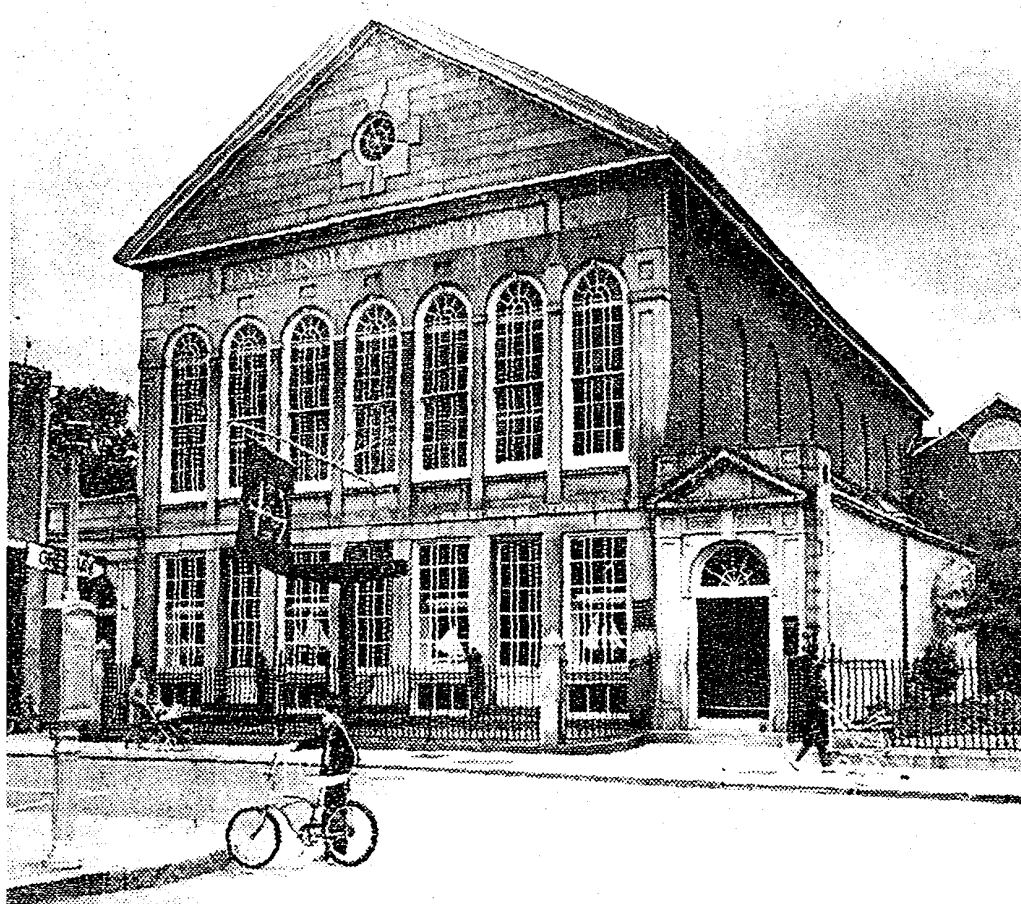


Urban Renewal Threatens Historic Buildings in Salem, Mass.



The Old Town Hall, center, in Salem, Mass., will be preserved as part of the city's urban renewal program, but other early-19th-century structures around it will not be.



City's Peabody Museum, famous depository of maritime history, will have highway going through garden at right while parking garage is created at street corner at the left.

Foes Fear Plans Will Mar Old New England Heritage

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
Special to The New York Times

SALEM, Mass.—Urban renewal has come to one of the country's most historic cities, and the clash between past and present here is being echoed in every aging American community in need of economic revitalization.

Across the country, the battle between history and the slipping tax base is on. Bolstering the tax base usually means replacing old buildings with new construction. Urban renewal has split tradition-rich communities like Salem in two.

The Salem plan is a case history of conflict. This small, prototypical historic city of just over 40,000 will submit a proposal for rebuilding its central business district to the New York regional office of the Urban Renewal Administration for review and approval.

Traditionalists' View

A trustee of Salem's Peabody Museum, the city's famous repository of its maritime history, has summed up the sentiments of the traditionalists. Commenting on the effects of the renewal plan on the museum, he said:

"It seems a shame that in order to build a shopping center similar to innumerable other shopping centers it is necessary to clip the wings of an internationally known institution which has lent glory to this city since 1799."

"We are not trying to build a shopping center," countered John Barrett, director of the Salem Redevelopment Authority. "We are trying to retain the present shopping area and save the tax base."

The plan's opponents say it will destroy the historic New England heritage that is the

city's special asset. They contend that it repeats the errors and ignores the lessons of renewal in the last decade, that it bulldozes rather than rehabilitates, gives absolute priority to the automobile, and shows an alarming insensitivity to urban esthetic values. The business community is accused of paying lip service to history while planning to demolish it for parking garages.

