How Salem Saved Itself from Urban Renewal
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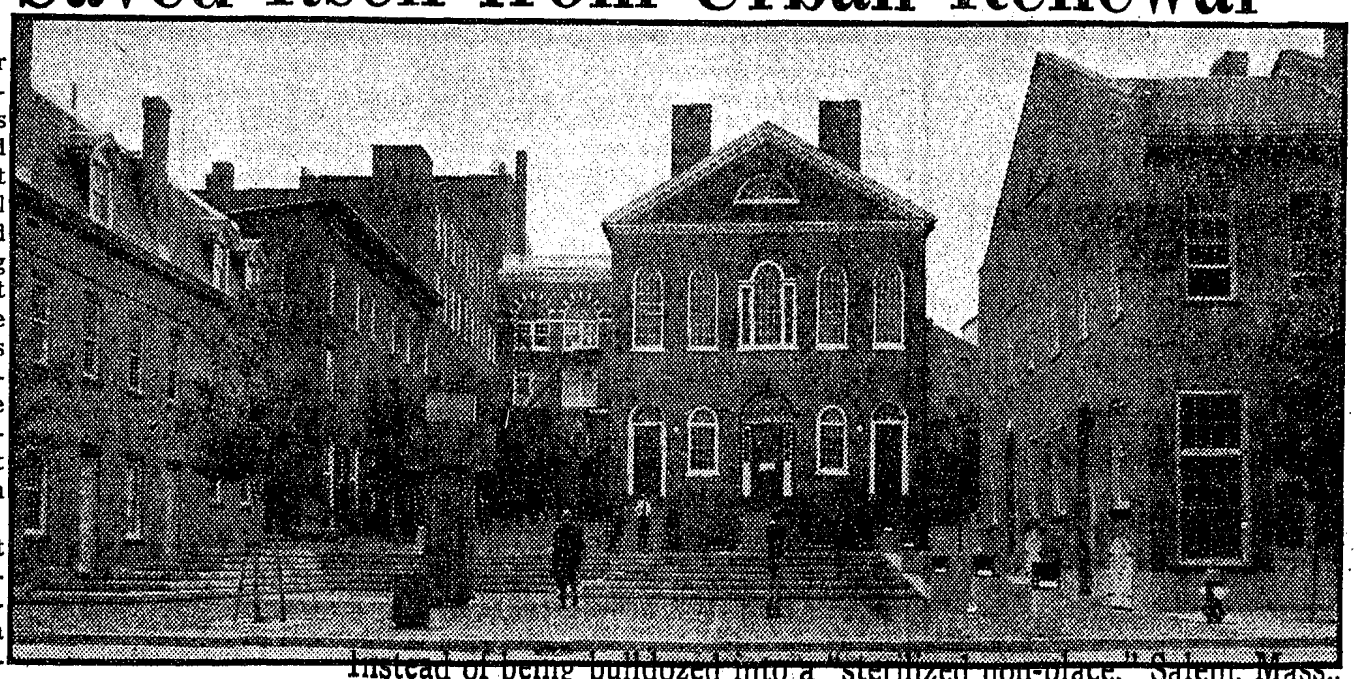

Instead of being bulldozed into a "sterilized non-place," Salem, Mass., has undergone genuine revitalization. Above, restored Derby Square.

THOSE who deal in urban disaster are entitled to a little encouragement once in a while. Nine years ago, we wrote a piece that held up Salem, Mass., one of America's most historic cities, as the tragic, prototypical example of how urban renewal could go wrong. The resuts were destroying not only history and architecture but also the identity and character that are the soul of a city or town. Nor was Salem alone. The process and the product were being die-stamped across the country in the name of traffic improvement and the tax base in the most destructive assault on the American scene since the Civil War.

Today, there is a new Salem plan that is approaching completion. It is a dramatic reversal of that original, disastrous scheme. Moreover, it represents a progressive change of policy and practice, not just in this one city but in many cities, in terms of economic, environmental and human values and goals. This change is the result of the pressures of public opinion, the rise of an increasingly informed and combative citizenry, the development of greater professional sensibilities, and the object lesson of failure. And it is a phenomenon of the last 10 years. How it happened in Salem is an enlightening story.

Critics of Salem's renewal plan in the early 1960's said that the city could not have done a better job of isolating and eliminating its historic past if it had set out specifically to do so. In the interest of traffic flow and beefing up shopping and taxes in the central business district, the priorities were circulation and parking.

The bulldozer was to be the tool to correct years of cumulative disorder, rooting out old with new, good with bad. Some landmarks, such as the Old Town Hall, a fine, Federal structure of 1816 in the Bulfinch tradition, would stay. But the related brick buildings around it, and the remains of Derby Square, laid out at the same time as the Old Town Hall and to which all of the structures related, would go for a parking garage and a widened street.

The distinguished Peabody Museum, Salem's repository of the artifacts of the China trade and the sailing age that made the city rich and architecturally notable, was to have a new road cut through next to its delicate, granite-faced East India Marine Hall of 1824, eliminating a Japanese garden that was practically the only open-space amenity left in the center of town. Historic structures on shopping streets were summarily condemned.

