

KNOXVILLE  
HISTORY  
PROJECT

**NINE PRACTICAL REASONS TO SAVE HISTORIC BUILDINGS**

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**Nine Practical Reasons to Save Historic Buildings**

“Historic? Why, that’s not historic!”

A lot of good and honest folks roll their eyes when they hear that adjective applied to a building they’ve never heard of. Angry anonymous bloggers jeer. Old men on breakfast clubs grumble. A building can’t be “historic” unless Davy Crockett was born there, George Washington slept there, or a Civil War battle involving at least moderate bloodshed was fought on the premises.

At this point, with the preservation-fueled revival of downtown Knoxville bringing people, dollars, and uncustomary positive press to the city, the value of the community’s finite and rather small stock of old buildings, even those with no nationally famous associations, might seem obvious. There was a time when demolishers could shut up a preservationist quickest by saying, “If you want to save it, why don’t you buy it?”

Things have changed. The demand for older buildings seems to be permanent, and newer techniques make rehabbing old buildings more affordable than it used to be. Often, now, preservationist developers are indeed willing to buy old buildings whose owners want to tear them down.

Still, somehow, they keep vanishing.

Consider that Knox County dates back to the 1790s, when the new city was the administrative center of the new state of Tennessee—and the fact that today the whole county hosts only a couple of intact houses from that capital era. In fact, Knox County has fewer than 100 houses that were standing during the Civil War. Considering the county is home to almost half a million people, you’d think all of them would be cherished, but that tiny number keeps getting smaller. They’re rare and getting rarer. Several rural antebellum houses have been torn down just since 2000. Preservationists tried, but couldn’t touch them. The owners could not be persuaded to fix them up—or allow them to be sold to preservationists who wanted to do so.

What’s historic and worth saving varies with the beholder, but some definition of what we mean may be urgent. The National Park Service comes up with criteria by which buildings are nominated for the National Register of Historic Places, respecting buildings associated with significant

people, events, architectural styles, and building practices. Put simply, “historic” generally means “old and worth the trouble.” The adjective applies to a building that’s part of a community’s tangible past. To a degree that might surprise cynics, old buildings also offer options for a community’s future.

Assumptions to the contrary, the term “historic” is not used liberally. Of the tens of thousands of buildings in Knox County, hardly one in 20 qualifies as “historic.” How historic buildings keep ending up in the hands of people who don’t like historic buildings is a statistical puzzle.

So why save any given old building? Lots of folks are just sentimental about old buildings, of course, and there’s nothing wrong with that. After a few decades, a building may have a human family in the thousands, people with strong associations with a building of which even the owner can be only vaguely aware. As people get older, they like to point to an old building and tell children, or grandchildren, “Pa and I went on our first date there,” or “Aunt Martha used to work in that building, and always gave us coconut bonbons.” Eavesdroppers encounter those scenes on Gay Street almost every day. It’s sweet, and for those with personal connections it’s a large part of the value of downtown, maybe the value of Knoxville itself.

But nostalgia is not the subject of this essay.

Some also like to stand in the place where history happened, and feel the resonance of long-ago events. In Knoxville, people like to see the place where Thomas O’Conner and the Mabrys shot each other to death in 1882, in front of a recognizable building you can still point to because it’s still there. Often we don’t know buildings are associated with a significant person or event until decades later, when a letter emerges or a historian bothers to look some things up.

Heritage tourism has a strong appeal in the 21st century. But that’s not necessarily what we’re talking about here, either.

This article is about the value of old buildings—the practical value—and why preserving them is good for business, especially the business of a city.

### ***1. Old Buildings Often Have More Intrinsic Value.***

Some value is obvious. Buildings of a certain era, namely pre-World War II, tend to be built with better materials, often more sturdily.

They include ingredients like certain hardwoods, or heart pine, wood from enormous trees in old-growth forests that don’t exist anymore. And buildings were built with different standards. A century-old building is often a better bet long-term than a brand-new one is. West Knoxville’s antebellum Walker-Sherrill house, which entered the century neglected and facing threats of demolition, was reborn as an office building. If tornadoes strike West Knoxville, you might consider heading for the Walker-Sherrill house. There the walls are five bricks thick. It might be safer than most modern houses.