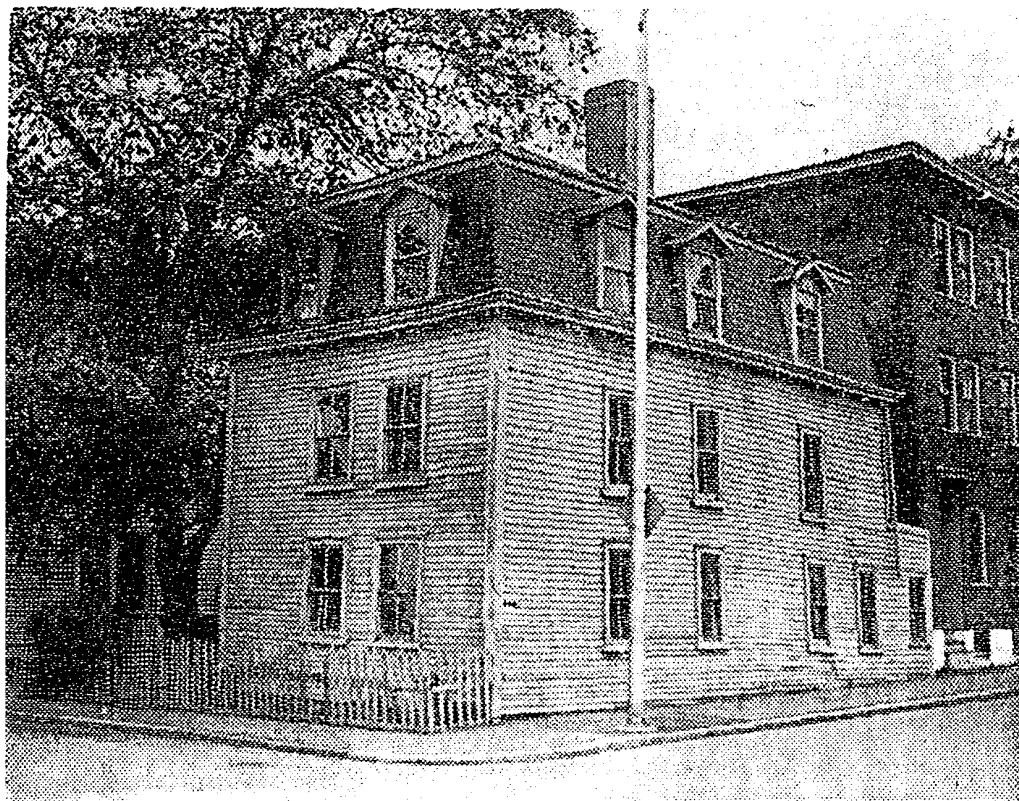
Position of the Backers

The plan's champions see it as an economic white hope, a rescue operation for the city's deteriorating property values and income. They call it an answer to the ills of congestion and decay in dated commercial neighborhoods and the only practical compromise between new and old.

To outside observers of urban renewal, the Salem plan is typical of what is happening in many older communities. It illustrates the design lag and economic gap between the goals set by the Urban Renewal Administration in Washington and the solutions devised on local levels. It highlights those factors that many critics believe make the Great Cities of President Johnson's Great Society virtually unattainable under urban renewal.

The Salem renewal plan covers 39 acres of its oldest commercial district. Called Heritage Plaza East, the area contains about 103 buildings of historical and architectural value catalogued by the Historic District Study Committee for the Salem Redevelopment Authority.

The real issue in Salem's plan goes beyond the extensive dem-



Richard A. Scheinwald for The New York Times

The 17th-century Pickman House, on corner, will be preserved, but old buildings around it will be replaced by a housing development. Critics of Salem's renewal plan say it is typical of those that do not provide historic structures with sympathetic settings.

olition that is the immediate cause of conflict. It concerns the conditions, assumptions and values that make the bulldozer seem the only practical tool to the business community and the local redevelopment authority.

These factors range from the conservatism and short-sightedness of local commercial interests responsive to only the most conventional investments to the real and serious "mortgage gap" between the costs of sensitive rehabilitation and routine new building that militate against preservation.

They include the lack of regional and transportation planning into which the local plan can fit proper long-range goals

and which force it to stop-gap solutions.

These realities are emerging as the universal deterrents to better urban renewal design in most American cities.

There remains the even more critical consideration in a city like Salem of how well the new plan relates to the few historic structures that will be left and to the character and tradition of the town. This, too, is a recurrent renewal problem.

Professional critics of Salem's plan feel that it could not do a more effective job of isolating and alienating Salem's historic past if it had set out specifically to do so. Some residents call it sabotage.

As illustrations, the treatment of two of the area's pivotal historical structures is cited. These are the Peabody Museum, the remarkable depository of Salem's China-trade sailing-age history, housed in the handsome, granite-faced East India Marine Hall of 1824, and the Old Town Hall, a superb small Federal structure of 1816 in the Faneuil Hall-Bulfinch tradition.

The Peabody Museum is to be cut off by a widened, four-lane traffic artery, and framed by a facing parking garage. The suitability of this treatment is being questioned bitterly.

The old Town Hall stands in

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Urban Renewal Plan Threatens Historic Sites in Salem, Mass.

