ADAPTIVE INTERVENTIONS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PARLOR CITY

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Introduction

This paper will explore the historic, sustainable, physical and economic aspects of the architectural adaptation of an important heritage district of a once vibrant, light manufacturing, Victorian era urban environment. As cities and environments change with physical, global and societal aging, creative interventions can be an exciting evolution and contemporary metamorphosis of our working and living environments. By researching and defining existing buildings, neighborhoods and/or social spatial systems, then designing/adapting them for contemporary usage, not only can the physical and cultural historical heritage of a once important urban city center be resurrected, but the visual elements that were once commonplace can be communicated to future generations.

The small urban center of Binghamton, New York was, in its late Victorian heyday, an important destination for eastern European immigrants landing at Ellis Island in New York City, in search of a new life and prosperity. What they found was a city located at water and rail transportation crossroads that provided abundant opportunity in the shoe manufacturing and cigar industries, second largest in the United States at the time, behind New York City itself\(^1\). The “valley of opportunity” as this area became known, was home to the manufacturing of over two hundred different products by the turn of the twentieth century. By 1890 over fifty cigar factories manufacturing over 100 million cigars per year and employing thousands of Eastern European immigrant workers\(^2\). During the twentieth century, the manufacture of shoes became the primary industry later followed by the founding of IBM which remains there today (Fig. 1).

The focus of this paper is on the center of the original manufacturing area, at the crossroads of rail and water transportation, so fundamental to the area’s development. This area of two city blocks containing over fifty buildings, once housed much of the city’s cigar industry (Fig. 2).

\(^1\) A Brief History Binghamton, NY, The Parlor City., Binghamton Public Library, Binghamton 1984.
\(^2\) ibidem.
Fig. 1. Aerial View Early 1900’s
Source: early 1900’s postcard.

Fig. 2. Historic/Heritage District
Source: author.
Fig. 3. Stephens Square, Former Cigar Manufacturing
Source: author.

Fig. 4. Victorian Marketplace
Source: author.

Fig. 5. Water Powered Elevator Machinery
Source: author.
As the cigar industry declined, the buildings were adapted during the early to mid twentieth century to house light manufacturing, commercial and residential occupants. Later in the twentieth century, the area declined even further as cities populations in the US began to move toward suburban locales, leaving “donut holes” of inactivity in the city centers. While “urban renewal” in the US removed much of the cultural heritage contained by the buildings and neighborhoods it destroyed, this area under study remained mostly intact, physically. During the late twentieth century, as part of an historic redevelopment team, this author, one of a small group of architects, began an analysis of this two block area, the goals of which were to understand the history and heritage of the area, document the existing conditions and propose adaptive interventions that would revitalize the area and redefine and communicate the rich heritage that was lost. As an architect member of this team, I was fully involved with all aspects of the historical revitalization study, analysis, proposals and subsequent realizations that ensued. The adaptive interventions proposed were defined in several categorical areas:

1. Re-establishment of the historically significant physical area through physical rehabilitation and adaptation using US standards for rehabilitation of historically significant buildings.
2. Introduce physical interventions whose goals were to increase population and use of the area in new and exciting ways.
3. Propose incentives for private property owners to redevelop individual properties to historically correct standards.
4. Improve communication of the history and cultural heritage of the area.
5. Propose funding avenues and cost estimations for the success of the project.

The adaptive interventions were centered around a five-story former cigar factory building that has as it’s front foundation, the original wall forming the transportation water canal that served the area (Fig. 3). Additionally, as a second focal point of adaptation, the last remaining Victorian era wooden commercial building was restored to historically correct standards and returned to much of its original usage (Fig. 4). Some of the manufacturing heritage elements, such as a water powered elevator, cab and machinery, were cosmetically restored and displayed for future generations to understand and enjoy (Fig. 5, 6). The creation of new spaces formed a nucleus of excitement that joined several buildings into an internal courtyard (Fig. 7).
Project Description

The Parlor City Center project, as it was known, proposed the economic revitalization of a two-block area in downtown Binghamton, NY primarily through the rehabilitation and historic preservation of a variety of structures. Basically a commercial area in the central business district, it contains predominately 19th century architecture. Much of the area has been excluded from previous “urban renewal” plans and has suffered deterioration through neglect. The need for historic, economic and cultural rehabilitation was recognized and municipal participation in the project was initiated with the following goals:

- to restore, preserve and communicate the cultural and architectural heritage of the Parlor City,
- to eliminate deterioration and blighted living conditions,
- to promote improved business and employment opportunities,
- to stabilize and expand the tax base,
- to promote private investment in property and
- to renew the productivity of under-utilized land and building resources.