Then there's craftsmanship. It was partly the result of pre-union slave wages for craftsmen of former eras, but a building more than a few decades old is likely to represent many more man-hours per square foot than a modern building could boast. Expert stone-cutters and woodcarvers and metalworkers once plied their trades cheap. They never got what they deserved, perhaps. Often they were unable to afford to live in the kind of buildings they built. But they left us a legacy that can't be replaced for a comparable cost.

In his 2017 book, *Imaginary Cities*, a survey of utopian communities through world history, British scholar Darran Anderson pictures a future in which the human race might be, if not absent, too disorganized to continue maintenance of its built environment. In that eventuality, he is confident, the world's buildings would deteriorate and vanish in reverse order: the flimsy modern buildings disappearing first, followed by the thick-walled brick buildings of previous centuries, finally leaving only the ancient stone monuments of Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

## ***2. When You Tear Down an Old Building, You Never Know What You're Doing.***

This statement come with two distinct interpretations.

The first has to do with a building's cultural heritage. Often destroyers of buildings aren't necessarily ignoring local heritage. They just don't know about it.

Author James Agee's main childhood home, the setting for the Pulitzer-Prizewinning novel *A Death in the Family* and the essay "Knoxville: Summer 1915" was subject of controversy when it was torn down in 1963. The owner learned about its connection to Agee at some point in the process, and voiced some regret over it, especially considering a Hollywood motion picture was about to be shot there. But he said he was too far along, financially, to turn back without losing his shirt. The house became famous, featured even in a mainstream national magazine *Look*, just as it was being demolished. Perhaps in remorse, the developer gave Agee's name to the apartment complex he built on the author's homesite.

What no one seemed to know at the time was that Agee's grandparents' home on Clinch Avenue, where he spent probably a couple years of his youth, was still standing. It was torn down with no publicity, no protest, perhaps no knowledge, six years later. Only years later, when Agee's birth certificate became a public document, did we know it was his birthplace.

There are similar stories all over. Poet Nikki Giovanni's childhood home, the one she would recall in the title of her best-known autobiographical essay, "400 Mulvaney Street, would vanish anonymously with Urban Renewal. Three of the four houses where Hollywood director Clarence Brown grew up were torn down; one of those, where Brown lived as a teenager, was lost in the last three or four years, after it had been photographed by the Irish scholar who was working on the filmmaker's first biography. "Vagabondia," where Frances Hodgson Burnett lived when she began writing novels, was known for a while, but probably forgotten when it was torn down, perhaps for the Henley Street project of the 1920s. Ida Cox, the groundbreaking blues singer of the 1920s who spent the last 20 years of her life—during which she made her only album—in a modest house on Louise Avenue in East Knoxville. That association was known only to a few blues and jazz scholars, and the house was never understood to be under threat—until it vanished

without warning, around 2000. In all those cases, there was no public controversy, and the owner or developer who tore the building down probably knew nothing of its significance or potential value to the city's cultural heritage.

Perhaps the most striking example of forgotten landmarks is a house that was once predicted to become famous, even a tourist draw. In 1938, the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, remarking on the national fame of African-American artist Beauford Delaney, whose work was featured in the current issue of *Life*, predicted that his family home on Vine Street would surely be a "shrine." However, memories are short. Few if any remembered that detail 30 years later when the Delaney shrine was bulldozed along with hundreds of others during Urban Renewal. Later, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Delaney became the subject of a nationally hailed biography, and of exhibits in New York and Paris, where his paintings sell in the six figures. The *News-Sentinel* of 1938 was accurate in its assessment of the house's potential, if not in its prediction of how it would be valued in the future. In the 21st century, tourists come looking for traces of Delaney, and find hardly any.

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But there's another reason why a demolisher never really knows what he's doing. Often a building's concealed value isn't something that requires library research. It's something in the brick and mortar, and emerges only with renovation.

