

# 30 Years of Preservation: A Forest & Tree Perspective

The saving of New York City's Penn Station in 1978 is a milestone date in civic preservation and revitalization. Prior to this highly publicized preservation struggle, historic buildings were being indiscriminately destroyed throughout the country in the name of 'progress'.

While trying to halt the decline of downtown districts, urban renewal's massive surgical removal of older structures almost resulted in the opposite effect of nearly 'killing the patient'. Louisville is a text book example.



Prior to this period, when a larger project displaced a noteworthy building, there was no public outcry since the newer building was of a distinctive appearance. A good case in point is the Brown Hotel. Prior to the Brown's opening in 1923, the northeast corner of Fourth and Broadway was occupied by the popular Solger's Confectionery. But, J. Graham Brown replaced it with a more substantial edifice that created an even greater civic pride.



The Seelbach, Palace Theater, and Hilliard Lyons Center (formerly Stewarts), along with numerous other major buildings, demolished lesser properties to achieve a grander result.

Starting in the early 1940's, though, well-built structures started to be replaced with lesser quality projects. The magnificent old Post Office at Fourth and Chestnut was demolished for an open plaza, which has since given way to a non-descript retail façade. The art deco Greyhound Bus Terminal became a parking lot as did the Rialto and National Theaters. The Columbia, Washington, and Bellevue high-rises all succumbed to generic, uninspiring construction. During this period a respected local architect actually recommended that the Jefferson County Courthouse be declared structurally unsound in order to build a box-like replacement while another notable developer wanted to bulldoze West Main Street.

**Above:** the old Solgers confectionery at 4th and Broadway.  
**Below:** Brown Hotel which replaced the Solgers Building in 1923.

This mentality of replacing landmark buildings with parking lots and boring streetscapes led to the preservation movement of the 1970's.

Louisville's own Penn Station Waterloo occurred in 1979 with the Will Sales controversy. Located at Fourth and Liberty, the Will Sales Building (*Right*) had a decorative masonry exterior but the proposed Galleria wanted to build an all-glass contemporary tower here. While there was a vacant lot just a block away that could easily accommodate the Galleria project, the Will Sales had to go to make room for 'progress'. Twenty-five years later, the old Galleria received an extreme make-over and the new 4<sup>th</sup> Street Live! look echoes the contextual nature of the old Will Sales.



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Since the Will Sales loss, Louisville has slowed the demolition trend. Old Male (*Left*), old St. Paul's Church, Louisville Gardens, Reynolds Building, Shelby Park, and the Henry Clay are a few of the dozens of historic properties spared.

In late 2007, the American Standard manufacturing plant (*Right*) was threatened. A residential complex was planned, but after opposition was voiced, the out-of-town developer changed plans to build on the adjacent vacant land.



Through preservation, the desirability of Louisville's urban district has tremendously improved. West Main Street is perhaps now the 'hottest' place to work. Glassworks, the Mercantile Lofts, old Stewart's warehouse, Louisville Trust, and the YMCA have been wonderfully renovated for residential and mixed uses. Smaller buildings throughout, like the jewel Almstedt Building near Fourth and Market, have been reborn with new life.



And, in a bit of déjà vu, demolition of smaller structures is still occurring, but the replacement structures are of a better, more valued design. In 2004, the Brinly Hardy warehouse on East Main Street was removed and the Fleur-de-Lis condominiums (*Left*) took its place. This new project is well-designed (Potter Associates)

and strengthens economically this east downtown area.



On even a smaller scale, the Strathmoor Building (*Left*), at Bardstown Road and Gladstone Avenue, was replaced by the First Capital Bank of Kentucky branch (*Right*). This newer building contains a clock

tower and other detailed characteristics that reinforces the surrounding neighborhood. And a similar upscale infill project was completed in 2009 at Broadway and Shelby Streets.



However, removing smaller historic buildings like the old Bauer's Restaurant (on Brownsboro Road) and Colonial Gardens (*Left*), on Southern Parkway, for unappealing pharmacy and fast-food projects which would not enhance the desirability of these areas.

The old Water company site may be the next preservation dilemma. The proposed \$100 million City Center project seeks to demolish several distinctive buildings here such as the Odd Fellows Hall (*Right*) at Second and Chestnut.



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This is the overall outcome of the preservation movement: keeping the historic landmarks while encouraging well-planned infills. While older structures could be lost like the Brinly Hard, they must be replaced with new landmark style projects which provide an even broader functional and distinctive value. The days of demolishing for parking lots and lesser quality buildings is no longer acceptable.

Over the past 30 years, Louisville has demonstrated that preservation can revitalize a city. Progress can now be viewed from the 'forest' perspective of improving Louisville's overall desirability. Where the 'trees' are both new and old landmarks that co-exist to create an even better place in which to live.

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**Left:** *The magnificent Old Post Office which was demolished in 1944.*

**Right:** *An unappealing retail / parking garage now sits on the Old Post Office site.*



**Left :** *The grand Columbia Building, which was demolished in the late 1960's.*

**Right:** *This generic high-rise took the Columbia's place at Fourth and West Main Streets.*



**Left:** *The historic Jefferson County Courthouse (now known as Metro City Hall)*

**Right:** *A proposed box-like replacement in 1948 which fortunately was never built.*

