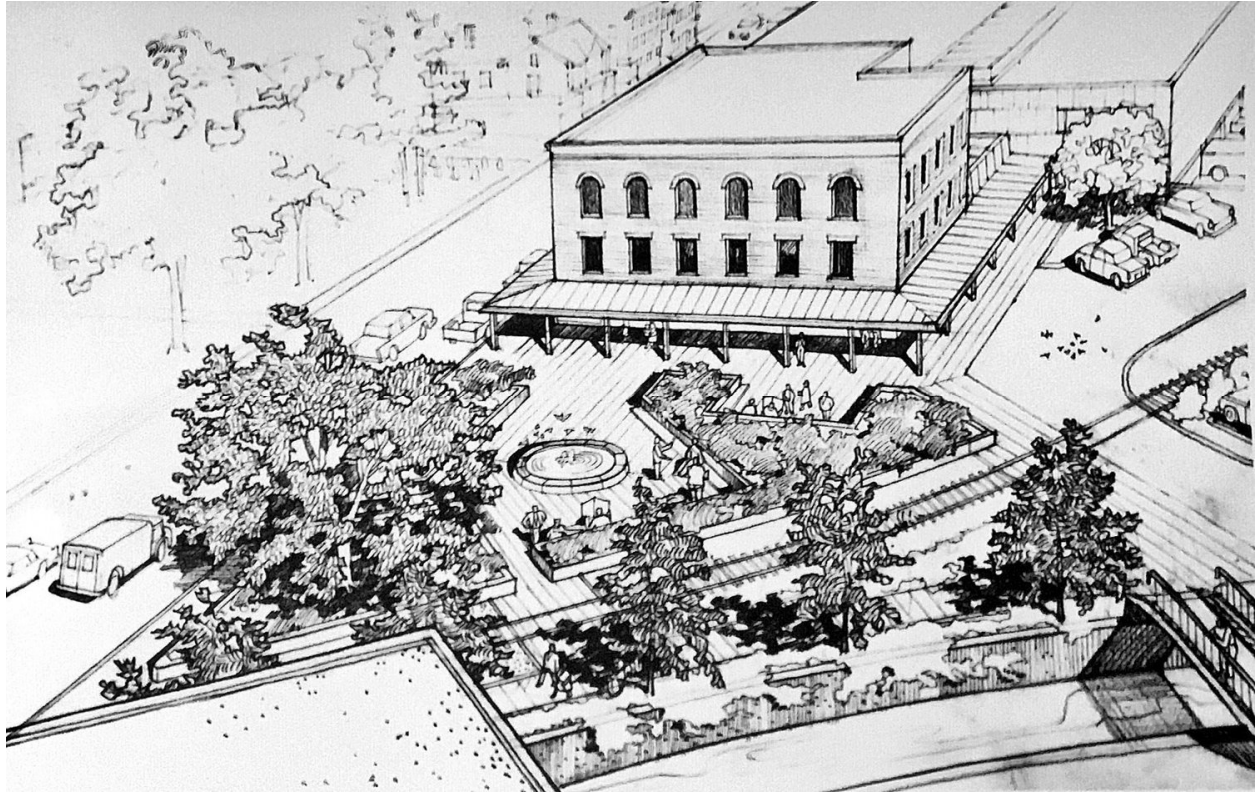


How urban renewal shaped downtown Adams

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By Jennifer Huberdeau, The Berkshire Eagle



Then: "Phase II didn't fail at town meeting," Sommer said. "It passed, but we couldn't get the required two-thirds majority vote to get the bonding."

As urban renewal swept through the Berkshires, beginning in the 1960s and lasting into the early 1970s, municipalities razed entire neighborhoods and business districts in an effort to revitalize substandard, decadent and blighted areas. In some communities, pristine, modern housing and retail buildings rose from the ashes, while other towns were left with undeveloped lots. And, as time has passed, some community members have come to bemoan the loss of architecture and history lost to the wrecking ball.