In 2000, the Daylight Building on Union Avenue seemed misnamed. It was a drab eyesore, more and more vacant as the years passed. A developer bought it to tear it down and replace it with something modern. Though Knox Heritage preservationists worked behind the scenes, the announcement of its demolition elicited no popular passion to save it. No one picketed. Columnists didn't protest. It was going to be torn down, and no one was going to miss it much.

By the time a couple of different demolition scenarios fell through, mainly only because the developers lacked the money to complete their announced projects, the 1927 building was utterly vacant, and went up for sale again. This time, Dewhirst Properties bought it and began renovation work. As random passers by hooted at its workers, shouting "Tear it Down!"—yes, that happened—the building was revealing some secrets. The second-floor drop-ceilings came down, revealing long-concealed heart-pine ceilings, and a large clerestory, allowing daylight into the building. Then exterior paint removal elicited more surprises. The front awning was adorned with unusual tinted "opalescent" glass, and the whole facade turned out to be trimmed with bright copper, thousands of dollars worth, inexplicably painted a drab yellow all these years. No one alive remembered it. If the building were demolished, all that copper would have ended up in a landfill.

Today, the Daylight's second floor of efficiency apartments has a long waiting list. Meanwhile, the ground floor houses four thriving retail businesses, including Knoxville's only independent bookstore—during the Christmas season, Union Ave Books is often cheek-to-jowl—and a restaurant that recently made *Southern Living's* 2018 list as one of the 10 best restaurants in the South.

It could easily have been another parking lot. Just a few years ago, there were people who would have liked to see that.

An even more extreme example stands a few blocks away. In 1974, a badly run-down theater was slated for demolition. It was the butt of 100 dirty jokes, because for almost a decade, it had been a porn theater. The fact that it was “historic” wasn’t obvious to many. In 1974, the theater was only 65 years old, today’s equivalent of something built in the 1950s. A few old-timers remembered when it was new, and resented it being called “historic,” a word they’d heard mostly in connection with the Civil War, the Revolutionary War, some other war. Theaters weren’t historic, anyway. Plans were to tear it down for parking.

Hawhawhaw, we said. We laughed and laughed. You really want to save that nasty old joint. The Bijou Theatre historic? Seriously? Whatever.

As many people didn’t know in 1974, it wasn’t just the 1909 Bijou. It was also the 1816 Lamar House. Knoxville’s best-known hotel of the antebellum period formed the lobby and office area of the theater. Presidents had visited the building. A famous novelist had referred to it. A Union general, famous as the namesake of East Tennessee’s biggest fort (and later hospital system), had died there. Those details helped raise some interest in the place. The organization known today as Knox Heritage was formed mainly to save the Bijou. But the theater itself had a unique characteristic even the preservationists didn’t know about.

Today, major entertainers perform to packed houses, several nights every month. Back when we talked about tearing it down, we hadn’t heard about its universally impressive acoustics. Traveling musicians from around the world are awed by the Bijou’s sound, sometimes remarking on it to their audiences. It’s mentioned in positive terms in the national media in nearly every Big Ears Festival, the annual celebration of new music from around the world. In 2009, *New York Times* music critic Ben Ratliff called the Bijou “one of the best-sounding rooms I’ve experienced in this country.” Meaning America.

Travelers rarely use superlatives to describe anything in Knoxville, but today the Bijou—the place we ridiculed and almost tore down—inspires many of them.

### **3. *New Businesses Need Old Buildings.***

In 1961, scholar Jane Jacobs startled the urban-planning community with a book called *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Dispassionately, without recognizable loyalty to anyone else’s dogma, she described the qualities of cities that thrive and the qualities of cities that fail. The book opposed the strong currents of “urban renewal,” with its erase-and-start-over ethic. But she picked up converts, who ultimately began to seem more modern than some of the modernists. She’s credited with saving New York’s Greenwich Village from a major highway project. Jacobs spoke at the University of Tennessee at its first Earth Day commemoration in 1970. By the end of the century, her book was being credited with inspiring a movement that would be known as “new urbanism.”

