment as possible, but:

In fact, however, in order to achieve the upgraded property values, the moderate and high-rent housing, and the influx of salaried homeowners and well-to-do tenants who would transform the South End into the kind of respectable middle-class neighborhood they saw as their ultimate goal, members of the BRA realized they would have to engage in precisely the kind of substantial demolition and wholesale clearance they had promised to avoid. To justify their actions, especially in light of the widespread public revulsion against what had happened in the old West End, city planners projected an image of a neighborhood so "pathologically disorganized," as one recent analyst phrased it, that its recuperation would require nothing short of drastic "social surgery."

Social reformers inveighed against the numerous "vice dens" that pockmarked the area and lamented the various skid-row areas where panhandlers roamed the streets by day and the unconscious bodies of the drunks lined the sidewalks by night. Largely ignoring the lively elements of multiracial and ethnic community life in many parts of the South End among Syrians, Greeks, African-Americans, and Puerto Ricans, whose activities revolved around their churches, social clubs, restaurants, stores, and taverns, planners chose instead to draw up lists of depressing statistics on the disproportionate amounts of crime, violence, disease, alcoholism, and welfare dependency. In reports remarkably similar to those that had been prepared for the old West End prior to its demolition, committees reported that over 37 percent of South End males between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five were not in the labor force; that 78 percent of the households did not have automobiles; and that the neighborhood had nearly 30 percent of Boston's tuberculosis cases.\textsuperscript{26}

The biggest outrage was the flimsy case for demolition. Rates of alcoholism and lack of cars, and unemployment in a period of national job shortages, were examples of the manipulation of social statistics that hurt the credibility of Social Reform as a demolition argument.

\textsuperscript{25} O'Connor, 137.
\textsuperscript{26} O'Connor, 227-228.
The “Compact City”

Today, social reform is experiencing a resurgence as a sincere rationale for demolition. Like the social reformers of the Progressive Era, today’s social reformers see demolition as a tool to change human behavior, especially moral behavior. Auto-oriented development is the spiritual target of this movement because many blame it for a decline they perceive in American community values. In practice, the targets are usually mid-rise urban areas next to good public transit, which are demolished to make room for architecture that better expresses the new wave of communitarianism known as New Urbanism. As Vincent Scully, a renowned urban theorist and historian, has said of a famous development (on virgin land) of the New Urbanist movement:

One cannot help but hope that the lessons of Seaside and of the other new towns now taking shape can be applied to the problem of housing for the poor. That is where community is most needed and where it has been most disastrously destroyed. Center city would truly have to be broken down into its intrinsic neighborhoods if this were to take place within it. Sadly, it would all have been much easier to do before Redevelopment, when the basic structure of neighborhoods was still there.

Scully is referring to the demolitions of Urban Renewal, which destroyed poor neighborhoods and replaced them with the Modernist architecture that New Urbanism stands against. He is positing that re-demolishing areas that have been in their present state for forty or fifty years and rebuilding the former street grids would be a way, though difficult, to exhume a lost community. The confusion between neighborhood and community, the scolding nature of his language, and the harkening back to yesteryear, do not improve the Social Reform argument’s validity. Even if the wonderful past existed as imagined, it is not possible for cities to demolish their way back in time. Demolition for nostalgia, in any of its guises, is not a coherent public policy. Furthermore, nostalgia is, if anything, a reason for preservation. By now, the detested Modernist urban forms hold decades of childhood memories, personal meaning and (for young people) an atmosphere of simpler days that would be lost in demolition and that nothing new can

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27 New Urbanism is a specific movement with specific design rules. It distinguishes itself from other movements that this thesis combines it with. The decision to combine these movements into a loose definition of New Urbanism is based on the focus here on their social reform agendas, which are all similar.

28 As quoted in Harvey.
ever replace. Nostalgia’s only coherent function in the built environment is to promote preservation, and even there it is dubious.

Social Reform demolitions seek to change human behavior, especially to elevate moral behavior, even though, as David Harvey put it, “Few supporters of the movement [today] would state so crude a thesis.” Many demolitions for New Urbanism, Smart Growth, Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND), Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) and sustainability are Social Reform demolitions because their aim in reconfiguring the built environment is to direct individuals to reach morally superior communitarian states and sustainable carbon footprints.

The urban sustainability vision is social first, and environmental second. “I believe we should be investing in the ‘Compact City’,” wrote a prominent architect and sustainability activist. “A dense and socially diverse city where economic and social activities overlap and where communities are focused around neighborhoods.” For proponents of the Compact City, form, somehow, will dictate behavior. Density, despite being blamed for two rounds of slums and their subsequent clearance (during the Progressive and Civil Rights Eras), is the magic bullet against the human failings that are destroying the planet. Social diversity only needs the right buildings or the right street pattern to flourish. Economic and social activities, apparently too dissociated from each other, will “overlap”, which presumably means that spending money will become more social, but can also mean that being social will be more expensive. The right urban form will carry the human animal into a golden age of togetherness, and the wrong form, with, as usual, its “quantifiably disastrous results” is all around us. The only hope for the vision, as usual, is a clean slate. New city form will push back against today’s “bottom-line economics”, provide space for the interminable public activities that communitarians cherish and “for people simply to slow down and meet.” New architecture, too, will “stimulate rather than repress people’s natural human potential” and “humanize the city.”

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30 Rogers, 33.
31 Rogers, 33.
32 Rogers, 67.
33 Rogers, 73.
34 Rogers, 74.
35 Rogers, 74.
Many of these arguments are familiar. Social data, too, has been hauled into service for the reform movement, padding the communitarian rhetoric with facts showing that walkable cities support local economies, mitigate climate change and fight obesity. Social data has made similar promises before, though admittedly the data may be subject to greater scrutiny today. The important distinction for this social reform movement is the new way cities are handling it. Rather than rely on the local government (Progressive Era) or the Federal government (Urban Renewal), this time around cities rely on the private sector. Encouraging demolitions of existing building stock through zoning changes is the principle way that American cities accomplish demolition for social reform today. (The demolition of Boston’s Combat Zone for the development of the Ritz Carlton Towers project is one example.) Some projects, such as Boston’s Harbor Point, successfully employ existing buildings (in this case, public housing) to promote the values of New Urbanism, but more often cities solicit redevelopment.

While upzoning has obvious economic benefits for cities and developers, and possibly even for the environment, the need for demolition at these sites is less obvious. The very success of adaptive reuse projects casts further doubt on the need for demolition, especially when the arguments for demolition are the communitarian, sustainability, “innovative” and “whole new world of living and lifestyle options” that these projects claim. Engineering is certainly a consideration, and the added costs of incorporating existing building stock into new projects is significant, but if anyone can foot the bill, surely those reform-minded, socially diverse purchasers of the new luxury condominiums can.

Demolition for any of the socially normative reasons above, as critic David Harvey has written, “Destroy the possibility of history and ensure social stability by containing all processes within a spatial frame. The new urbanism changes the spatial frame, but not the presumption of spatial order as a vehicle for controlling history and process.” New Urbanism is a familiar animal for that reason. It is also familiar because of its intolerance for the existing forms. The lack of imagination about rehabilitating existing spaces for contemporary standards is a sign of the importance of symbolism to the change agents. It is not enough to be sustainable, or to be a community. It must look the part, as it does in our imaginations. The distracting allure of design

36 Kemp, 59 and 62.
slows cities' substantive responsiveness to new values or emergencies (such as the environment). In the ways that matter most, the notion of social reform through design retards rather than propels its progress, and creates enormous waste and disruption in the meantime. It in fact discourages the social diversity that the Compact City longs for by increasing property values and rent rates. Cities have to spend more and more money to meet affordable housing quotas, and more and more people need housing assistance.

The trickle-down principles behind the mixed-income vision simply do not work. Under the latest iteration of public housing, HUD and municipal governments have cleared over 100,000 units, and not replaced them. The idea is that the mixed-income housing envisioned in the Compact City will take care of the social evils of isolating the poor by themselves. “Hope VI” (established 1989) applies New Urbanist formal principles to address the problems associated with the Modernist projects, but has only seen an increase in the numbers of the needy. Even if the idea worked, there is still no reason to demolish buildings first. Furthermore, by demolishing the unremarkable building stock, cities end up demolishing much of the affordable building stock. Affordable housing, office, business and retail space, often in good parts of town with good transit access, is sacrificed in the name of social reform, only to disperse those who cannot afford to upgrade or burden the city with subsidizing them to stay.

There may be a valid argument for the acceptability of social, even outwardly moral, reform goals for government. Access to public transit, for example, is a social equity issue, and cities must engage in urban form at some level if there is to be affordable housing near transit nodes and other places with market appeal. Furthermore, one could argue that cities have an obligation to serve the public, and physical design may be a natural place to turn for solutions for public safety, environmental stewardship and economic growth. Even so, demolition is more than any of these objectives calls for.