It was also the intent of the project to provide for the redevelopment of unoccupied urban renewal land in the project area, and to extend and complete the overall plans for the revitalization of the downtown area. Under this plan, the irreplaceable and highly visible historic character of the project area’s many Victorian buildings will be preserved against further decline and unsightly modifications by a facade restoration effort that is design coordinated and implemented by the City. Preservation of the
building exteriors in their restored condition would be a feature of the project, enabling the City to designate the two blocks as an historic district through a local statute and to seek its listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

For the involved property owner, the Parlor City Center program made available an opportunity to renew the effective useful life of his/her property and to improve the marketability and hence the income potential, of the rental spaces, by shifting from a marginal quality environment to a prime retail, office and residential mixed-use environment of historical significance. To integrate the individual rehabilitation and restoration efforts of property owners with one another and with the redevelopment surrounding the project area (both completed and in progress), a plaza and second level pedestrian walkway system was designed to be constructed by the City. The existing configuration of buildings, open space and the project area environs represented a unique design opportunity for the successful establishment of an integrated marketplace in the heart of the downtown area. Implementing these public improvements required that land, or an interest in land, in some cases be conveyed to the City by involved property owners, through acquisition or easement. The rehabilitation program was designed as a partnership effort, with the investment of the City of Binghamton and the investment of involved property owners (and those financing the investment of property owners) occurring in a programmed manner.

**Property Area Inspection**

As a beginning to the project, each building in the project area was surveyed to determine its condition relative to the Binghamton Housing Property Maintenance and Rehabilitation Code and the New York State Building Construction Code. In addition, each building was surveyed in accordance with selection criteria to determine its suitability for rehabilitation, restoration or demolition, and the scope of the work required to bring buildings into compliance with codes and standards. The inspection was made on the basis of violations which were visually evident, without testing or redesign. Structural conditions were assessed on the basis of sagging, deflection, deformation, buckling, rotting, deterioration and similar visible signs of structural failure. Individual building inspection reports were furnished to property owners, indicating improvements required and estimates of costs involved.

In addition, a field survey was conducted to determine existing land uses and to study the present parking situation. Attention was given particularly to the present use and appropriate reuse of Urban Renewal Agency owned land within the project area. Possible connections to appropriate neighboring land uses were identified and the relationships of the project area to neighborhood blocks was noted. In addition, the project area was surveyed to determine the land and/or interest in land required to be conveyed to the City to construct a public pedestrian walkway system on two levels and provide landscaped areas within the project area along with required easements and other essential requirements.
Existing Conditions

The existing land use of each parcel was recorded during the inspection. Mixed-use properties combining retail and apartment functions in downtown, row-type structures occupy almost half of the project area. Although the entire parcel area is classified according to the predominant use, improvements did not always occupy the entire site and some space was used for other purposes such as parking. The two blocks of the project area occupy 4.75 acres, excluding the dividing street. Approximately 2.93 acres or 62% of the area was occupied by buildings.

Historic Significance

There are 25 buildings of historic merit within the area, most of them forming contiguous facade clusters. All were built from locally manufactured “Binghamton brick” and are three or four stories high except for Stephens Square, the dominant landmark and former cigar factory, which is 5 stories high. Originally, the upper floors were occupied by people who worked in the shops and factories on the street level. Plans under preparation called for facade restoration, renovation of the upper floors for mixed income apartments, and renovation of the lower level, street level and second story for shops and stores. The space defined by the rear facades of the buildings in the eastern-most block would become a fully landscaped public courtyard. Architects of the late 19th century buildings are unknown, although two buildings on the east side of Washington Street have been attributed to Henry Hobson Richardson.