Chapter 10, titled “The Need for Aged Buildings,” was especially startling. “Cities need old buildings so badly,” Jacobs wrote, “it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them.”



It was a right peculiar thing to say in 1961, the New Frontier, the year of Seattle's Space Needle, and the year Knoxville was tearing down much of its city center. Having just demolished our unusual Victorian Market House, the city was razing dozens of blocks wholesale, especially on downtown's east side. Demolishing the old and building anew seemed the answer to reviving downtown. With radical facelifts, downtown looked fresh and clean and suburban, at first. Ancient Market Square became a "mall" and Gay Street's "Promenade" promised to compete with the automobile-accessible stores of the mod suburbs.

A few months of excitement and fame were followed by a few decades of stagnation and decline. Much of the new stuff came apart. When downtown began to turn around, with bold new life, it happened mostly in old buildings.

What is it about random old buildings that makes them so vital?

Jacobs observed that new buildings make sense for major chain stores and restaurants that know exactly what they want and can afford to build it. But many other sorts of businesses, especially small start-ups, thrive best in old buildings. Jacobs mentions that old buildings work better for a variety of specific business purposes: bookstores, ethnic restaurants, antique stores, neighborhood pubs—but also some other things. Old buildings are more forgiving of business plans that are yet to be proven.

"As for really new ideas of any kind—no matter how ultimately profitable or otherwise successful some of them might prove to be—there is no leeway for such chancy trial, error, and experimentation in the high-overhead economy of new construction," she wrote. Then she added a kicker. "Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings."

That sounds counter-intuitive, if not crazy. But the paradox finds new illustrations daily, some of them in ventures Jacobs could hardly have imagined, even here in Knoxville. One of our most technologically daring businesses of the last 30 years was a state-of-the-art computer-game creator called Cyberflix. The company reached its peak of international success with a million-seller called *Titanic* while headquartered in a century-old grocery wholesaler's building on Market Square. In 1990, a talented immigrant with little financial backing opened an unusually provocative new restaurant in a cheap old Victorian hat store on the same square—with no dedicated parking, at that. The Tomato Head became Knoxville's most written-about restaurant, and proprietor-chef Mahasti Vafaie affirms that she couldn't have started it if not for the availability of inexpensive, run-down old buildings downtown.

Maybe it's not ironic that Market Square, which dates back to 1854 and is by far Knoxville's oldest commercial space, became our first wi-fi neighborhood. It's still where Knoxville comes to see what's new.

The city's boldest new-music venue of the 21st century, with live shows almost nightly, is the Pilot Light, located in a plain prewar un-renovated commercial building in the Old City. In fact, most of Knoxville's cutting-edge retailers of recent years have found success in century-old buildings: the city's first espresso-era coffee shop, first gastropub, first hookah lounge, first no-smoking restaurant, first wine bar, first sushi restaurant, first brewpub, first creperie, first gelato shop—all of

these popped up in decades-old buildings built for other purposes. Considering how few of Knoxville's commercial buildings are that old, it's an astonishing ratio.

One surprising growth industry in the 21st century is the local-beer and local-whiskey business. As of 2018, almost all local brewers, close to a dozen of them in total, are located in re-purposed older commercial and industrial buildings, most of them over 50 years old. The same is true for distilleries. Knoxville's newest whiskey manufacturer, Postmodern Spirits, is not in a postmodern building. It produces and dispenses its product in one of the Old City's oldest buildings, the 130-year-old railroad freight depot.

So many new businesses favoring very old buildings is not a matter of sentimentality or just a crazy coincidence. More than a half-century after Jacobs' insights, real-estate economist Donovan Rypkema cites new studies suggesting that the nation's fastest-growing businesses in the 21st century have fewer than 20 employees. Modern developers, for the most part, aren't building anything of an appropriate size to suit them. To offer a return to investors, new construction emphasizes size. The average size of a historic commercial building is about 2500 square feet, an ideal size, Rypkema says, for small-business incubation.