40 Larry Vale. April 15, 2010.
Chapter Two
Demolition as Modernization: City Beautiful, Urban Renewal and LEED

Modernization in the United States needs no justification. There is seldom a political need to justify a proposal beyond the promise of modernization. The purpose, beneficiaries and price are implicit: Modernization reduces the gaps between rich and poor, addresses the issues of the times and propels everybody toward a mutually desirable future. These virtues speak for themselves and demolition is a small price to pay.

The City Beautiful to Urban Renewal

The City Beautiful, the first modern urban vision, sold itself on this basis. “In the light of this new city,” wrote the editor of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in 1901, about an exposition in Buffalo of the idea. “The old seems almost as much of an anachronism as the walled city of the Middle Ages with its turrets and donjon and drawbridge and portcullis.”41 City Beautiful’s modern attributes were that it was comprehensive, which meant it incorporated parks and recreation, transportation, water and sewage facilities, and public buildings into a single vision, and that it called for a single epochal intervention designed by an expert “master builder” to achieve a static end state. The emergence of City Beautiful marked a return to classical architecture of the Beaux-Arts school and a celebration of centralized control over individualism. These un-American values were interpreted as promoting unity within the United States and reflecting the country’s new importance in the world.42 To paraphrase the influential Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, City Beautiful had a tendency toward bigness, organization, delegation and intense government presence.43 It emphasized business and government with architecture and city designs that gave them a powerful visual presence. With its unified design and civic emphasis, City Beautiful was meant to be the government’s assertion of itself following the rise of monopolist capitalism. Mostly, the aesthetic was as far from the crowded reality of the American immigrant cities as visionaries could get, and designs aimed to decongest cities as much as possible. As Harvard President Charles William Eliot explained it, the uniformity and formality represented, “democratic, enlightened collectivism coming in to repair the damage caused by

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42 Colquhoun, 43.
43 Colquhoun, 43.
democratic individualism.”

Typical features included landscaped boulevards or canals that provided the social benefits of nature while offering long sight-lines to stately museums, city halls, civic centers and other public facilities. Gigantic demolitions were to make room for grand central districts anchored by domed government buildings, sometimes atop a hill.

The goal was that empowered expert planners wielding comprehensive plans would “bring a missing civic order to the great industrial and port cities of the United States” and “restore to the city a lost visual and aesthetic harmony.”

Dramatic demolitions correlated with the bold new philosophy: comprehensiveness, expertise, and the conviction that cities were the artistic media of the new professionals, who needed demolition so they could work with a clean slate.

Accordingly, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Cleveland all underwent bigger demolitions than American cities had ever seen. Cleveland leveled more than one hundred acres of urban fabric. Even though most cities did not make such bold changes, the United States experienced a boom in civic center construction between 1900 and 1929, and many cities, including Boston, adopted beautification campaigns and built commemorative monuments. (A “union station” was also a City Beautiful hallmark, and Boston’s South Station was meant to serve that purpose, even though architects at the time were disappointed with the results.)

Within most cities, cautious slum clearance of the Social Reform variety was the only kind of government-sponsored demolition that made any headway. Demolition itself, and not objections to redevelopment, proved to be the main obstacle to implementing City Beautiful ideas in cities. Many cities were unwilling or unable to execute massive demolitions because of the ill-defined role of municipal government with respect to private interests. The Supreme Court eventually clarified the rules of eminent domain and compensation, but tax payers resented the decision that the government had to pay the market price to property owners before they could demolish their buildings, especially when the buildings were substandard slums. Such an arrangement was seen as rewarding bad behavior, and demolition for big City Beautiful projects was too expensive.

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44 Colquhoun, 43-44.
45 Hall, 192.
46 Hall, 192.
1909, Nelson P. Lewis, the New York City engineer and planning activist, publicly criticized the New York City Improvement Commission for “its zeal to make the city over by a sweeping revision of the urban fabric. To destroy buildings simply to rebuild on a grander scale, at staggering costs for land-takings alone, seemed folly.” 48

Boston’s Progressive Era was characterized by decay, ethnic tensions, and corruption. New England lost some important industry at the turn of the century and the economic boom of the 1920s bypassed Boston. 49 Boston’s downtown declined through the 1930s and 1940s. To make matters worse, the Roosevelt Administration did not trust Boston to handle federal financial assistance “honestly, equitably or responsibly” 50 so the city received far less relief from the New Deal than other large cities. Boston’s property taxes were the highest of the country’s big cities, 51 but none of it went to maintain Downtown. 52

The economics of demolition had changed as well. Around the turn of the century, recycled brick, salvaged plumbing fixtures and pipes, steel beams, marble, granite and windows were lucrative commodities for professional wreckers. Until the start of the Depression, wreckers had been willing to pay for the opportunity to demolish, a system that had helped the construction industry too, as the money generally went toward the down payment on the site. After 1928, wreckers began to charge a fee for their services, a reversal that slowed the rate of change in the private sector. 53 When new buildings switched from using lime mortar to cement mixes, salvaging material became impossible to do. Wreckers had to bludgeon the buildings to get them down, creating huge amounts of solid waste that had to be barged out to sea, another expensive development. 54 For these reasons, as well as the general effects of the Great Depression, huge areas of Boston were barely touched, let alone modernized, until the passage of Title I of the Federal Housing Act in 1949, the same year Curley was finally voted out of office.

City Beautiful supporters, who still wanted to appropriate cities for their own artistic and social experimentation, worked to gain a credible place for demolition in the government. When the Public Works Administration took on demolition for Social Reform purposes, City Beautiful

48 Peterson, 267-268.
49 Krieger, 220.
50 O’Connor, 10.
51 O’Connor, 43.
52 O’Connor, 11.
53 Byles, 42-44.
54 Byles, 46.
proponents criticized the demolitions for being too piecemeal. The targeted, purposeful method of the New Deal frustrated those who advocated for a more European display of ambition. Put another way, the demolitions of the PWA were not Daniel Burnham’s “no small plans” that planners were waiting for.

When John Hynes ran for Boston mayor against the iconic incumbent Michael Curley in 1949, he campaigned on the promise of a “New Boston”, a phrase coined by Progressive Era reformers who published a magazine with the same title. He ran as the candidate for the new era (Modernism), new generation (World War II veterans) and new mode of operating (Rationalism). During the race, Curley called him, “the Republican candidate from the State Street wrecking crew” to remind voters that Hynes stood for all the modernizing reforms, and disruption and destruction, that he had successfully spared them. The defeat of the old guard by a reform candidate felt like a national victory, at least enough for President Truman to send a representative, Labor Secretary Maurice Tobin, to the inauguration. Physical change seemed necessary to highlight the change of personnel and to make it harder to return to the “Old Boston.”

Thanks to the G.I. Bill, the anti-urban rhetoric of the Progressive Era and new road construction, Boston lost population in the 1950s. By 1959, the tax base twenty-five percent smaller than in 1929. Municipal revenues, which came almost exclusively from property taxes, were down, municipal spending was up, and in 1959 Moody’s demoted Boston’s bond rating to the lowest of the United States’ large cities. To make matters worse, Boston under Mayor Hynes (served 1950-1960) had a strained and unfruitful relationship with the Massachusetts state government and continued to receive less than its share of Federal dollars.

Boston’s modernization got off to a later start than other large American cities. Pittsburgh, in the mid-1940s, and Chicago, in the early 1950s, had embarked on massive redevelopment projects using innovative partnerships of the public and private sectors. Boston had more work to do to make such partnerships possible, and an important step was reorganizing city government. This reduced expensive redundancies and inefficiencies, but it also cleared the way for demolition. For example, the Board of Street Commissioners had been established in 1870 and

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55 Page, 96 and 105.
56 O’Connor, 37.
57 O’Connor, 147.
58 O’Connor, 147.
peopled with popularly elected members. It made minor decisions about the intersection of public and private space, such as where private owners could encroach on public sidewalks and where public rights-of-way could infringe on private property. In 1954, Hynes renamed the body the Public Improvement Commission, gave it the right of eminent domain and peopled it with members he appointed himself. The Boston Redevelopment Authority (established 1957) was empowered with both the planning and the implementation of redevelopment, an unprecedented move\textsuperscript{59} that eliminated the hassle of checks and balances.