The architecture, particularly the brick detailing, embodies the heritage and pride of place expressed by Binghamton’s merchant princes in the days when the City was known as “The Parlor City”, a grand Victorian Era city with manufacturing in the cigar and shoe industries. The visual interest of the area stems from the unity of materials (brick with sandstone or limestone trim) and the variety of detailing of fenestration, cornice lines and other decorative brickwork. Several of the buildings are outstanding of their type: Stephens Square, the only remaining cigar manufacturing building and important from a cultural and architectural heritage standpoint, is a synthesis of industrial expressionism and Victorian gingerbread. Two other buildings, the Brunner building and the Phoenix Building are exuberant Romanesque Revival rendered in brick. Additionally, the newly named “Marketplace” building is the only remaining wooden structured Victorian era commercial building. The two block mostly brick ensemble is a complex sculptural statement of the spirit of industrial and commercial heritage of the 1880s and 1890s.
Selection Criteria

The following selection criteria were used to determine whether a building was suitable for rehabilitation, restoration or demolition, which was not required. These standards have been incorporated into the inspection process and buildings were classified accordingly.

1. Rehabilitation
   A building shall be suitable for rehabilitation if it can be economically repaired or improved to bring it up from a less than acceptable condition to a locally acceptable standard condition (compliance with Binghamton’s Housing, Property Maintenance and Rehabilitation Code and the New York State Building Construction Code) and renew it to a long-term sound condition. Buildings have deficiencies as result of inadequate maintenance, outdated systems and changes in applicable codes. Conditions are characterized by minor defects beyond the scope regular maintenance.

2. Restoration
   A facade shall be suitable for restoration if it possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association, and:
   a. is associated with events making a significant contribution to Binghamton’s history and heritage (particularly the “Parlor City” era),
   b. embodies distinctive characteristics of type, period or method of construction,
   c. represents the work of a master or possesses high artistic value.

3. Demolition
   A building shall be designated for demolition if it is so damaged, decayed, dilapidated or unsafe that it creates a serious hazard to the health and safety of occupants, the public, or surrounding buildings. The structure may have holes, open cracks, rotted or missing material over a considerable area of the foundation, walls, floor, or roof as the result of inadequate original construction. It may be seriously damaged as the result of storm, fire or flood. It may be structurally unsound, having substantial sagging of the roof or substantial portions of the structure out of plumb. Conditions are characterized by critical defects no longer economically repairable.

Rehabilitation Standards and Guidelines

The standards recommended herein have been adapted from the U.S. Secretary of Interior’s “Standards for Rehabilitation”. All rehabilitation work must also comply with any and all applicable building construction codes and applicable local zoning.

“The Standards for Rehabilitation” (codified in 36 CFR 67 for use in the (US) Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program) address the most prevalent treatment. “Rehabilitation” is defined as “the process of returning a property to a state of utility, through repair or alteration, which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural, and cultural values”.
The intent of the Standards is to assist the long-term preservation of a property’s significance through the preservation of historic materials and features. The Standards pertain to historic buildings of all materials, construction types, sizes, and occupancy and encompass the exterior and interior of the buildings. They also encompass related landscape features and the building’s site and environment, as well as attached, adjacent, or related new construction. To be certified for Federal tax purposes, a rehabilitation project must be determined by the Secretary to be consistent with the historic character of the structure(s), and where applicable, the district in which it is located. The Standards (Department of Interior regulations, 36 CFR 67) pertain to historic buildings of all materials, construction types, sizes, and occupancy and encompass the exterior and the interior, related landscape features and the building’s site and environment as well as attached, adjacent, or related new construction. The Standards are to be applied to specific rehabilitation projects in a reasonable manner, taking into consideration economic and technical feasibility”.

Here is a listing of these Standards for reference purposes, additional information can be found on the Secretary of the Interior’s Technical Preservation website, referenced herein.

1. A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.

2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.

3. Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.

4. Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.

5. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.

6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.

7. Chemical or physical treatments, such as sandblasting, that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.

8. Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.

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9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Additionally, the Secretary of the Interior’s Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Structures were referenced to reflect the architectural heritage of the buildings, as well as their part in the neighboring streetscape.

“Together with the Standards for Rehabilitation, the “Guidelines” provide a model process for owners, developers, and Federal agency managers to follow. The Guidelines are intended to assist in applying the Standards to projects generally; consequently, they are not meant to give case-specific advice or address exceptions or rare instances. For example, they cannot tell owners or developers which features of their own historic building are important in defining the historic character and must be preserved – although examples are provided in each section – or which features could be altered, if necessary, for the new use. This kind of careful case-by-case decision-making is best accomplished by seeking assistance from qualified historic preservation professionals in the planning stage of the project. Such professionals include architects, architectural historians, historians, archeologists, and others who are skilled in the preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration of the historic properties. The Guidelines pertain to historic buildings of all sizes, materials, occupancy, and construction types; and apply to interior and exterior work as well as new exterior additions”


