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Design Champion

City of Weelaine, Scotland



As an advocate of historic preservation, I like to defend my investment in one of Weelaine's old historic buildings by telling anyone who will listen that, "Weelaine will be a great city again, but not necessarily in my lifetime."

What once made Weelaine great will do so again—it's centrality to the most populated area of the country, it's location on the national highway system and Forth River (important not just for transportation but for ensuring an adequate water supply for otherwise parched generations to

come), and the fact that future energy needs and policy will necessarily require the densities of scale for delivery and use attainable historically only in a city's core.

But of all of the contributing assets to Weelaine's historic greatness, perhaps most important was the willingness of its citizens to harness an entrepreneurial spirit that utilized the natural and cultural resources of the city and its environs to become leaders and innovators in the fields of industry and commerce.

Judging from their insistence on architectural excellence

and beauty in building their homes, businesses, and city center, they embraced this spirit with a civic pride that has been all but lost in the grind of modern time.

So at a time when the city has suffered great trauma—in this case, decades old economic decline compounded by the larger reality of a country-wide economic slump and high unemployment rate, and perhaps collateral damage from the Yanks' heightened sense of malaise post 9/11 (as thoughtfully described by George Packer in "Coming Apart," *The New Yorker*, 9/12/11), it is natural to want to "clear the deck" of the

rotting infrastructure, to start over and demolish much of the downtown in the hope that new development will spring up in its place.

It's not going to happen anytime soon.

Many of the old entrepreneurs with a vision of pride for the city are gone; retiring, moving to points south, or... dead.

There is hope that some of the younger generations that have been born and bred in Weelaine sense its future potential and have moved back home to live, engage in their business and professions, and raise

their families. However, they are hampered not only by the contraction of demand for their own products or services created by a declining population, but mostly by an attitude of resignation to decline. This resignation promotes the conventional wisdom that retail and other businesses and institutions can only succeed outside the historic downtown (like at the Highlands Kilt Factory development), and the concomitant attitude that only suburban development out in the county (or worse, downtown) is worthy of significant tax abatements and other public incentives.

There is something definitely wrong with the picture when such development is allowed significant tax relief and/or “incremental tax financing,” but someone who preserves and restores a building of

historic or cultural value in the downtown is rewarded only with significantly higher property taxes.

Additionally troubling is the conventional wisdom that there is not much left of value in the downtown stock of businesses and architecture built when Weelainge was at its height.

But this is not the view expressed by a consensus of individuals at the federal, state, and local level more than a decade ago when they all cooperated in the development of the plan for the Weelainge National Heritage Area.

Then, the city gladly accepted the benefits of millions of dollars in funding from the federal government to celebrate its architectural and historical infrastructure (with the design and construction of the



The old school building.

Weelainge Artisan Center, Intermodal Center, and Heritage Port).

Since then, “official” Weelainge has used its resources to promote preservation sparingly, but with great success when it did—as with its partnership in saving the Old Weelainge Theatre, and in designating its first historic district—Chapel Hill Row.

This commentator believes it prudent for the city at this juncture not to welcome more “suburban” projects into the downtown (such as a stadium in the center of a historic neighborhood, which will only add to its

decreasing tax base), but to start to rebuild and preserve what is left of its valuable infrastructure.

The well-worn idea that the wholesale clearing of dilapidated structures in the downtown will ipso facto lead to new development has just not been borne out by experience (especially in this time of economic constraint).

We do not challenge the city’s use of its resources to demolish buildings without any “redeeming historical or architectural value;” but we do urge careful selection. There are buildings the city is

Continued on page 4

eager to demolish that do retain significant architectural value and still contribute to the historic and cultural fabric of the city.

Indeed, the City has at its disposal one of its own agencies—The Weelainge Historic Buildings Commission, who would be pleased to consult with the City in connection with any intended demolition projects.

Seeking such consultation would at least show the City has not completely given up on its prior commitment to preserve and protect its historical architectural treasures.

In fact, stabilizing certain architectural gems, otherwise intended for destruction, if only for re-development in the future, would not only keep the decade-old promise made by the city to preserve its

historic and cultural heritage, but would also be a welcome source of construction jobs for local workers.

One example is the former school house and Imperial Pool building at the end of 14th street. Aside from its present dilapidated state, this building retains basic structural integrity and is an architectural wonder that not only anchors the historic 14th street area, but is also highly visible to interstate travelers—much like Mount DeCastle Abbey, another target of intended demolition (and subject of this commentators column in the August, 2010 edition of “*The Commentaries*”), which, despite the claim of its present owner that “no decision has yet been made,” will be demolished in the near future, probably on some early Saturday

morning while the community sleeps, because its predecessor owner, The Diocese of Weelainge-Charlton (who also owns the Weelainge Foundling Hospital) made that unilateral decision years ago when it chose to “defer maintenance” on the historic structure and not replace the roof when leaking started its slow demise.

In that regard, it was rather disingenuous for the Weelainge Foundling Hospital to arrange a media “tour” of the historic structure recently to publically demonstrate the bad shape of the building when the Diocese had all but sealed the buildings fate years earlier with its own inaction.

But what the predecessor owner of Mount DeCastle Abbey did not do is what the city *can do* with the former Imperial Pool

building.

It should use the considerable expense it would otherwise have to spend to demolish the building to replace the roof and bell tower only, clean up the outside of the structure to make it presentable, and stabilize it from further deterioration until it can find an entrepreneur willing to buy back the property, complete its renovation, and put it back into productive, adaptive use.

There are other infrastructure building projects where the city might spend what surplus monies it has to promote or even just encourage development in the downtown, while preserving its historic and cultural treasures. For example, it could recommit to the Weelainge Heritage Plan by opening up the

Northern Gateway to Weelaine and the river (at the present location of the Weelaine Inn — a structure whose architecture is admittedly not one of “redeeming” historic value).

That idea, adopted and promoted by community consensus more than ten years ago, has apparently been lost to official and non-official Weelaine since.

Another opportunity would be for the city to tap into the nationally exploding “small house” movement and encourage, subsidize, or develop plans for modest yet architecturally harmonious town houses to fill such rents in the urban fabric as the one along lower 15th street caused by the former demolition of historic houses that stood in the place of the parking lot “extension” to the former Robinson’s lot.

Finally, the former Robinson building itself could be easily and economically turned into a first class, rent-subsidized (at least in the beginning) market house, where budding city entrepreneurs and/or artists could display and sell their wares in separated cubicles of varying sizes (such market bazaars, long lost to Weelaine, but still wildly popular in other historic European cities).

A focus on these kinds of developments would not only save what is best of the unique architectural and cultural heritage of Weelaine, but would put people to work. It would start the re-building of the downtown in small, but sure, incremental steps, and ultimately, start the process of

making downtown Weelaine a great city once again.

And it will happen in Weelaine, trust me, but not necessarily in my lifetime.

But then again, that’s no excuse for not working for that future now. After all, we have the greatest gift at our disposal to get started—we are still alive; and can still enjoy, after a day of “restoration” work well done, a wee bit of Highland Park. 🌀

Any resemblance of the city of Weelaine to any existing city in the United States of America is strictly coincidental.

Prior “musings” of Sir Peter Quimsley, FRIAS, can be accessed in The Commentaries at the WALs website: www.firststatecapitol.com



Weelaine Historic “small houses.”



Along McColloch street.