Over the next decade, Boston cleared the New York Streets (thirteen acres in the South End), the West End (fifty-two acres now home to the Charles River Park Complex), Scollay Square (now the site of Government Center) and several smaller areas. Most of these were ambitious plans first formulated during the Progressive Era. With the federal government finally making City Beautiful plans (or slightly revised versions) financially feasible, Boston ignored the stipulation that came with the funding that “An approved project period will ordinarily not exceed 2 years”\textsuperscript{60} and cleared with impunity. In some cases, there was not even a redevelopment plan or an interested developer. The story was typical:

Typically, land was left vacant, since the average scheme took 12 years to complete. Nearly 40 percent of the new construction was not for housing; and of the replacement housing units, most were privately built for high-rise apartments commanding high rents.\textsuperscript{61}

Urban Renewal was introduced as an economic development tool to draw the middle class back to the cities. Confusingly, the scheme used Progressive Era urban plans to serve this purpose, even though they had been designed to achieve the opposite effect. Besides the convention center, the government center, and the slum clearance, the road construction had an unmistakable City Beautiful design. Some, like the Central Artery, were outdated from the first day they opened. \textsuperscript{62} If anything, the new era had a more ferocious strategy for the poor than the

\textsuperscript{59} Kennedy, 171.
\textsuperscript{61} Hall, 263.
\textsuperscript{62} Kennedy, 167.
Progressive Era, because the interest was not in helping them so much as assuaging middle class fears about them.

Perhaps this was one reason the use of demolition during the Rationalist Era, as it was called, was so dramatic. City Beautiful meant to communicate to the local inhabitants that a new moral order had arose. Urban Renewal, on the other hand, had to broadcast to the suburban middle class that the city was a safe and desirable place to live. A widened street here and a new museum there did not have the same symbolic weight of razing, for example, the fifty-two acres of Boston’s West End. Boston’s mid-century demolitions were symbolic on another level. In contrast to their City Beautiful predecessors, Boston’s Rationalist demolishers were more concerned with the morals of the government than the morals of the masses. As the architectural historian Lois Craig puts it, Mayor John F. Collins (served 1960-1968), “Was determined to revive a deteriorating downtown as a symbol of his reform administration.” 63 Hynes and Collins wanted to send the message they could get things done to highlight the contrast between themselves and the preceding fifty years. After criticizing Curley for the political and economic rifts that prevented action, big action, any action, was necessary for these men to legitimize their claims of reform. The demolitions were symbolic of the contrasts between the two styles of governance. According to one historian, Boston of the 1940s was like Detroit, and “changes were absolutely imperative if Boston were to survive and prosper during the second half of the twentieth century.” 64 The Rationalists shared that view. They transformed the city in fewer than twenty years without, for the most part, the wheeling-and-dealing of their corrupt predecessors.

This strategy for Modernization was highly suspect, even to the federal agencies that funded it. Jane Jacobs quoted Arthur H. Moteley, the president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1960, vividly describing the situation: “Some cities using federal funds have acquired so much land without rebuilding that the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency has become the largest grower of ragweed.” 65

It is not a stretch to suspect that Moteley was thinking of Boston. The Federal government may have intended a quick turn-around for the redevelopment projects, but in the hands of cities, Renewal became about demolition. Boston’s West End was still not entirely rebuilt more than forty years later.

64 O’Connor, 4.
65 Jacobs, 294-295.
A revealing quote from an interview with Hynes’ successor, John Collins, by the *Sunday Globe* in 1962, illustrates the sense of mission of the era for demolition:

> The blight and decay was overwhelming. Seventy percent of the housing was substandard. The waterfront was literally falling into the Atlantic Ocean. Scollay Square had half a dozen burlesque houses, honky-tonk places, and tattoo parlors. It was just miserable—and right on the edge of downtown. Nothing new had been built for years. But the people who worked on State Street sat at their rolltop desks and thought everything was all right, because it was the same today as it was yesterday.66

Collins’ sincere concern at the outset (problematic definition of “substandard” housing aside), is then muddled by a values judgment of Scollay Square, then cheapened by the implication that the perceived “misery” might not have been a priority if it were not “right on the edge of downtown.” The cure, Collins implies in the next sentence, is to build something new, and the problem, he believes, is the musty old bureaucracy that does not feel the same compulsion to modernize.

Eventually the Urban Renewal program was simply too expensive. The economics that had prevented sweeping Master Planning in the Progressive Era were not surmounted sustainably in the 1960s. Urban Renewal was too expensive for a country at war and facing high inflation and interest rates, a tight job market and stagnant home construction.67 At the same time, local governments, especially Boston, faced new expenses as they were forced to take on the problems of “education, juvenile delinquency, chronic poverty, care of the aged, and ‘intergroup relations.’”68 On top of that, the costs of routine expenses like transit services, pensions, welfare and veterans’ services, wage increases for municipal employees, school and hospital expenses were climbing. Funding for Urban Renewal was cut more than once before the program was finally allowed to expire in 1973.

This did not mean the end of Modernization. As the economic and social situation of the nation began to shift, cities saw more public-private partnerships and neighborhood activism. Diverse and uncoordinated interest groups pushed the government to pay more attention to

66 O’Connor, 72.
67 O’Connor, 249.
68 O’Connor, 240
neighborhoods and niche interests. Demolitions were usually executed by governments responding to these groups. Modernization came to be used as an argument for targeted projects rather than entire cities. For this reason, the demolitions of the age of public participation usually covered less acreage than the demolitions of more unified previous movements. The scale of recent demolitions and redevelopment projects was under direct scrutiny as well. Modernization in the Urban Renewal style was not only too expensive, it was out of favor stylistically.

Modernization and the mid-century office building

The latest wave of Modernization concerns the rise of green technology. To date, a handful of cities have passed ordinances mandating that new public buildings be built with green technology or even LEED certification. This by itself does not lead to demolition, as it corrects the future and not the past, but cities do often demolish buildings on the grounds that their energy efficiency technology or design is outdated. The justification rests on widely circulated statistics claiming that buildings account for forty percent of raw material use, thirty-eight percent of carbon dioxide emissions and thirty percent of solid waste output, though the Environmental Protection Agency is currently being sued for not keeping good enough statistics on the content of municipal solid waste. The environmental impact of the built environment has made it a natural target for sustainability reform. Like all reform movements, the first casualties are the recent past buildings. Mid-century buildings, with their glass curtain walls, hollow mullions, and other energy inefficient features, are felled to prove the point, even though the reasoning is as incoherent as demolishing the buildings associated with demolition, and even though a less dramatic remedy, retrofitting, would do the job. In 2007 in Anchorage, Alaska just such a demolition occurred. The International Style Alaska Experience Theater building (office and commercial space) was felled for a state-of-the-art office building because, as the developer said, “The green movement in the building environment and sustainability is a big deal." At this point the site is in use for private surface parking where a building ought to be.

Like so many movements before it, proponents believe this urban vision can only be realized when the associated architecture is realized as well, and for that to happen, demolition must come first. Technotopian sustainability activists often speak of a need for architecture that can

adapt to the changing needs of people and cities.\textsuperscript{70} It is unclear what these changing needs are, if they exist, and the movement, while contributing some terrific architecture and architectural technology, overlooks the adaptive potential of the existing buildings.

Also like so many movements, the language of this urban vision is loaded with valuations that cast doubt on the purity of the stated reasoning. As a prominent architect and sustainability activist put it, the “pared-down and crude”\textsuperscript{71} buildings of recent decades, the “barren structures, with their classical, neo-vernacular or modern facades chosen as if from catalogues”\textsuperscript{72} are, lucky for us, “the energy-guzzling structures that are consuming half of the world’s annual energy.”\textsuperscript{73} Clearly, if we love our planet we must hate these buildings, and since we probably already do hate these buildings, how convenient to find a moral imperative to destroy them.

The buildings of the recent past reflect their era of cheap energy, but there is no doubt that energy inefficient buildings that are better loved are more creatively treated. The call for demolition is not due to energy inefficiency alone. None of the grand glass halls of Beaux Arts train stations, the drafty quaint Colonials, or the “starchitecture” of Frank Gehry, to name a few, would stand a chance if energy efficiency were the true motivator. The Modernization argument, like all demolition arguments, pops up in a pattern based on the perceived dispensability of the buildings, not on the logical appropriateness of the argument. Office buildings today are rarely revered, or even distinguished from each other, and cities demolish them in the name of sustainability.

Office buildings may also be under attack from another kind of Modernization. IBM surveyed American office buildings for their efficiency in terms of worker productivity, and found that office buildings hinder work.\textsuperscript{74} Time stuck in the elevator (Boston ranked eighth for 2009 with a total time of 1.8 years) and time waiting for the elevator (Boston again ranked eighth for 2009 with a total of 5.4 years) are two things that cost money and resources, and that buildings should be modernized to address. Cities find more trivial reasons than elevators to demolish buildings (indeed, elevator-related complaints were a major part of the decision to demolish Pruitt-Igoe and are today one of many shortcomings detractors list for Boston City Rogers, 79. Rogers, 68. Rogers, 68. Rogers, 68. Rogers, 68. 74 http://www.greenrightnow.com/boston/2010/04/29/survey-shows-u-s-office-buildings-are-inefficient-wasteful/
Hall) and, as a pair with the energy inefficiency and the general unpopularity, mid-century office buildings are fair game.