Incentives and Control of Restoration

The purpose of building restoration controls is to enhance the visual environment and to preserve the historical character and heritage of the district. At the same time, the objective was to make the buildings architecturally sound and physically attractive. To that end, it was necessary to provide viable and enticing incentives to property owners to encourage and make feasible their participation in the restoration of significant buildings, which, realistically, amount to control mechanisms. These include but are not necessarily limited to:

1. Architectural and technical assistance – property owners needed technical and architectural assistance with all aspects of historical rehabilitation. To ensure code compliance and rehabilitation consistent with the historic character of the property, architectural design services were provided in addition to the inspection reports, work write-ups and cost estimation. Recommended services included furnishing design rehabilitation services, technical and code related guidance,
assisting with preparation of historic preservation formwork for grants, referring owners to appropriate funding agencies and advising on program requirements during rehabilitation.

2. Loans and grants – the rehabilitation of buildings could be financed through public funding, private funding or a combination of the two. The availability of affordable rehabilitation financing was essential to the success of the project(s).

3. Tax incentives – it was possible for property tax laws to provide exemptions from taxation for rehabilitated historic buildings in the form of tax credits or abatements. In some locations capital expenditures incurred in a certified rehabilitation of historic structures may be amortized over a longer period in lieu of income tax depreciation deductions otherwise allowable.

Public improvements to coincide with individual efforts – publicly financed capital projects which provide or improve public facilities were typically used to induce private investment in property. Of all the incentives, public improvement appears most acceptable to the community in general but should not be used alone. The effectiveness of public improvements is reduced without mechanisms which assist an owner to borrow and complete the work. The impact of public improvements would fade over time without mandatory standards and controls to protect the investment in the project area.

The Facade Easement as a Control Mechanism

The irreplaceable and highly visible historic character of the many Victorian buildings in the project area will be preserved against further decline and unsightly modifications by a facade restoration effort that was design coordinated and implemented by the municipality. To provide for the long term protection of the public interest, involved property owners were asked to convey to the City a “facade easement”, which is, in essence, the rights to control the appearance of a buildings facade, by law, thus permitting the City to execute facade improvements and obligating themselves and their successors to preservation of the building exterior in the restored condition. This mechanism would enable the City to designate the restored area as an historic district by law and to thereby seek listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

An easement is preferable to a restrictive covenant for mostly legal reasons. Although much of American law is based on the premise that an individual has sovereignty over his own property, one principle or historic preservation is that, in some sense, such property is public – part of our historic heritage and shared environment. Because both legal and popular opinion are constantly changing over what infringements of personal (in this case property) rights can with validity be made in the name of the public good, historic land use legislation tends to be a very controversial subject. The use of easements overcomes some of this controversy because the easement is actually purchased, therefore the property owner may be considered to have entered willingly into a contract abridging his rights and to have been duly compensated for that loss.
A facade easement is limited in scope to the exterior appearance of any building or other improvement on the property. The exterior includes all architectural construction features visible from a public way (front, rear or side) including without limitation to structural materials, facing materials, windows, doors, trim, sills, steps, railings, cornices, moldings, fences, and other decorative features, whether part of the principal structure or of any accessory buildings.

**Property Easements**

In addition, an interest in property would be required to bring landscaped areas adjacent to the buildings. Perhaps the easiest, least-cost method of achieving such a result would be for owners to provide right-of-way easements for landscaped areas and pedestrian walkways in exchange for the provision of these public improvements by the City. In exchange for public improvements, property owners were asked to convey to the City a partial property easement, in the form of a covenant running with the land, permitting the City to landscape areas at the rear of buildings for public use and to construct a pedestrian walkways which may serve other commercial spaces. The exchange of land interests would compensate increased property values resulting from public improvements. In addition, owners were able to donate easements to take advantage of tax provisions for charitable contributions.

**Conclusions**

Due to a number of economic factors, this city center area has again fallen into a state of disrepair and use. Perhaps cyclical with center city areas, however, much of the rehabilitation work that was done, remains intact, preserving the cultural, historical and architectural heritage of the area.

The procedures, tactics and lessons learned from this long process and the significant results are applicable to other cities and intervention sites, including documentation processes, historical standards, analysis procedures, adaptation procedures, building code compliance and economic incentives.