

“How many communities would deliberately destroy their historic tallest building?” (66)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Martin Tower, Serious Issues May 30, 2019

(66th in a series on Martin Tower)

Though Martin Tower is now an imploded heap of rubble and thus “old news,” Gadfly hastens to archive follower Al Wurth’s perspective so that it will be available to historians of this moment in Bethlehem history.

Wurth’s moving comments at the Nitschmann public meeting (where he was rudely interrupted from the head table) got the most vigorous applause of the night.

AUDIO RECORDINGS UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE

Here’s Wurth’s excellent essay, a version of which appeared as an op-ed just before the demolition.

Al Wurth, “What is the advantage to the community of ‘imploding’ Martin Tower?” Lehighvalleylive, May 17, 2019.

What is the advantage to the community of “imploding” Martin Tower?

In a few days, on Sunday May 19, Bethlehem residents will have a surprise on our way to church. The spectacle is the announced “implosion” of the iconic Martin Tower, the former headquarters of the steel company known round the world by the name of its birthplace — Bethlehem. However, it won’t be terrorists who have carried out the

assault but rather our local officials and people we call “developers” who have led us to do it to ourselves.

The building will fall on itself after being broken apart with explosive charges and will release a cloud of dust that will spread over the city (and Nitschmann school across the road), and travel for miles in an ever-larger pattern to the Southeast, if prevailing winds are in place—aimed initially toward the most densely populated parts of town – the near West Side, downtown, the historic districts and the South Side—and toward South Mountain, which will likely contain even more of the dust in city.

Actually, we did not vote for any plan to destroy the Martin Tower; it was not a decision made by the people. It would never have been supported by a referendum, but we never had a vote. It was instead enabled, ambiguously, in a 6-1 rezoning vote (promoted by Mayor Donchez), by city council in December 2015, that effectively removed protection of Martin Tower as a historic structure. Only three of the members of City Council who approved that rezoning remain on council, Councilors Callahan, Reynolds, and Waldron; the lone dissenter, Kathy Reuscher, and the others, including City Business Manager Eric Evans, are no longer on council.

The insensitivity of the city leaders to the history and the uniqueness of the structure should not be surprising. Abandonment and destruction of old structures in “historic” Bethlehem has lately been common. Indeed, good advice for preserving property would be: Don’t get on the National Register of Historic Places—like the old Broughal School, or even be designated historic, like the 2nd Avenue Armory, because you end up in the cross-hairs of the absentee out-of-town speculators that call themselves developers.

So, three years later, it should be no surprise that the unique and historic structure, the tallest building in the Lehigh Valley, would be scheduled for demolition by “implosion” at the same time that cities around the world are seeing a boom in distinctive tall structures. I recently visited Durham NC, where one was just completed, and condominiums on the upper floors are listed at \$1 million. Rather than take advantage of the unparalleled views (much better than Durham’s) from our own tallest building (that used to be reserved for the steel execs), our leaders’ choice apparently has been to destroy both the uniqueness and the historical character of Martin Tower in favor of suburban-style “generic” developments made up of low-rise structures on acres of parking lots—mirroring the shopping centers across the street.

Bethlehem doesn’t have to settle for this plan, and certainly citizens should not face the risks of the “implosion demolition.” The original rationale for demolition, that the Tower was too plagued by old construction materials like asbestos, no longer applies. Fortunately, the negative characteristics of the old building have been removed by the developer; only the historic significance and the unique character of the building remain. With its costly and dangerous asbestos removed, it is what Bethlehem Steel made it to be—the skyscraper company’s skyscraper—a hometown tribute to the builder of world-class bridges and buildings.

Instead of completing the destruction, why not retrofit the remaining steel structure with new cover skin with solar panels, add state of the art efficiency, insulation, and daylighting, and other modern technologies, and remodel the old monument in a 21st century form? The solar exposure (for PV panels and daylighting) is unmatched as the building is not shaded from any direction—another distinctive characteristic of its monumental status.

The mayor and council and other state and local officials (who have been conspicuously silent) can work together to find a better and much safer plan. Place a moratorium on any demolition to get clear comparisons of cost and risk of the slow but steady (job creating) piece-by-piece demolition alternative, compared to the quick and dirty implosion. These estimates have not been provided to the public. Meanwhile, seek initiatives from other builders who could contract with the current owners for the structure's skeleton and shell to be turned into multi-use and multi-level residential, and commercial area, like so many similar developments in other communities.

The complaints from the absentee owners about how long it will take can hardly be considered serious given the years of inactivity that the location has endured. The owners will still have their special tax breaks from the CRIZ—that they can apply to the project and the surrounding property. Make no mistake, citizens are paying for the destruction of Martin Tower not just in the destructive pollution and loss of our history; our leaders are actually giving special tax breaks to the wreckers.

The old obstacles to reuse have been removed; why destroy the core and its historic and structural integrity—and make citizens hide from the pollution? How many communities would deliberately destroy their historic tallest building? Bethlehem officials, and the developers, can do better.

Op Ed submitted by Prof. Al Wurth, Bethlehem resident and (imperiled) neighbor of Martin.