Modernization and Public Schools

Replacing schools in the name of sustainability is a Modernization argument. Sean S. Miller, the Director of Education for the Earth Day Network, wrote a letter to the Boston Globe in 2008 in which he repeated the statistics above and said, “If green building should be the standard for all buildings, there is one sector where it is a must: schools. Although schools are the largest construction industry in the United States, we still build them with a 20th century vision unfit for the challenges of this century.”

Sustainability and education are important political issues and cities demolish schools to prove their commitment to both. In Massachusetts, new school construction is inexpensive for local governments and school boards because the money can come from the state, whereas maintenance money must come from the school district’s budget. This creates a perverse incentive to neglect and then demolish school buildings, a cycle that does nothing for students and hurts the environment. The political visibility of school construction and demolition, and the economic temptation of the cycle, makes schools, especially mid-century schools, vulnerable, even in districts where student populations are declining and do not need new facilities. Reading Memorial High School, built in 1953, is a present-day example, and the Informed Residents of Reading have launched a passionate campaign to preserve it.

Education activists have also weighed in on the demolition of schools because the physical configuration of classrooms and learning environments is a recurring topic of interest to them. “Open-concept” classrooms were favored in the 1970s and 1980s, and schools with traditional enclosed classrooms were torn down because walls were seen as obstacles to learning. Today, “pods of learning” supporters demand visually distinct regions within school buildings to reduce student feelings of anonymity and encourage their sense of belonging. Demolition is also committed when schools have outdated wiring or asbestos, or are too small.

Again, none of these reasons are sufficient justification for demolition. Even the threatened Reading High School has undergone retrofits, renovations and expansions. Schools all over the

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75 Boston Globe, November 29, 2008. “Sustainability a necessity, not a trend”.
76 http://www.iror.org/rmhs_questions.asp
country have updated their electrical systems, removed asbestos or lead paint, enlarged auditoriums and built new planetariums. Halls can be painted different colors or any number of more or less expensive or elaborate steps could be taken to achieve the visual distinctiveness of the “pods of learning” theory before demolition is necessary. The rationale for demolition simply does not exist.
Chapter Three  
Demolition for Nonconformity:

Nonconformity became a reason to demolish buildings, but it began as a reason to prevent new construction. Popular protest against Modernization focused especially on highway construction. In Boston, public protests could not stop the demolitions for roadwork in the North End in 1950 and 1951. The public protests from Chinatown in 1953, to minimize disruption from the Central Artery extension, was semi-successful, and only because it had an ally in Deputy Mayor Francis Ahearn.

The biggest public victory in Boston was the halting of the Inner Belt and Southwest Expressway. The roads first appeared in the state’s Master Highways Plan of 1948, but after the Federal Highways Act of 1956, “the proposal mushroomed to include a five-story-high interchange in the South End.” The Federal Highways Act had left dramatic scars all over the country, and especially in poor neighborhoods, and in 1969 the Greater Boston Committee on the Transportation Crisis held a protest on Boston Common, and the governor agreed to cancel the project as long as he could keep the federal funding to spend on mass transit, a proposal that Congress eventually approved for all states.

Demolition itself was a nonconforming neighborhood presence, or at least the vacant land it created was. The most famous public demonstration was the “Tent City” protest of Urban Renewal or, as one historian put it, “what they saw as the city’s wrecking-ball policy of demolishing homes in the name of urban renewal.” This was one of many instances that show that demolition was being used for its own purposes, and not in tandem with a redevelopment strategy. If the city government had been serious about renewal, it would have renewed the sites it demolished. Instead, the city left land vacant, hurting the neighborhood around it and probably accumulating the ragweed Moteley complained of.

In the meantime, demolition gained its reputation as a government evil, and the bulldozer itself loomed in the American psyche as the freakish and destructive mutation of a tractor that it was. Invented by the military during World War I, the bulldozer entered popular culture with Urban Renewal. In 1974, Marvel, the comic book publisher, debuted The Wrecking Crew, which

77 Kennedy, 198.  
78 Kennedy, 199.  
79 Kennedy, 201.
featured a team of supervillains named Bulldozer, Piledriver, The Wrecker and Thunderball, each armed with different destructive gadgets drawn from real demolition technology.

Once the public got behind the wheel of the government bulldozer, it saved and demolished buildings for a range of reasons, but the recent past was consistently the target, especially public housing. Public housing built in Urban Renewal had deteriorated rapidly, in part because of the inflexible way it was financed, leaving municipal housing authorities unable to adapt to shrinking tenant incomes, soaring maintenance costs and the rapid inflation of the 1960s.80 As conditions worsened, tenants moved out and the cycle of decline continued.

St. Louis’s Pruitt-Igoe housing project (1954-1972) is the classic example. HUD had considered salvaging some of it, including by cutting some of the thirty-three buildings down from eleven stories to four stories and converting them into walk-up apartments.81 In the end, in the words of the Washington Post in August 1973, “the King Kong of public housing [was] brought to its knees by 90 pounds of dynamite.”82 The demolition of the iconic project began one year before the expiration of the Act that funded it, and part of the ruined site was preserved as an educational park.83

It was a busy time for the wrecking industry, as public housing all over the country, especially in cities with giant Modernist projects, were destroyed. “Between 1973 and 1977,” one researcher found. “More than 1.1 million home-owned and 1.5 million rental units were removed from the national market.”84 The demolitions were usually the second round of clearance to occur on the sites in living memory—the first time being the clearing of Industrial Era slums to make room for public housing (built anytime between 1934 and 1965) and the second time being to clear away the slums the public housing had become.85 But the destruction was not actually the substance of the rejection. The demolition ceremonies were merely the symbolic events, and an excuse to witness the new demolition technology. Hand-wrecking was outmoded in the 1930s, and the wrecking ball, while still used, was not always appropriate, especially in dense urban areas.86 The wrecking industry developed the method of demolishing

80 Vale, 337.
81 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, January 13, 2004. “43. Pruitt-Igoe Housing Complex”
82 Byles, 197.
83 Byles, 210.
84 Byles, 218.
86 Byles, 57.
buildings through gentle implosions achieved by carefully orchestrated sequential explosions.\textsuperscript{87} Demolitions happened artfully and apparently magically. The new technique lent itself to ceremony. At Pruitt-Igoe and dozens of other notorious icons of Modernization, demolition became a new kind of event, with luncheons, press packets, speeches and toasts by politicians and prominent citizens before the pressing of ceremonial detonator buttons.\textsuperscript{88} The theatrics seemed appropriate to the democratic spirit of the collective decision to reject the recent past.

But the real rejection of the buildings was when residents vacated them by their own accord. The year before Pruitt-Igoe’s demolition, for example, twenty-seven of its thirty-three buildings were unoccupied. Around the nation, “more than 520,000 units [were] lost every year to abandonment between 1974 and 1980.”\textsuperscript{89}

The ostensible reasons for demolition were the appalling health and safety risks associated with under-occupancy. As usual, health and safety were scapegoats for the real motivating factor. It was also not about economics. Many of the demolished sites, including Pruitt-Igoe, were not replaced with other developments. It would have been just as effective and much less expensive simply to board up the buildings and abandon them until the site could be sold, if the health and safety reasons were the real drivers. More proof that the buildings did not inherently need to be demolished is the case of Boston itself.

Boston public housing underwent fewer demolitions than many cities even though it had some of the worst conditions in the country. Abandonment rates were double the national high\textsuperscript{90}, and vacancy, vandalism, violence and disrepair disgraced the dysfunctional and disempowered Boston Housing Authority. On top of that, the authority was in enormous debt, and in 1980, it became the first publicly financed independent authority ever put into court-ordered receivership.\textsuperscript{91} Under new leadership, the BHA embarked on the redevelopment of the four worst projects, but did not demolish the buildings. Instead, the BHA “reconfigure[d] many of the buildings into three-story row-houses, replete with private entrances and private yards”, a move that “marked a dramatic repudiation of the usual project appearance, and a reconciliation with many of the norms of associated with a middle-class condo development, if not a single-family

\textsuperscript{87} Byles, 72-73.
\textsuperscript{88} Byles, 197.
\textsuperscript{89} Byles, 219.
\textsuperscript{90} Vale, 347.
\textsuperscript{91} Vale, 344.
home." Physical modifications were sometimes as simple as riveting a metal triangle to a flat roof, giving the building the shape of a traditional home. Each project was different and results were mixed, but Boston became a leader in innovative reuses of Modernist architecture and simultaneously redeemed its reputation for its treatment of the poor.