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the remains of Derby Square, which was also laid out around 1816, with its related early 19th-century brick buildings and Victorian additions. The official Blair and Stein Associates survey report, made for the Salem Planning Commission as the city's master plan, notes that "the full visual potential has not been realized" of these related historical commercial structures around the Old Town Hall, which "complement it in character and scale."

In the design carried out by the Planning Services Group of Cambridge, Mass., the consultants hired subsequently by the Salem Redevelopment Authority to implement the Blair and Stein studies, this potential will be realized by ripping out all of the related old buildings except the Old Town Hall. The delicately scaled, brick landmark will be jostled on either side by an expandable parking garage and a large new retail block.

Historians contend that the Old Town Hall grouping in Front Street qualifies as a historic district. The original street and its buildings will be eliminated to make a new, wider street for better traffic flow. The garage was sited for the slope of the land, which will eliminate a ramp.

In no case has priority been given to providing a prime historic structure with a sympathetic setting.

The priorities considered, according to John Barrett, director of the Salem Redevelopment Authority and former head of the Chamber of Commerce, are traffic movement, parking needs, and the necessity of rear-door delivery on business streets.

"The objective was to get parking as close to the stores as possible," he explained.

The Railroad Went Away

Mr. Barrett notes that the opportunity to provide mass transit to the central business district was lost with the removal of the railroad a few years ago.

The substitute is a vast parking lot called Riley Plaza, which critics believe offers dubious honor to Mr. Riley and equally dubious visual focus to the heart of the city. Nor has it relieved the congestion of the surrounding streets.

The new plan will bring in more cars and provide parking garages that can be enlarged by adding stories, although, beyond the initial widening, the streets will remain the same. This plan, admittedly far from ideal, is an inevitable accommodation of the original regional planning error, according to Mr. Barrett.

The city contends that the old buildings are beyond restoration, or that it is economically unfeasible to restore them. Restorationists contend that anything can be rehabilitated. Bankers and businessmen consider the price of rehabilitation impractical.

Professionals note an opportunity missed to use urban renewal creatively to weave the town's authentic historic fabric into its economic redevelopment for a long-term profitable investment in combined tourist and shopping trade.

According to Dorn McGrath, head of project planning and engineering for the Urban Renewal Administration, Federal review of local urban renewal plans does not judge quality or suitability; it is concerned with legal compliance. There is no design review, and there are no design criteria. He notes that

few sophisticated or imaginative plans are submitted.

He also notes that urban renewal is not much more than the power of eminent domain. It acquires and clears the land. It plans and builds nothing. That is local responsibility.

"If a locality has a pedestrian plan, and it fits the technical criteria, it is accepted," Mr. McGrath said.

When the local design process starts, esthetic problems become economic. As an example, Salem's Bowker Block, a Federal building of 1828-30 on a main shopping thoroughfare, Essex Street, which will be turned into a pedestrian mall, would cost \$50,000 to rehabilitate, according to the Redevelopment Authority. It will not be done, because the owner cannot afford it, or the loan. The building will be demolished.

In such a case, however, it is frequently to the owner's advantage to sell to the Redevelopment Authority, which, in turn, will find it easier to raze the structure and turn the land over to a developer than to find an investor interested in the higher costs and smaller profits of rehabilitation.

By setting up "design controls" for the new construction, the city guarantees itself, at best, "instant Georgian," to replace the genuine example. The spurious product is a much better economic deal than the real thing.

These problems all remain unsolved. But for the first time, answers are being sought. A demonstration project of the Urban Renewal Administration, called WHALE, for the Waterfront Historic Area League, is working on the renewal and restoration of the historic New Bedford, Mass., waterfront.

In the process, it is trying to find ways to close the "mortgage gap," or the difference in the amount of money needed for proper restoration and conversion of a historic structure to modern uses and compliance with city codes, as opposed to the larger and easier profits of ordinary new construction. The reality is being faced of what commercial investors are willing to do, and what should be done in the community interest.

This could mean direct Government grants or subsidies, such as are empowered by the British Ministry of Works, or the kind of Federal assistance and protection that is longstanding practice in Europe.

In the private area, it includes studies of more imaginative uses of conventional investment processes, voluntary land re-assembly programs to create equity, and an emphasis on long-range, rather than short-range, goals.

Nonprofit or limited dividend corporations, such as the urban redevelopment corporations provided for by section 121A of the Massachusetts General Code, give citizen groups with broad renewal goals special eligibility for economic assistance to achieve them. Salem's Redevelopment Authority is not this kind of corporation.

"The business community always looks to the bottom line," said Robert Kerr, director of WHALE. "You don't need to rip out the heart of an old town. It is possible to renew the historic, as well as the economic fabric of a city. The tragedy is that we are just reaching the point of finding out how it can be done."

None of Salem's historic heart, from the internationally famous Chestnut Street to the colonial common on Washington Square, has any protection from the renewal bulldozer through zoning or preservation legislation. As things stand now, it will take some potent modern witchcraft to save Salem's historic past.