

# A practical use for The Aud

The old Worcester County Courthouse has been sold for 1.2 million dollars and will be redeveloped into a modern complex of apartments, retail space and offices.

Across the way, the old Boys' Club building is being scrutinized by Winn Development for renovation into office space. The city has just extended the agreement that gives Winn the exclusive right to come up with a firm plan.

Winn is seeking a major tenant.

In short, Lincoln Square is at last coming alive. But right in the middle of things looms the old Municipal Auditorium, mostly empty and deteriorating and a constant drain on city budgets. No one has yet come up with a feasible proposal for its future.

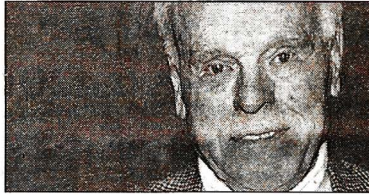
I think I have one: convert the Aud into a parking garage.

Now, before you set up the firing squads, think of this: imagine what it would mean to Lincoln Square to have a 500-car parking garage right there. It would be a shot of adrenalin, both for Winn and for the developer of the old Courthouse. It would help rejuvenate the whole area. It would go a long way to resolving what is bound to be a nagging problem – parking.

It would provide the city with a revenue stream to replace the current revenue drain.

And it would preserve one of the city's iconic landmarks.

I am no architect or engineer and can't estimate what a redesign would entail. But I am pretty



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sure that it could be done, with little change in the outside look of the building. The majestic front facade, pillars, steps and all, would remain untouched. Entrance would be on the Highland Street side, exit on the Institute Road side. Or perhaps the reverse. The main interior work would be to empty the cavernous hall and revamp it into a garage. The floor would probably need bracing from below to carry the load, but otherwise it doesn't seem that much major construction would be required.

The idea will seem outlandish to many. Some will think it a betrayal of a promise, an abandonment of an historic icon to the greedy needs of modern society. A desecration of sorts. Preservation Worcester and the Worcester Historical Commission might have their doubts. But since my plan would ensure the continuance of the old building, little changed in its outward aspect, it can be seen as a preservation move. The old Auditorium would still be there, looming majestically over Lincoln Square like the Depression-era monument that it is.

On the practical, engineering, construction side, I have

no idea what it would cost. It might be more expensive than a brand new parking garage, but that is irrelevant if preservation is considered important. A parking garage may seem like a comedown for an iconic landmark, but parking is an essential consideration for any urban redevelopment project. Turning the Auditorium into a parking garage may be one way to achieve both goals – parking and preservation.

I am well aware of the past – particularly Worcester's past. As a boy, I was there when the Auditorium's cornerstone was laid. I was in the audience when the Lincoln Square monument to the first World War was dedicated. My uncle, Admiral Ralph Earle, president of WPI, was the main speaker.

I remember when the Salisbury Mansion, jacked up on timbers, was hauled away from its ancient location in Lincoln Square to its current site on Highland Street. I remember when the railroad ran right across the square, causing daily traffic jams. Lincoln Square has undergone many changes since the first settlers waded across its swamps and brooks.

Anyway, in regard to the Auditorium, does somebody have a better idea? Or shall we just let the old thing sit there like a Roman ruin, prey to time and decay?

— Albert B. Southwick's column appears regularly in the *Telegram & Gazette*.