Size is part of it the secret of old buildings and new businesses. But many new businesses just like old buildings. The founders of Draft Agency, a youthful high-tech video producer, chose to settle in the quirky old Commerce Building on Gay Street. Their workspace has an old-fashioned mezzanine and 130-year-old weathered brick walls and a wooden-plank bridge to the sidewalk. They say they're here partly because they like downtown, and partly because they believe they couldn't do their jobs in a typical corporate setting. Their old building, they say, is individualistic, unique, interesting, inspiring, as they are. And, for them, it's the perfect size.

#### ***4. Old Buildings Are More Versatile than New Buildings***

Some downtown buildings offer extreme examples of diversity. The three-story brick Kern Building on Market Square, for example, built in 1876, has housed a large bakery, an ice-cream saloon, a soda fountain, an Odd Fellows hall, a performance space, an oil-painting studio, a chain drugstore, a speakeasy, a ballroom-dancing studio, and multiple restaurants from a French bistro to a soup kitchen. Recently it's been Knoxville's highest-end boutique hotel, with a couple more popular restaurants.

The JFG building on Jackson Avenue began life as a hat factory. Then it was, for almost 70 years, a coffee-roasting plant. For more than a decade, it's been a popular apartment building.

Knoxville is also home to one extraordinary case study, that of the 1982 World's Fair. Dozens of modern new buildings were built for the six-month extravaganza. When it was over, most of them were torn down, including some that were intended to be permanent, like the large concrete and steel U.S. Pavilion and the adjacent IMAX Theatre. We couldn't find a post-fair use for them.

Most of the buildings that remain, 36 years after the fair, are the historic buildings that were on the site decades before the fair. The 1917 Candy Factory, during the fair a noisy emporium with restaurants, took a turn as an art gallery and performance-space venue for several years before it

was converted into residences. It's now fully occupied by people who live there. The old 1905 L&N train station was restaurants and offices during the fair, and was a magnet for interesting restaurants for some years afterward. Now the whole building is thriving as an unusual public high school, a STEM academy that seems to fit the old building perfectly.

The World's Fair site offers another surprising new example of versatility. Some styles of old houses have a reputation as energy wasters, like the "drafty old house" that bedeviled Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Knox Heritage's "Green House," one of the city's first to be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified, is an 1888 Victorian off 11th Street, almost demolished a few years ago because it was deemed too far gone to save. After KH's work, which included a heat-pump system, it's one of the most energy-efficient houses in town. Its first residents were the Episcopal bishop and his wife, who moved to town looking for a historic house. The house's utility bills are reportedly less than \$50 a month.

It may be an unusual case. But a 2011 National Trust study concludes that for overall energy efficiency and environmental impact, "reusing an existing building and upgrading it to be as efficient as possible is almost always the best choice regardless of building type and climate." Often that modern upgrade is as simple as storm windows and insulation.

### **5. *Old Buildings Attract. Maybe Not You, but Many Others.***

Of course, Jacobs' premise that old buildings are less expensive than new ones is true mainly for renters of unrenovated old buildings. After a thorough renovation, a historic building is rarely cheap. Renovations sometimes do cost more than new construction would—and that points out another strength of old buildings, though it may be the hardest to analyze.

Those who can afford to are often willing to pay extra to live or work in an historic building. Demand determines price. Many of the most expensive condominiums in the whole city of Knoxville are in adapted historic buildings downtown. Currently thousands of affluent residents choose to live in downtown buildings built before 1940, and they patronize downtown restaurants and shops. What's the most popular residential block in metropolitan Knoxville, in terms of residents per linear foot? It's the 100 block of Gay Street, where the very newest building dates to 1925, and most are decades older than that. These residents spend money here, and make it possible to keep the tax rates down for the whole city and county. That's another practical reason to save old buildings.

Preservationist developers say it's easier to sell condos in older buildings, especially those with the coveted claim of "prewar"—that is, pre-1940. Manhattanites' prewar apartment craving has been lampooned in *New Yorker* cartoons, but it's a factor that urban real-estate agents have learned to respect.