According to then-current renewal practice, rehabilitation was considered economically unfeasible. Asked about the possible preservation of building after historic building, the Redevelopment Authority would reply regretfully that it couldn't be done.

The real villain in the case was the system: "It can't be done" is the constant refrain and conventional wisdom of bureaucracy when faced with anything but knee-jerk procedures. At that time, any concern in Salem other than traffic movement and retail services was labeled impractical idealism.

Consultant planners compounded the damage. Like many smaller communities, Salem was the victim of city-hopping firms who dropped Plan A or Plan B on town after town with an environmental unconcern that seemed like outright hostility. Not only were the wrong new buildings to be put in the wrong places, but their relationship to what was grudgingly left of the old was marked by an insensitivity that amounted to sabotage.

However, the plan had its opponents. Among them were a Salem lawyer, William J. Tinti, and local historians who had made a survey of the city's resources, only to watch them disappear. It was not so much a question of beautiful Samuel McIntyre houses, in which Salem is inordinately rich (although the McIntyre hospital was demolished by the Housing Authority), but of lesser, vernacular structures of the same period that had survived as a functional and stylistic part of the town.

The ensuing battle between the Redevelopment Authority and concerned citizens stalemated action for a number of years. On the debit side, conditions in Salem got worse for almost a decade, with more store defections and more property deterioration until building began with the new plan. On the credit side, the fact that little or nothing got done to that point was a godsend of sorts.

At that time, national publicity brought on by this writer's comments focussed attention on Salem, and by extension, on the irreparable damage being done not just to one town, but to the national heritage and the quality of American cities. Concern ranged from White House inquiries to a visit from the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The timing was fortuitous because resistance to renewal was being voiced increasingly and the winds of change were blowing.

In 1968, they really blew hard. The election of a new mayor in Salem also brought new appointments to the Redevelopment Board, including Mr. Tinti in 1971. Salem proceeded to turn its renewal upside down.

The new approach started with recognition of the value of the city's existing infrastructure, and proceeded to keep and improve it rather than damage it with arbitrary new streets and construction. The preservation of existing, architecturally worthwhile buildings, from the 17th to the 20th century, became the first priority. The rest was to be constructive infill. The city did away with hit-and-run consultants and hired its own planner, Robert J. Kerr, its own architect, Robert L. Scagliotti, and its own engineer, Israel Davidson. After some sleepless nights, John W. Barrett stayed on as executive director to guide the revolution through the Federal maze of urban renewal action.

Imaginative new techniques were devised. (HUD warned against them at first but later was extremely cooperative.) The Redevelopment Authority found that owners preferred to keep their old buildings rather than suffer the hardship of leaving. "Why give me $40,000 to move out but nothing to fix up?" asked one, questioning HUD's classical procedures, which, at the time, emphasized demolition money rather than rehabilitation funds.

One innovative practice was the use of scenic easements, by which the city took over control of a historic building exterior if it met criteria for national landmark status and public purpose, and then was able to invest $90,000 in restoration and structural repair. The owner paid the rest of the rehab costs, which he considered a bargain after that $90,000 subsidy. The city retains exterior control, the owner is responsible for maintenance, and the building is saved. Renewal is achieved, according to Mr. Tinti, "much more cheaply, simply and far less cruelly than by throwing people out."

Instead of completing a paper plan for which no developers would ever materialize after the bulldozer had done its work (many cities had their "Hiroshima flats"), Salem went to developers first for possibilities, within flexible guidelines. It found out what they were willing and able to do. It then signed them up with stiff design review requirements.

Today, many of the doomed buildings still stand and have been renovated. The 1828-30 Bowker Block, for which there were originally no takers, has been bought by the Rogers specialty shop, and the building's granite lintels and oval Adam windows have been carefully restored. It will be a fine, Supermodern salon inside.

A Victorian building of the 1850's has had its restored brownstone trim carved in England for quality and accuracy, and its owners are moving back in. A rather frenetically designed but attractive modern bank is successfully scaled to existing structures and stands sympathetically opposite the Old Town Hall.

The Old Town Hall and all the surrounding buildings that were to be bulldozed are beautifully restored, with Derby Square paved and planted and furnished with benches. This group links what will be a pedestrian Essex Street to a brick-paved and pedestrian Front Street with revitalized early 19th-century structures being occupied by new and old enterprises. (The street was to have been widened and gutted for through traffic.)

The Peabody Museum not only has its Japanese garden intact; a new wing is in construction, to be fronted by a plaza. Where once the business district was to be given over to the automobile, tree-lined pedestrian walkways will now thread through it.

This has all been achieved by a firmly supportive city administration, a dedicated local staff, a new breed of savvy young bureaucrats in HUD, and an aggressive community that knows what it wants. What it wants and is getting is a past sensitively linked to the present and future for a city of quality rather than a sterilized non-place. Salem has been saved from a fate worse than renewal for genuine revitalization. And to this critical gadfly and affectionate neighbor, it is a heartwarming thing to see.