

City's iconic buildings face wrecking ball

It was a hard, bleak winter for historic preservationists in Atlanta, a city already infamous for not saving the sign posts of its past.

In December, the McCord Apartments, a three-story building on Seventh Street designed in the 1920s by Atlanta neo-classicist architect Neel Reid was devoured by an excavation machine. A Youtube video shows the wrecker saving the building's ornate doorway for last, just before delivering the coup de grace.

In February, the 1951 Gulf Oil Building, a sleek two-story building on Ponce de Leon Avenue designed by internationally known modernist architect I.M. Pei, disappeared to make way for apartments.

But what most alarmed local preservationists was a move early this year by the city to settle a lawsuit and allow the Georgia Tech Foundation to tear down most of the Crum & Forster building, built in 1926 in the Italian Renaissance Revival style, after a nearly five-year battle to build a technology center.

Preservationists worry the city's decision to allow the foundation to tear down most of a building designated by the city as a landmark sets a precedent that weakens the entire preservation ordinance and allows further destruction of historic structures.

"The Crum & Forster decision was devastating to the preservation community," said Regina Brewer, a historic preservation consultant and former chair of the Atlanta Urban Design Commission. "We lost it despite the fact that every single (city) board upheld the ordinance to keep that building intact. The Crum & Forster decision says you make all the laws you want but if the city doesn't fight for it, then (the ordinance) doesn't mean anything."

The recession, and Atlanta's head-long rush to constantly rebuild itself, allowed preservationists time to take stock in remaining historic structures and reach out to property owners to see if they will work with the groups in preserving or donating their structures to the public for tax breaks. But with the real estate picture improving, the wreckers are back in force.

May is National Preservation Month and local groups are plotting ways to get out their message and slow the pace of destruction.

Impact overstated

Boyd Coons, executive director of the Atlanta Preservation Center, said the Crum & Forster decision was so detrimental that the group is considering putting the entire Atlanta preservation ordinance on the his organization's "most endangered" listing, which is normally reserved for structures facing extinction.

"Crum & Forster was landmarked, which is the highest level of local preservation," said Coons. "This puts into question every building."

Simon Bloom, an attorney who represented Atlanta in the lawsuit filed against the city by the Tech foundation, noted the landmark designation came after the foundation started the process to demolish the building in 2008. In essence, he said, the rules of the game changed against the foundation.

Bloom said preservationists are overstating the effect of the consent decree, which allows the demolition of most of the building. The foundation has said it will retain the facade of the structure that stands at 771 Spring Street.

Asked if the case weakens the law, Bloom said, "Absolutely not. The preservation ordinance is completely intact."

He said the case should spur a rallying cry: "If anything, it should create more of an imperative to move more quickly to designate buildings they want to protect. Don't wait until someone takes action."

Richard Robbins, who represented the foundation, said the consent order "sets a precedent for compromise to preserve historic sites while respecting private property rights."

Neither of the demolished buildings (the ones designed by Pei and Reid) were on the city's landmark list, although preservation groups have listed them previously as "endangered" or lobbied on their behalf. The city, according to its website, has 46 structures listed as "landmark," its top protective status, and eight listed as "historic."

Preservationists say the Crum & Forster decision shows those with clout can do as they please. The Georgia Tech Foundation last year listed assets of \$1.7 billion and has a board filled with civic big-hitters.

"The lesson? Don't oppose the Georgia Tech Foundation or you're going to lose," said Robert Craig, a former Georgia Tech professor who taught the history of architecture and also chaired the city's Urban Design Commission. "The case went through every hoop it could have gone through and (the foundation) kept hearing 'No.' That's why (the outcome) was so frustrating for a lot of people."

He added, "Any creative architect could have designed something that could have been built around it and saved the building."

Attorney Robbins contends, "There's nothing historic about the back two-thirds of that building."

Memorial Drive corridor

Mark McDonald, president of the Georgia Trust, said the recession was a "double-edged sword" for preservation. "We need developers to save old historic buildings but they can also tear down buildings. (Going forward) we don't know if there will be more respect for the past or business as usual."

McDonald, whose group is using Preservation Month to tout the theme "See, Save, Celebrate," said he would "encourage the Atlanta Urban Design Committee to update its list of landmarks to add some of these buildings built in more recent years."

One of those fitting that bill would have been the Gulf Oil Building on Ponce. Built in 1951, the building was reportedly among the first buildings drawn up by the architect who designed the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library in Boston and the pyramid at the Louvre Museum in Paris.

“I’ve seen his work from Boston to Beijing but to hear his work in our backyard is torn down is discouraging,” said Craig.

Kris Fetter is the project manager of 131 Ponce Midtown, where Pei’s building once stood. Fetter, who works for a Charlotte-based firm, said the marble panels on the building were removed before demolition and have been cleaned.

“We really, really respect and admire that design,” he said. He said the developer is building a 280-unit apartment complex on the block and will rebuild a facsimile of the Pei building (with the original marble) to serve as the apartment complex’s leasing office and clubhouse. A pool will be built on the roof.

Coons of the Preservation Center said a reproduction is a far cry from a historic original. One of the next preservation frontiers, he said, will be the Memorial Drive corridor, which has several Modernist structures of the same era as the Pei building. The Atlanta BeltLine construction — a trailway on old railway lines — could connect with Memorial Drive in the next couple years.

Development along already completed sections to the north has brought an explosion of lofts and restaurants and Memorial Drive should see many same opportunities. Coons said his organization is excited about the re-development of several old industrial buildings along Memorial. But he worries some some mid-20th century structures might not be cherished by the public as “historic” and might become casualties to progress.

Down the street from a restaurant in the old Memorial Drive railroad depot is an abandoned dairy that to many might look junky. But to Coons it looks like a perfect example of “Modernism.”

“Look at the curvature,” he said pointing to the edge of the graffiti-covered building. “It evokes an image of streamlining, of speed.”

He looked around and then down the dowdy corridor. “This is a remarkable spot because of the character,” he said, “and the possibilities.”