Several businesses prefer old buildings, too—even exclusively, as in the case of Mast General Store. The small North Carolina-based chain opens stores only in historic downtown buildings. It's part of their business plan. Travelers from other states drive into town off the highway just to shop at



Knoxville's Mast store on Gay Street. Their building, not outwardly impressive before renovation, had been vacant for two decades. (For many years, we called it "the White Store Building," for the chain grocery that once occupied the ground floor, and closed in the 1980s—but long before that, it was Newcomer's Department Store, a major emporium of the Edwardian era. If it had been torn down, we might not have a Mast General Store in town. That renovation project also resulted in three floors of new residential space upstairs.

As a municipal amenity, prewar condos and apartments help with attracting new talent to Knoxville. About 30 years ago, I worked for Whittle Communications, a magazine company that recruited nationally. Some of the prospective editors I interviewed turned down our job offer precisely due to what was then a striking lack of apartment spaces downtown and functional historic neighborhoods nearby. It was what they were used to in New York or San Francisco, and what they hoped to find here.

I wonder if any of them have been back since then. It's different now. Today, a couple thousand people, many of whom could afford to live anywhere, choose to live in apartments in old buildings downtown. Thousands more professionals live in the reviving neighborhoods of Old North, Fourth & Gill, and Parkridge.

Diversity of living options is a major municipal asset, and one always served by preservation—especially in a city like Knoxville, where our supply of historic buildings is limited.

Is it the warmth of the materials, the heart pine, marble, or old brick—or the resonance of other people, other uses? To some, older buildings are more appealing just because they're more interesting. The different levels, the vestiges of other purposes, the awkward corners, the mixtures of styles, they're at least something to talk about when greeting a newcomer in the lobby.

Maybe you could still build a building as distinctive as, say, the Emporium or the S&W. But no one ever does.

Maybe what people like is the stories associated with the buildings. Some architects, developers, and retail businesses today treasure their building's history, and use it in their decor. Some restaurants even tell their building's stories in their menus, as does Sapphire, whose building was a jewelry store for generations after its construction in the wake of the city's catastrophic 1897 fire.

America's downtown revivals suggest that people like old buildings, for whatever reason. Often you can't walk to lunch downtown without blundering into someone's photograph of the Burwell or the Farragut or the Kern building. Madison Avenue's been aware of that fascination for years. Watch some TV commercials, for almost anything. When an advertiser wants to show an appealing picture of "America," in a commercial for mood-elevating drugs or investment strategies or luxury cars, they show old streets with old buildings. Whether the intention is patriotic, homey, flirty, warm, reassuring, pre-1940 architecture flatters us. It's still the ideal. Regardless of how they actually spend their lives, Americans prefer to picture themselves living around old buildings.

Even modern developers respect that yearning. Many 21st-century strip malls, like on Kingston Pike in Bearden, mimic Victorian streetscapes. Sometimes new developers build new buildings to look like old factories. Near Knoxville Center is a Don Pablo's, built to look just like a ca. 1920 brick factory building reconditioned as a restaurant. Lacking a real historic building, they want to give their customers the illusion they're in one. In a more subtle way, University Center, which houses the first Walmart and Publix in the central part of the city, also bears some resemblance to a century-old factory. In shape, it's not unlike the old Fulton factory, there for almost a century, but torn down a few years before the University Center's developers arrived.

The appeal of old buildings is a subjective thing, of course. I've met some people who don't get it. If you're one of those, it might profit you to know there are many people who do feel it.

If a prospective resident, or investor, or proprietor, needs an old building—say, a prewar building—there's a finite and comparatively small supply of them. Every time one is torn down, the supply is even smaller. Knoxville becomes, in that respect, less appealing, less interesting, less marketable.

### ***6. Old Buildings Are Reminders of a City's Substance and Complexity.***

Without historic buildings, whether they're related to something famous or not, newcomers and even longtime residents can get a weirdly skewed idea of the character of a place. Without the depth of its tangible history, a city can seem less substantial, less integral, maybe less reliable.