Most cities chose demolition instead and their real reason was Nonconformity. The rise of public participation was precipitated, in part, by the clash between ideals of Modernization and ideals of Nonconformity. Boston’s history illustrates that reform through, as Whitehill put it, “Total demolition of large areas, without regard for the feelings of people, and their eventual reconstruction—after long periods as a desolate dump—in unfamiliar form for new uses was neither good sense nor good politics.” Public servants after the West End tragedy promised to proceed in a less “drastic”, “more imaginative way that would enhance rather than obliterate the unique character of the city.” One way to ensure this was to increase the amount of public participation.

While Boston resisted the trend of demolishing public housing, the demolitions of auto-oriented infrastructure and other mid-century constructions were popular public spectacles of the rejection of Modernization. It was not enough simply to stop new road construction. The parking garages and highway networks of the 1950s were aesthetically nonconforming scars on the physical city and they were loaded with the unhappy memories of the Federal Highways Act, Urban Renewal and the muscular interventions of top-down planning. The city sold several of its parking garages in 1982 to survive a lean economic period, and almost all of them were replaced with office buildings. One became the park at Post Office Square. The parking garage, “a squat, ugly structure built in the fifties was demolished in the late eighties to make way for a new and appealing public space in the city’s financial district.” This was an act of social reform, perhaps, but it was also an effort to rid the built environment of Nonconforming elements. Likewise, the demolition of the Travelers Insurance Building (1959-1987) was a Sunday morning event that thousands of people lined the Turnpike Extension to see. When the building went up, it was the first building built in downtown Boston in thirty years, but as one historian

92 Vale, 354.
93 Whitehill, 202.
94 City hall doc.
95 Kennedy, 209.
96 Kennedy, 224.
97 Kennedy, 1.
wrote, “A later generation, ready to forge ahead, decimated prominent symbols of the fifties, a destructive era in Boston’s history.” The incoherence of that position never seemed to matter. The removal of the Turnpike too, symbolized the staunch rejection of Modernization.

The architectural style associated with Urban Renewal is an important consideration in analyzing the public’s decisions to demolish the redevelopment. The quintessential Modern architecture was the Pruitt-Igoe project, which consisted of: “Slab and rowhouse buildings of various heights; wide access gallery corridors in the apartment slabs meant to function as play areas, porches, laundry-drying areas, duplex units with skip-stop elevators, and rivers of open space winding through the site.” That aesthetic matched and evoked too well the planning that came with it, which the geographer and urbanist David Harvey described as: “Large-scale, metropolitan-wide, technologically rational and efficient urban plans, backed by no-frills modern architecture.”

This meant the architecture was too good at stirring the memories associated with it, but the architectural itself faced, and still faces, opposition because of its nonconforming appearance and scale. Public buildings, like Boston’s City Hall and Paul Rudolph buildings, retained much of the grandeur of their Beaux-Arts predecessors, but they were more visually challenging because of their asymmetry and other design departures and because of their use of troubling materials such as cement. This meant the buildings failed to conform in all respects. From a planning perspective, they did not conform because they departed from the close-grained fabric of American cities—instead of a dozen doors and windows on one block, the Modernist buildings created long blank walls designed to play up their civic importance. Some also broke from the mold by redrawing the street grid itself, as in the case of Boston’s Government Center, or by skipping the ground floor all together, as in the case of the San Bernadino City Hall (opened 1971) and hundreds of buildings like it. From an aesthetic standpoint, they did not conform because they did not feature materials similar to those of the surrounding buildings, they did not face the street and hide their structural elements, and they did not lend themselves to instant interpretation.

In Boston, cement buildings have the additional challenge of resembling, perhaps, the parking garages the people feel such a clear antagonism toward. Parking garages are targeted as

98 Kennedy, 167.
99 Hall, 256.
100 Hall, 374.
Nonconforming, and any structure that looks like the nonconforming structures has an extra obstacle to survival.

The point is that Modernism, both in planning and architectural designs, raises strong emotions that endanger the legacies of the era. Nonconformity is as vacuous a reason to demolish buildings as any, and in Boston it is especially dangerous because the range of acceptable architecture is so small.

The emotions themselves are insufficient too. The emotions surrounding the memories of the Modernist Era, and the debacle of the Modernization effort of Urban Renewal, are already fading as the proportion of people who lived through it shrinks. These buildings are taking on new associations and emotions, and even their perceived fit in the urban context is improving as fewer people can remember the buildings that predated the controversial ones.

Still in 2010, surviving symbols of Modernism, including Boston City Hall, are the subject of intense emotional debate and Boston City Hall is the biggest target of demolition for Nonconformity.
Boston City Hall Demolition Debate Case Analysis

On December 12, 2006, Mayor Thomas Menino gave a speech to the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce in which he introduced the idea of selling Boston City Hall:

I want to improve the financial health of city government and strip away waste and inefficiency. I want to create room for the smart growth that this city’s strong future requires. I want to improve the downtown public realm and create great unity and beauty for our residents... To achieve all this, I have initiated a plan to move City Hall. Some of you may recall that I explored this idea back in 1998. I knew then how inefficient that building was, how many expensive updates it would need in the years ahead... At that time the market conditions were not right. Today, however, the demand for downtown development is stronger than it’s ever been. The sale will open up prime real estate for facilities and open space that will galvanize the vitality of our downtown and strengthen Boston’s future... 101

The economic downturn shortly after forced the mayor to abort the mission, but in the meantime the public aired its views. Before long, calls for the demolition of City Hall were louder than calls for selling it. “We can’t tear it down,” wrote one contributor to an Internet forum.102 “No, we should blow it up!”

Another poster calling himself Alanna Prince suggested that Boston City Hall was not half as bad as everyone “makes it out to be”103, to which a Philip Harris replied that City Hall Plaza was:

...an urban desert inhabited by monstrous Brutalist Architectural nightmares, particularly the out-of-place, out-of-context pile of hideous concrete cubes better known as Boston City Hall. Yes, alanna prince, City Hall Plaza is not half as bad as people think it is, it is TEN TIMES WORSE THAN PEOPLE THINK IT IS! [sic] 104

Preservationists, especially of buildings from the recent past, are familiar with the power of hate. No amount of historic significance or architectural merit will persuade a community to rally

101 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23F2prLbg
102 People for Public Spaces, poster identified as Ted Kochanski, November 16, 2008.
103 People for Public Spaces, July 20, 2006.
104 People for Public Spaces, November 13, 2006.
around a building it hates. As Menino’s speech illustrates, hatred is always cloaked behind a range of rationales. In the quote above, Menino uses City Beautiful-style imagery (“great unity and beauty for our residents”), a buzz-word from the sustainability movement (“I knew then how inefficient that building was”), an economic argument (“how many expensive updates it would need”), a catchphrase from community development and city planning (“will galvanize the vitality of our downtown”) and an appeal to the future (“strengthen Boston’s future”). The public chimed in on a similar smattering of topics, none of which explain why the possibility was considered in the first place or justify demolition by themselves, and all of which together would not justify demolition of a building that was adored.

To be fair, Menino himself was not calling for the demolition of City Hall, but the arguments he made could have supported any number of public projects, sales or demolitions. The question is why City Hall is vulnerable to such consideration, and the answer appears to lie in its symbolism.

**Boston’s History with Change**

Pushes for the physical modernization of downtown since the early years of City Beautiful have faced resistance by Bostonians themselves, who had a long tradition of suspicion of change. Even the 1872 fire, which cleared 65 downtown acres, did not galvanize Boston’s gentry to implement Robert Copeland’s plan from earlier that year, changes that would be much more painful sixty years later. Copeland’s plan, *The Most Beautiful City in America: Essay and Plan for the Improvement of the City of Boston,* was popular and claimed to be fiscally responsible and feasible, but Bostonians used procedural controversies and jurisdictional disputes to prevent its implementation.

Twenty years later, Boston took action against the new threat of change, the skyscraper. Bostonians had criticized tall buildings since they first appeared downtown in the 1880s. In 1892, the state legislature passed a height limit for Boston (125 feet), as well as tougher restrictions specific to different neighborhoods. In the 1920s, interest in maintaining what was already a “historic feel” prompted Bostonians to reiterate these height restrictions in the new zoning laws, foregoing an opportunity to encourage desperately needed private investment but reflecting a typical Boston attitude:

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105 Kennedy, 78.
Other American cities might choose to have smoothly paved sidewalks or modernistic skyscrapers soaring grandly into the sky, but native Bostonians would have none of it... Don’t give over “all wisdom and foresight” to city planners and street commissioners, one concerned Bostonian urged his fellow citizens, warning them that year after year “structures with priceless associations” would inevitably be destroyed by the devotees of “progress.”

