

February 1, 2011

Iron Quarter's Demise and Rebirth

By Steve Wiser, AIA

Replace a landmark with a landmark. If a historic structure must be demolished, then whatever replaces it should be of comparable, or better, quality construction. While this philosophy is not shared by die-hard preservationists, it is one that allows a city to reinvent itself and improve in a proactive manner.

With the impending demolition of the Iron Quarter historic structures, it is incumbent on Todd Blue, the developer, and Mayor Fischer to advocate for a significant project that, 100 years from now, preservationists will be seeking to save from demolition.

The Iron Quarter facades, on the south streetscape of the 100 block of West Main Street, exceed in aesthetic composition the more celebrated, restored 600 and 700 blocks of West Main Street. Two of the city's most prominent historic architects, Henry Whitestone and Charles Clarke, built buildings here. But, the load-bearing structural walls behind the colorful facades have always hindered their redevelopment.

The Science Center's ornate façade was saved due to its column-and-beam open interior. Frazier Museum and 21 C Hotel removed massive walls using large overhead trusses, which weren't inexpensive. The exterior of the Coleman Building, at Jefferson and Third, was recreated.

Unfortunately the city also has a poor track record of trying to save historic facades. The Board of Trade's beautiful red granite columns and carved stone lintels still lie dormant at the vehicle impoundment lot off Frankfort Avenue. An attempt was made to retain the old Ben Snyder's arched masonry front, at Market and Sixth, before it crumbled. Even Todd Blue tried to save the façade of his Mercantile condo project, which also collapsed during this process.

It is depressing, though, that we are still demolishing historic properties in downtown while acres of surface parking lots remain. An old brick building housing DW Silks, at Preston and East Main, was just cleared while the infill development has been placed on hold. Likewise, when will "City Center" be built on the blighted old Water Company site? What about the empty lots along Fifth and Sixth? Even Todd Blue owns a prominent surface lot adjacent to the waterfront at Preston and Witherspoon. And, over \$200 million is being spent to

spare the Drumanard property in the east end, which does not even come close to the historic nature of Iron Quarter.

Recently, in Lexington's downtown, there was a similar scenario for a historic block. It was ultimately torn down but the development never took place, resulting in vacant muddy lot eyesore.

Preservation conflicts in Louisville are similar to the movie 'Ground Hog Day'. The Women's Club Houses, Will Sales Building, Old Male High School, Shelby Park, Bloom School, old Bauer's Restaurant, and Colonial Gardens, among many others: these episodes keep reoccurring without any long-term strategy to avoid them. Perhaps Mayor Fischer can end this cycle and finally provide a framework that gives owners, developers, and the community a sound basis to amicably resolve historic designation issues.

The ultimate goal is to create a vibrant, exciting downtown. If Iron Quarter must be sacrificed, then its replacement should be of the highest quality that will receive design awards and future preservation.

(Steve Wiser, AIA, is a local architect, author, and historian who has been involved in numerous preservation efforts over the past thirty years.)