



Sir Peter Quimsley, FRIAS.

Design Champion

City of Weelainge, Scotland

I think it may have been fellow Brit Oscar Wilde who said we moderns know “the cost of everything and the value of nothing.” That was in the nineteenth century. Perhaps American Joni Mitchell said it best in the twentieth—“they paved paradise, and put up a parking lot.”

But we had hoped the 21st century would see more sensitivity to the historic and cultural treasures of this place we call home.

In our sister city of Edinburgh, where preservation is a focus of the community, our native son Alexander McCall Smith has written that the vista of Edinburgh is so beautiful that it “breaks the heart again and again.”

I was then in some quandary when I felt this same breaking of the heart for the opposite reason—a break in the vista—when I learned about the planned destruction of a historically significant building (a corner structure integral to the urban fabric) here in our own town of Weelainge.

Since then, I have learned that it was not so much my heart that was breaking as what has now been identified by psychologists as “solastalgia,” defined as the “pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault...a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home.’” (New York

Times Magazine, 1/31/10, “Is There An Ecological Unconscious?”)

It wasn’t just that the owner made the decision to demolish without consultation with other members of the community. It wasn’t just the fact that our city accepted and spent tens of millions of dollars in taxpayer money from the Scottish National Parliament by promising in its Weelainge Heritage Plan to preserve

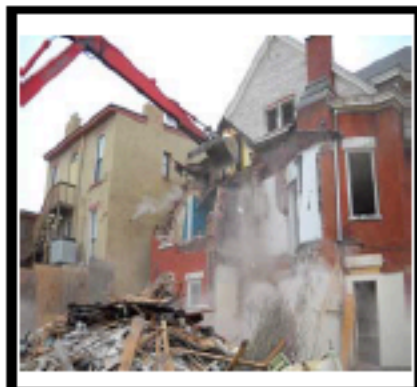
Weelainge’s cultural and architectural heritage and yet not a single official source raised any public concern about the proposed destruction. It was also the real mental jolt of witnessing the



*A proud corner anchor since the 19th Century.
Photo by Annie Cassidy*



A shell of its former self.



An otherwise quiet Saturday.



His-story ends.

destruction of an architectural gem that has endured for more than a century, which destruction was accomplished nearly surreptitiously on an otherwise quiet, recent Saturday.

Oh yes, I know the conventional wisdom. “Weelaine has no laws to prevent it,” “It was not economically feasible to save it” (time and time again this excuse in preservation circles has been proven wrong). “We need more parking,” and anyway, “no one was willing to come forward to save it.”

All of these conventionalities may be true in any given instance, but if the community is never

consulted in the first instance when a historically significant building is to be destroyed, we will never know for sure whether or not a person or other entity, or some group of persons or entities would have stepped forward to assist or save the building or for that matter, offer to assist the owner with whatever needs it felt justified them to make a unilateral decision to destroy a structure long designated a “contributing structure” to the Downtown Historic District.

In fact, the owner in this case just sought and received positive publicity in the local press for its purchase of yet another historic

building in the Downtown Historic District, portraying itself as a good neighbor to downtown development. It was somewhat ironic that that same article did not mention the planned destruction of this other historic structure, even though demolition was in the planning process even then. And even before the article appeared, yours truly was assured by a representative of the owner not to fear its commitment to preservation, because it had a “historically sensitive” architect on its board.

While “solastalgia” has often been discussed in connection with environmental degradation (it seems that philosopher Glenn

Albrecht coined the term to describe the feelings of desperation by residents of the Upper Hunter Valley in eastern Australia due to an exponential increase in “open-pit” coal mining—the Australian equivalent of our own mountain top mining), the connection of environmental concerns to historic preservation has often been ignored on a local level.

While it may be fashionable to speak of “building green,” in new construction, “green” considerations in the preservation of older buildings are just as important, perhaps more so, in determining the future use of a structure. Simply put,

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not only was an old building demolished on that recent Saturday morning, but all the compacted energy that went into its construction and upkeep over more than 100 years—the energy used to make the bricks and other building materials—the energy of the Wheelainge bricklayers at the end of the 19th century—the stone masons, the carpenters, and other local craftsmen—all that contributed to this century old structure – energy that might have been well enough spent to have been good for another 100 years with proper preservation efforts; all was lost in the swirl of dust and destruction of that voracious, banging crane bucket.

It has been proven time and time again that it often makes more environmental sense, more sense to a community, to “retrofit” a substantially older building,

then to tear down the building and start from scratch for any new construction. But this requires that an owner approach a building important to the urban fabric as a concern of the community, which is to say, with an open mind, and a willingness to discuss their needs and possible alternative uses with the affected community. It requires in a nutshell the opposite of what has sometimes been referred to as an

“arrogance of ownership.”

Yours truly will take some of the blame. Perhaps I could have done more, sooner, to attempt to save this now lost architectural gem. But we all really need to do much better as a community. Much, much better. ☞

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



Photo by Annie Cassidy

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