Boston’s restrictive building codes, especially at a time when other cities did not have them, were a luxury of cities with a geographical advantage. Boston’s high tax rates, especially property taxes and taxes on industry and commerce, were a similar luxury. Boston’s mistake was to overestimate its importance to the private sector. It increased taxes and regulations just as technological developments and shifts in industry freed the private sector from geographical limitations. Rail and canal construction reduced the cost of business and made strategic locations less important. Simultaneous changes in agricultural and manufacturing trade hurt Boston as well. As Kennedy writes: “Whereas in the previous century the city had continually exerted its power to expand the community, in the beginning of the twentieth century it began to constrict growth.” Like the City Beautiful Movement as a whole, the object of these policies was not economic development. They were much more about the citizens’ emotional relationship with the city, although the beautification efforts sought to change the relationship and the height restrictions sought to maintain it.

There was no doubt that resisting change at a time when Boston was losing its economic significance had immediate economic consequences. One of the City Beautiful plans produced by a committee from the Boston Society of Architects was especially portentous:

In articulating its multifarious plans, the BSA committee implied that Boston’s chief problem was the shackles placed on the private sector by local government. It blamed the standstill in construction not only on the shortage of space, but also on the city’s ‘too restrictive building laws, both as to height and material.’

Though many aspects of the “multifarious plans” of 1907 were best left unrealized, the complaint foreshadowed perceptions of Boston that the private sector grew to share: that Boston

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106 O’Connor, 4.
107 Kennedy, 110.
108 Kennedy, 112.
109 Kennedy, 119.
was unwilling to make room for new development and the new money that came with it. While it is true that the corruption and lack of government implementation mechanisms were hurdles for city planning, the Boston Society of Architects correctly realized that other cities faced the same hurdles and overcame them with the political will for change, the crucial ingredient that Boston lacked.

In 1928 the city allowed for slightly taller buildings as long as they had setbacks, but so little was built downtown between that time and the Urban Renewal decades (with a few important exceptions) that the policy had little impact on the urban fabric. Piecemeal public housing and private projects, rare as they were in Boston in those years, were Boston’s first real experience with demolitions. Losses to the built environment during Boston’s early history were due to fire rather than demolition:

Pemberton recorded fifteen fires between 1702 and 1794 as worthy of note; indeed the destruction by fire became so frequent that finally, in 1803, the town meeting requested the General Court to require by law that all buildings in Boston exceeding ten feet in height be built of stone or brick and be covered with slate, tile or other noncombustible materials.110

Even with the fires and without the private sector, Boston’s history of loss of built environment was scant because it had the luxury of building more land as it needed it. As late as the 1960s, Boston was able to fill in Fort Point Channel using state money.111 This gave the city more taxable land and more space for development without demolition. In total, Boston has increased its size by over 50 percent112, and had done most of that by the end of the Progressive Era, thereby reducing the pressures of redevelopment.

**Background: the Story of Boston City Hall**

The idea for a new government center for Boston dated from the Progressive Era, and even the site, Scollay Square, was picked decades before the project was seriously considered. In the

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110 Whitehill, 50.
111 O'Connor, 170.
112 Whitehill, 4.
mid-1950s, Boston was in decline, and Hynes, and then Collins, took on the government center project as “a catalyst to the physical and psychological rejuvenation of Boston.”

Scollay Square had “a long reputation as the place where inelegant transients come to enjoy themselves,” although defenders remember family-friendly features like nickel movies, hot dogs and the best hardware suppliers in Boston interspersed in an area whose character was a casualty of Prohibition. Boston neighborhoods were pretty ethnically fixed, but Downtown was where everyone mixed, and Bostonians, while maintaining strong ethnic identities, “developed a sort of dual citizenship with the historic inner city.” People from all over Greater Boston felt a connection to and ownership of Scollay Square, not merely the 440 families who lived there and the owners of businesses located there. However, it is true that by the late 1950s demolition and decline were already in evidence as surface parking replaced buildings, and a consulting firm reported in 1956 that the area was “lapsing into sheer vacancy.”

Scollay Square, like the West End before it, was already undergoing a loss of residents. The history of Scollay Square has a lot in common with the history of the West End, because that project did relocate people (440 families) and it did clear-cut [90] acres of urban fabric. One difference was the interest of private developers in the West End, because of the proximity to the hospital and the views of the water, which added to its attraction. Scollay Square attracted zero private interest. From the government’s perspective, taking that area for itself would be least disruptive to the economic interests the government was eager to support, even though it meant evicting many small businesses, including the first Radio Shack store and the nation’s first theater. (Even today, private presence in the area is scant.)

The city-sponsored City Hall Committee admitted the role the city played in the decline of Scollay Square: “Finally in 1954 the Fitzgerald Expressway effectively cut [Scollay Square] off from the old heart of the city.” The unpeopled description of the razed portion of land matches

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113 Kennedy, 177.
114 8, A Competition to Select an Architect for the New City Hall in the Government Center of the City of Boston, Government Center Commission, 1961.
115 O’Connor, 6 and Salvucci interview.
116 Salvucci.
117 Kennedy, 178.
118 8, A Competition to Select an Architect for the New City Hall in the Government Center of the City of Boston, Government Center Commission, 1961.
the unpeopled results of the construction, but the old Scollay Square is now remembered as a charming place. The 1961 perspective of the commission, however, was:

The Scollay Square—Dock Square district, and the areas between it and the North Station have suffered a long deterioration, and the accidents of history have left it with a disordered street system and small odd-shaped parcels of land. All available land in this district was built upon by 1900; in our century there has been relatively little replacement and business activity has been declining. Redevelopment involving major street changes is now imperative not only to improve traffic movement but also to create land parcels of size and shape suitable for modern business operations.\(^{119}\)

The special thing about the project was that it really was a government center, with local, state and federal buildings all together. This was unusual in any city and especially symbolic given Boston’s tumultuous political history, the federal government’s history of not trusting the local government and the state’s record of not being willing to work with the city. The location was also a triumphant signal. Local and state authorities were attracted to the site because it was a centrally located area that was not the object of private interests. The federal government had already bought a site for new office building in the Back Bay (today’s Hancock Tower)\(^{120}\) and the liaison at the Government Services Administration balked at the prospect of settling in such a seedy area. Logue promised him that total demolition would happen first, and the federal government acquiesced.\(^{121}\) The fact that City Hall was to be the centerpiece of the project, and not the federal offices, was not a given, and required expert persuasion on the part of Logue and exploitation of a family connection on the part of Rappaport. The ambition for the Government Center development was clear in the request for proposals:

The Boston Redevelopment Authority and its consultants believe that the Government Center is an urban renewal Project requiring extensive and detailed regulations and controls. There are several reasons for this concern. Because it is the seat of government, it should reflect the highest aspirations of the people served. As a plan where the future mingles

\(^{119}\) Commission competition document, 8.
\(^{120}\) Kennedy, 178.
\(^{121}\) O’Connor, 183.
dramatically with the historic the Project must fulfill the future’s needs in a way that does honor to the past...

In every direction City Hall will have an important and different relationship to its surroundings. Great care should be given to the shaping of the spaces between City Hall and other buildings. The treatment of the floor of these exterior spaces, and the arrangement of architectural and landscape elements therein, are basic to the design of City Hall and to full realization of the civic design intention embodied in the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s proposal for the Government Center.\textsuperscript{122}

Highlighting the stately local history, the stately buildings and the topographical engineering, the history section of the Government Center Commission’s competition document describes the non-stately Scollay Square as having “atrophied” (though it had never been stately) after it lost some shipping business.\textsuperscript{123} The planners’ conception of history, highlighting the highbrow and, like other language of the time, empty of people, reveals something about the mindset of the movers and shakers.

The marginal role for the public was clear from the very beginning. The 1958 City Document No. 37, “An Act Providing for the Construction by the City of Boston of a New City Hall,” began:

Section 1. The Boston Redevelopment Authority is hereby authorized to convey to the City of Boston, with or without consideration, a suitable site for a new city hall for said city; and said city is hereby authorized to acquire by purchase or gift from said authority or otherwise or to acquire by eminent domain under chapter seventy-nine or chapter eighty A of the General Laws from said authority or otherwise, such site and to construct and maintain thereon such new city hall.

The consideration of the people of Boston was strictly optional, and the use of the dreaded eminent domain was an indifferent tool by a nonchalant government. However, only the first of the City Hall Commission’s annual reports, issued between 1958 and 1971, does not speak of either “duly advertised” (1959) or “regularly advertised” public meetings. In the years when Scollay Square and the nearby West End were both enormous empty wastelands though, citizens did not feel the “physical and psychological rejuvenation” they were told to expect.