Anybody who's been to Memphis can get an idea of the importance of context. Part of legendary Beale Street is preserved, and it's a good thing that it is. Several interesting old buildings there represent a lot of musical history. But almost nothing around this one short historic section of Beale Street was saved. It's like a little theme park popped up in the middle of a big bleak suburban strip, with acres of surface parking all around. The many buildings torn down in its vicinity may not have been as "historic" as some of these remaining ones, but they once gave Beale Street context, and made it seem like a real place.

A similar phenomenon afflicts Knoxville, on a different scale. Gay Street's there, but most of State Street, most of South Central, most of Vine, almost all of Commerce are gone. All of East Cumberland Avenue, East Clinch, Kennedy Street, etc., are utterly gone. Based on what's left, it's easy to believe, as many do, that Knoxville's urban development just never had the oomph to extend in those directions—that Knoxville has always been a "small town."

The most common demolition-related mis-perception is that Knoxville is a "college town," existing for its university, and historically dependent on it. Downtown's tiny, perhaps the size of a typical college town's downtown. UT's campus, which is almost adjacent, is much bigger. That's a typical pattern for college towns.

In fact, Knoxville developed mainly as an industrial and wholesaling center, and during the city's period of greatest growth, a century ago, UT's entire student population accounted for hardly 2 percent of Knoxville's population. UT was never more than 5 percent of Knoxville's population

until after World War II. But development patterns, and especially demolition in the campus area, can give a tail-wagging-the-dog impression.

People also jump to conclusions about how flexible the city is. More than one observer, looking around town, has assumed that apartment living, for example, is new and unfamiliar to Knoxville. It's an easy conclusion to make. Almost all obvious apartment buildings are relatively modern, mid-20th century or later. Downtown's remaining old buildings are mostly stores, warehouses, and office buildings, suggestive of an old-fashioned version of a modern business park to which people commuted from suburban homes. Still, a century ago, several thousand Knoxvilleians did live in downtown apartment buildings and townhouses. Some of them were gorgeous. Henley Street and State Street were mostly residential, with multiple apartment buildings. Walnut Street was especially impressive in that regard. They're not obvious anymore because we tore almost all of them down. Urban living isn't new to us. It's just been a while.

Just as banks like to build stately, old-fashioned facades, even when they're in strip malls, a city needs its old buildings to give itself—perhaps more authentically than suburban banks—a sense of permanency, versatility, and independence.

### *7. You Can't Trust Developers*

Knoxville is gullible. Maybe most cities are. But it's instructive to look at the track record of major demolitions in the last 60 or 70 years. If you do, you'll find that when a developer proposes tearing down a historic building, there's a very good chance that they won't replace it with anything akin to what they presented in their newspaper-ready architectural renderings. A review of examples over the last 75 years suggests that fewer than 50 percent of developers who demolished a historic building don't follow through with the promised new construction.

In 1956, developers tore down a once-famous building, Knoxville's 1872 opera house. Sarah Bernhardt and Lily Langtry and Will Rogers had performed in the big auditorium. Frederick Douglass had addressed a mixed-race audience there. Developers tore it down to build a wonderful new department store, one so modern it was going to change the way Knoxville shopped. But soon after the demolition, developers changed their minds. The new store was never built. The site became a surface parking lot, and for 20 years it was nothing else.

The years since have presented us with a dozen more stories just like that, even into the 21st century. Developers always seem to find the finances to complete the demolition, but then, somehow plead that they don't have the finances to complete the construction of the building they proudly advertised.

In fact dozens of downtown's most remarkable historic buildings were torn down for exciting projects that never got built. It can seem almost as if it was a deliberate bait-and-switch, as if the demolition was the main thing, and in some cases took place only to prove who was the top dog.

Developers' promises can make a cynic of Pollyanna. With no mechanism to hold developers to their promises, the city can only smile sweetly and hum a merry tune.

We always forgive and forget. We're pushovers for pretty pictures.