\textsuperscript{122} 16, ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Commission Competition document, 6.
It did not help that the government at that time felt little obligation to solicit feedback. The Government Center project, however, created an occasion for a minor improvement to that end. The public, especially the prominent public, raised alarms about the Sears Crescent building, which was slated for demolition. Walter Muir Whitehill was already “the eminent Boston historian”\(^{124}\) during the planning of Government Center. When he learned of the plans to demolish the historic building, he stormed into the BRA office and demanded that they reinstate the Sears Crescent building\(^{125}\) in the Government Center plans. He was not the only one. “Delegations visited the mayor, committees descended on the BRA, and floods of letters poured into city hall,” wrote O’Connor.\(^{126}\) Collins responded. He personally saw to it that the building was saved, much to Pei’s chagrin. He instated Whitehill as a consultant for the project and urged him to organize the historic commission.

The request for City Hall proposals was distributed in 1961 as an open design contest. The purpose of the contest was to maintain the city’s new image as an honest and upstanding institution. An open contest reduced the appearance of back-room deals and promoted Boston’s commitment to democracy and inclusiveness. The United States had not hosted an open contest for a major building in 50 years, but throughout the 1950s contests for city halls were popular in Canada and Europe. Collins’ introductory letter in the competition packet stated, “The primary motivating force behind the Commission’s decision to run a national competition expresses the desire of the City to obtain the best possible design in terms of beauty, planning and harmony with the other buildings in Boston’s new Government Center.” His vague language was more than compensated by I.M. Pei’s design specifications:

> In contrast [to the rest of the contests], the Boston city hall competition dictated a building to fit a detailed urban plan that specified site, height and formal treatment. In effect, the 256 competition entries were designed to a predetermined envelope. Some competitors complained about the uncharacteristic lack of maneuverability for a monumental statement. For its time, it was a remarkable attempt to place contextual constraints on architecture.\(^{127}\)

\(^{124}\) O’Connor, 200.
\(^{125}\) Built in 1868, the Sears Building was the first building in Boston to have an elevator (Kennedy, 112.)
\(^{126}\) O’Connor, 200.
Pei had to do this in part because of City Hall’s position within a larger plan, but his real goal was to avoid architecture that imitated traditional city halls. The young, unknown victors were hailed as proof of a fair and open process. As a prominent critic, Wolf Von Eckardt, put it, “The general result of [the usual] method is that we have more and more distinguished architects and less and less distinguished architecture.” He was thrilled with the results of the contest and the results on the ground:

Their concern was not to impress with an authoritarian monument but by making each part of the building work to best advantage and by clearly articulating it, to express, as Kallman put it, “the vigor of government.”

It is, he says, no accident that the building was inspired at the time when its designers were inspired by the presidency of John F. Kennedy who, like this new City Hall, pronounced the word “vigor” with that peculiar Boston accent.128

On the other hand, the scathing review by the group People for Public Places, decrees: “It proves once again that design competitions accomplish little if nothing in creating great places.”

The new city hall too, had a new symbolic meaning. The City Beautiful movement emphasized government buildings to remind city denizens to be good citizens, or at least to have good morals. Proposals for a new city hall, appearing as early as 1909, were very much within that spirit, but by the time Hynes took up the project, the government buildings had become a vehicle to announce to Bostonians that their government was committed to being a good citizen itself and a better partner in the public interest. The final design meant to advance this symbolism a great deal. The 1968 Annual Report of the Government Center Commission read:

As 1969 will mark the first year of operations in the New City Hall, we are firm in the belief that city officials, employees and the public generally will experience a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction in that Boston was a city that dared to be controversial and different in its architectural designs and now looks forward to the challenge of the future while respecting the greatness of the past as reflected in Faneuil Hall which stands only a stone’s throw away to serve as a reminder that Boston has been and always will be a bastion of strength, courage, and fortitude with which no other city can compare.129

128 Boston Sunday Globe, “Boston’s New City Hall: It Has Vigor”.
129 Government Center Commission 1968 Annual Report, 5. Things they worked through (pg 4), like the telephone strike. (Earlier annual reports speak of a steel strike.)
The Rational Planners never missed an opportunity for a symbolic gesture. The site selection was symbolic for the usual reasons demolition is symbolic—clearing away the unacceptable present. The coordination of three branches of American government symbolized a new era of cooperation and trust. Situating City Hall as the centerpiece symbolized the recovered authority over the city’s direction that local government had won. Using the open contest symbolized the pragmatic and ethical new government and selecting unknown and untried entrants symbolized the integrity behind the changes.

The architecture itself was also laced with symbolism. Boston City Hall was meant to herald a new relationship between city and citizen. It intentionally departed from traditional City Hall designs to symbolize the changes to the traditional relationship. The functions of the building were divided according to how the public used them—the license counters and high-traffic offices were thoughtfully made accessible: “Like stores they are strung along wide interior streets and ramps on the lower levels of the building and have their separate entrance.”30 (The separate entrance makes it possible to keep these offices open when the ceremonial rooms and administrative offices are closed.) The concrete exterior had symbolic power too, as the absence of veneer was meant to signify sincerity: As one of the architects, McKinnell, told Robert Campbell:

We were particularly interested in imbuing architecture with authenticity... When you build in concrete, what you see is what you get... The characteristic of concrete we enjoyed most was that one material could do so much... I think if we could have done it, we would have used concrete to make the light switches.

Symbolism notwithstanding (and furthermore criticized for being too obscure), the building was controversial from the moment the design was unveiled. Mayor Collins reportedly gasped and had trouble composing himself, but then made a statement: “I believe in this century it is a really historic event, a design that will live for many years.” Some members of the public organized a Citizens’ Committee for a Bostonian City Hall to try to overturn the results. But the building was immediately hailed by the architectural world.

“Boston gambled and, to blurt right with it, won!” Proclaimed Wolf von Eckardt.131 He went on to call it a “miracle”, a “place that proclaims the majesty of government by the people” and assert that “City Hall provides precisely what was needed to make Boston’s government center

130 Von Eckardt.

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the greatest triumph of urban design since New York’s Rockefeller Center was built in the 1930s.” The petition for granting the building Landmark status cites dozens of academic, touristic and popular books and articles singing the praises of City Hall.132

On the other side, a respected writer of Boston’s built environment, Robert Campbell, has described it as “the product of well-meaning but idiotic control freaks, playing in their offices with zoning maps instead of walking out into the world to observe how cities really work.”133

But for the most part, the critics loved it and still love it. One layman commented in 2009 to a glowing architectural review by Ada Louise Huxtable:

It never seems to fail that on matters of taste and aesthetics such as art, music, and yes architecture, we are expected to buy the views of the critics...The City Hall itself, for a building that is supposed to welcome the citizen, is forbidding. Ms. Huxtable, is there an architectural term for “call in an airstrike”?134

Another reader posted:

Oh my god!!! We now have some pinhead who wants to save some of the most hideous architecture ever conceived. This is truly depraved stuff. The people of Boston should simply take to the streets with jackhammers and pickaxes and start tearing down that execrable structure much as the Parisians tore down the Bastille. Heck, at least the Bastille was better looking.135

The destructive impulses in these statements do not shroud the emotion behind any other excuses. By now the building has a list of criticisms from every interest. Many structural preservationists dislike the structure. Many associative preservationists dislike the associations. The planning-minded public finds it, as Robert Campbell has said, “a legend of bad urban planning.” Now too, the environmental sector bemoans its energy inefficiency, the ADA activists lament its inaccessibility, and the mayor “minces no words when it comes to his dislike of our most famous mid-century-modern building, Boston City Hall.”136

133 Campbell, 66-67.
Boston City Hall gets lots of criticism for energy inefficiency because of its high ceilings and mid-century origins. Critics also claim it requires a prohibitive cost of maintenance, an argument given as a reason to leave the old Boston city hall, which is now a restaurant and some offices. (The new City Hall is currently a stop on the Museum of Science’s “Green Trail” tours of Boston. The tour guides visitors to the roof of City Hall, where shrubs on the patio mitigate water run-off.)

People also say that it is a depressing or inefficient place to work as an employee, though one clerk in the council chambers raves about the building, saying, “But that’s because I remember what was here before.”

The controversy of City Hall is sometimes subsumed in the controversy of Government Center Plaza, which Collins, Campbell and other have called the Bermuda Triangle. Some disdain it because it replaced the “fascinating close-grained texture… of cityscape that seems to beckon us toward unimaginable mysteries just around the corner.” Others have ahistorical objections, like its windiness and emptiness, the failure of its water fountain (which was finally cemented over) and its apparent resistance to attempts to reprogram it. (Not all the original plans for the space, or for access to and from it, were realized, building over some parts of it is difficult because of the T line underneath.)

In 1995, Mayor Menino proceeded with a City Hall Revitalization Plan called, “Framework for Change.” It was the first time any revitalization effort had been attempted, but it was not followed through. City government and other entities have solicited proposals or ideas to alter the space. Planners and architects use Government Center as a site for design exercises, often for sponsored contests, including this year’s Rotch design competition by the Boston Society of Architects. Implementing these proposals has never been seriously attempted, perhaps because the proposals are not good enough, and perhaps because of the prevailing opinion that the majority of Bostonians would be unhappy with any change at all.

Even the 2007 petition to grant City Hall a landmark designation included a closing note assuring the Landmarks Commission that the petitioners would support modifications to the

137 Campbell, 153.
building. It even lists five suggestions.\textsuperscript{139} "Preservationists say that these mid-century-moderns need not be flies in amber,” wrote a journalist for Boston Globe Magazine.\textsuperscript{140} “The key to their survival likely lies in sensitive reworkings that honor the structures’ integrity but make them more palatable to the public.”

Since the advent of skyscrapers, Boston has made a name for itself as a jealous guardian of its distant past (and the associated property values). All architectural styles fall out favor with the generations immediately following their introduction, but Modernism may be extra vulnerable now because it is still the recent past, and it also does not represent any “good old days.” It would be unfair to talk about Boston City Hall without mentioning that suspicion of and disdain for Modernism is an international phenomenon, especially for one of Modernism’s sub-styles, Brutalism, which is the style of City Hall. Modernist and Brutalist buildings, especially those situated on demolition sites, may face a slower cycle of popular opinion and longer periods of vulnerability.

This is not to say that Brutalist edifices do not have their own guardian angels. In Boston, professionals and activists in “recent past preservation” try to educate the public on the aesthetic merits and historic significance of midcentury buildings. A recent exhibit by Pinkcomma dubbed the style “heroic architecture.” Featuring the Boston area’s “Age of Concrete,” the curators identified 154 local buildings of that style, a number that challenges popular conceptions of what Boston looks like. Robert Campbell wrote a column about the exhibit and pointed out that, “Today the Age of Concrete is timely again for the simple reason that many of its monuments are in danger of being demolished. That’s most notably true of City Hall, the crown jewel of the era, which Mayor Menino hopes to get rid of.”\textsuperscript{141}

Boston City Hall currently suffers, many charge, from the age-old strategy of intentional neglect. This is a strategy Boston has seen before, including in the old Scollay Square and the West End, when local officials would allow a place to become dilapidated as a way of strengthening the case for demolition. Occasional efforts to fix City Hall have been half-hearted. Friends of Boston City Hall, a group of preservationists and architects, has dedicated itself to the building’s maintenance and longevity by beating the tactic of neglect. The visual impact of

\textsuperscript{139} Landmark Petition, 10-11.
neglect contributes to the public’s dislike of the building. Sooty and water-stained walls make the public work harder to find appealing qualities in the architecture.

Either way, the Boston public has never been positive about the new city hall, or, at best, reviews were mixed. According to one historian:

While taking pride in the achievements of renewal and reinvestment, most Bostonians never grew to love their new city hall or the austere plaza in which it aloofly sat. The subsequent rejection of the radical means of urban renewal and the increased interest in traditional urban patters, history, local activism, and public input to planning led to a different assessment of the symbolism of Government Center. As the downtown renewed itself relying on a mixture of commercial, cultural, and residential investment, Government Center’s great size, indifference to history, and functional isolation came to represent, for many, the shortcomings of mid-century, top-down planning.\textsuperscript{142}

Hate is a dangerous thing for historic preservation, but a demolition of this magnitude is done as a symbolic gesture of change. Whether asserting the government’s role in the free market system, reforming the corruption that dominated the city, rejecting the top-down planning of the Rationalist Era, or proving a commitment to a public interest, demolitions sent a message. Until such a shift occurs again, Boston City Hall is safe.

\textsuperscript{142} Krieger, Alex. 164.
Conclusion

Poor maintenance is government’s most common excuse for demolition. “Blight”, a phrase so liberally applied to private property, has now shifted to public property. More than ever, “blight” has become a verb as governments intentionally neglect buildings until they are dilapidated enough to be demolished or to be sold at a reduced rate. Schools are not the only public buildings that receive this treatment. One contemporary example is the East Boston immigration station, which the Massachusetts Port Authority has owned since 1985 and is now hoping to demolish “for safety reasons.” They have no plan to rebuild on the lot. Demolition is sometimes cheaper than maintenance, in narrow terms, and dilapidation is an easy way to avoid confrontation with citizen activists. This is not a cost-saving measure in the big picture. It merely helps the city externalize the costs of cities. This is the first time city governments have attempted to keep a low profile on demolitions.

Private developers are willing to undertake a demolition when the project satisfies the “Rule of Three.” If the new construction will be three times more profitable than the cost of the purchase, then private developers will consider the project. It is easy to see how governments tacitly participate in depressing public and private property values to make them vulnerable to condemnation, or simply to make them cheap for developers.

The implications for sustainability are great, and the sustainability movement is increasingly aligned with historic preservationists for that reason. Historic preservation activists have struggled to create this alliance, and have won support on the argument that it is useless to recycle bottles and cans but not recycle buildings and streets. LEED has modified its rating system to better reflect the environmental benefits of adaptive reuse, and t-shirts reading, “The greenest building is the one that’s already built” are for sale on environment-oriented websites. Even demolitions themselves are changing, as “deconstruction”, the careful unbuilding and recycling of material from standing buildings, rather than the indiscriminant disposal of them, becomes more common. Local ordinances banning demolition debris from entering municipal landfills or mandating deconstruction are appearing in more and more cities.

Demolition simply does not do what conventional wisdom claims it does. Its practical arguments do not hold up under scrutiny. No compelling evidence supports the claims that

\textsuperscript{143} Boston Globe, April 11, 2010. “Gateway to hope and heartache”
\textsuperscript{144} Byles, 9.
demolition is necessary to revitalize the economy, create jobs, improve social welfare or advance the cause of modernization. Even demolition for redevelopment has inconclusive justifications. Furthermore, the case-by-case nature of demolition dialog belies the claim that demolition is motivated by practical concerns. The practical arguments for demolition of a contested building or area apply to many buildings in every city, but are only advanced in the first place for sites that are already vulnerable. Every plot of land in a city has a potential higher and better use, but only some are considered for redevelopment. The idea that economics or any other practical argument drives city change overlooks the fact that some agreement about where change is acceptable has already been reached.

Practical arguments, therefore, simply exist to justify a non-practical pre-existing desire, which can be based on sentiment, fear, ambitions and memories, all of which will die with the generation that feels them and none of which implicate the sites themselves in any kind of offense that deserves such total punishment.

Its symbolic applications, though powerful, distract from substantive solutions to the issues they symbolize. As a method for economic development, social reform, promoting equality, improving education, saving the environment and achieving neighborhood cohesion, demolition simply does not make the grade. When the substance is absent the symbol is empty, and even when the substance is serious, the symbol then is trite. For cities serious about overcoming social injustice, for example, a symbolic demolition is wholly beside the point, or even undermines the effort by signaling the denial of painful history.

Engineering is not an obstacle. Cities have acres of real estate devoted to useless and expensive purposes like roads and parking lots, which are already popular targets for redevelopment. They also have miles of air space that any engineering student could find a use for without sacrificing the building underneath.

Nor is it persuasive to say that the cost is prohibitive because the practical case does not exist (at least, no more than the prohibitive cost of every aspect of real estate development) and the claim that economics drives these decisions is not sincere.

Most of all, the argument that urban planning needs a clean slate is only excusing juvenile planning practice. Cities should work with the conditions and resources that exist, and good planners will make the most of them. The reliance on physical change as a medium for communicating professional change is evidence that the profession has not changed after all.
The threshold for demolition needs to be much higher. In fact, it should be as high as the threshold for preservation is today. The burden should shift to the redevelopment side, and demolition should be permitted only after a demonstration that the existing structure has no useful purpose whatsoever. The economics of one city doing this alone are not favorable. Development would leave. For this reason, the preservation assumption should be adopted at the national level, much like building codes and minimum wage, and cities can modify them beyond the federal level if they have an interest in preserving historic character, building heights or other things.

Over its history, publicly sponsored demolition has destroyed neighborhoods and historic resources, broken up communities and economies, left countless people homeless, inspired a social revolution, and accounted for 40 per cent of all solid waste. (At one point it was 50 per cent.) Today it is embedded in the urban system through perverse incentives that disguise municipal complacency about the environment, social justice, education, government spending and long-term planning. It has been offered as proof of political change, economic improvement and the coming of the bright new future, even when none of those things materialize. Finally, most demolitions are of adequate building stock and this thesis has found no compelling excuse for this.
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Books


**Articles**


**Video**

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23F2pre_lbg