### **8. *We Can Never Know What Will Be Valued in the Future.***

“Historic” is subjective. There was a time, not too long ago, when slave cabins were never considered historic, even if the master’s house was. They were discreetly removed before the tourists arrived.

Americans were late to start talking about their own history. As de Toqueville and others observed in the early 19th century, America was a country that lacked a past and didn’t especially wish for one. But by the late 19th century, Knoxvilleians began speaking with some regret about the loss of the city’s tangible past, first noticing that the log cabins of the original 1790s settlement were rapidly vanishing, later wishing for some way to save the big Civil War fort on the west side of town.

Only in the 20th century did Knoxvilleians start admiring “antebellum” houses, those built before the Civil War, as something special that America’s many newer cities lacked.

It was mainly just talk, of course. Of the 4,000 antebellum houses standing in Knoxville in 1865, only a few dozen remain today, many of them altered beyond recognition.

Only decades after the early blooming of interest in antebellum houses did people start talking about Victorian houses and buildings as historic, and worth saving. Knoxville was home to a nationally notable architect of the Queen Anne style, whose work is cherished across the nation, from coast to coast. George Barber died in 1915, but is much better known today than he was 50 years ago, when we were content to let much of his work rot away. Dozens of Barber homes were lost to highway projects alone. Now we treasure them, and they’re the subject of national television shows.

Of course, every generation redefines what it considers historic, in terms of what it deems valuable from the past.

The National Park Service opens historic consideration for any building that’s at least 50 years old. Maybe that blanket definition made more obvious sense before 1990, when any building old enough to be considered historic was prewar, notably distinctive in architecture, often with hand craftsmanship and higher-quality materials than most modern builders can afford.

But time moved on. Several years ago, local modernist architect Bruce McCarty experienced an honor known to very few architects—he lived to see one of his own creations, an innovative 1955 modernist home in West Hills, declared a Historic Place.

Today, a 50-year-old building can be a cheap concrete-slab rancher built in 1968. Personally, I’m going to have a harder time thinking of buildings built in the 1970s or ’80s as historic. But knowing how people my age have reacted to saving old buildings, I know that I may not be the best one to make that call. People younger than me, who have more of a stake in the future than I do, should be the ones who decide that.

It's often the youngest citizens who are most interested in saving old things. I thought about that a few years ago, when someone called me, unhappy about changes contemplated for her apartment building, inquiring whether there was any chance her building could be considered "historic."

Her question startled me. The building she was asking about was a building I remembered being built. Moreover, even as a kid, I didn't like the looks of it. Was it "historic"? I didn't like to think so. Partly because I didn't like to think of a building that seems unattractive to me to be worthy of protection. And partly because I don't like feeling "historic," myself.

That creepy feeling, familiar to each generation's crop of grumpy old men, may be behind thousands of demolitions over the last century or more. But a creepy feeling about one's own personal mortality isn't a good reason to tear down a building.

### **9. *Regrets Go Only One Way.***

A few years ago, in my newspaper column I offered the community a challenge. Name a building torn down in the last 75 years that was replaced by something better. We often need some context to realize what we've lost and what we've gained. The question aroused some conversation, but I got very few answers. Only one, really, from someone who liked the modernist Lawson McGhee Library better than the Presbyterian church that was there previously. But he admitted his preference was partly informed by his antipathy for organized religion.

Over the years, I've heard begrudging regrets, from developers and businessmen, about tearing a building down. "We just didn't know," they claim, that a neighborhood was on the cusp of revival, that an old building might have profitable new uses—or that what resulted, whether it was a new building or a parking lot, turned out to be much less valuable than what was lost.

Do people ever say, "Damn, we should have torn that building down when we had the chance?" I don't know. I've never heard it.

#### **EDITOR**

*Jack Neely is executive director of the Knoxville History Project. He has become one of Knoxville's most popular writers and its unofficial historian. Jack is well known for his thoughtful, well-researched, and provocative pieces of long-form journalism, not to mention his books, speeches, and other public appearances...*