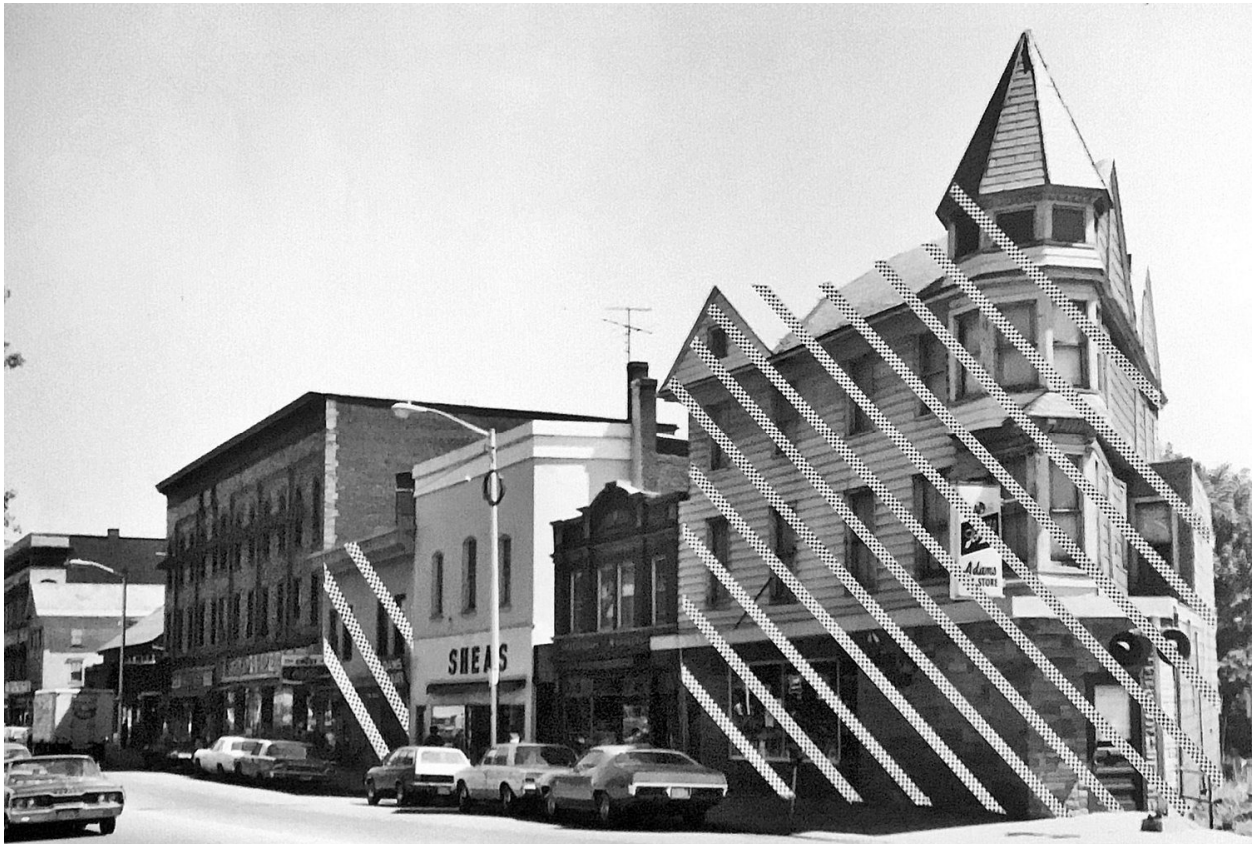
Urban renewal began in Adams with its 1959 Master Plan, which saw its first phase of revitalization efforts, named Project Progress, kick off in 1967. Project Progress, a 10.2 acre mix of residential and commercial properties, razed the Remillard, Weston, Richmond, Collins and Vrabel blocks, as well as the Adams House and Greylock Hotel. In the years to follow, redevelopment in the area would include the Greylock Apartments on Myrtle Street, a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant and an Adams Supermarket on the corner of Myrtle and Center streets.

"We demonstrated that we knew what we were doing with the initial 10.2 acres," Donald Sommer, a former selectman who was head of the Adams Redevelopment Authority. "Nobody challenged the money we gave them for their property. We were a recognized by the state and federal government as a model small town urban renewal authority."

Planning for "Project Pleasant Park," the second phase of urban renewal planning, began in 1967. The plans covered 42.5 acres in the downtown, calling for 68 of 126 buildings in the area to be demolished and requiring the relocation of 95 households, 10 individuals and 50 non-residential establishments. It would have built new fire and police stations; sold off the Town Hall and purchased the American Legion building for the relocation of town offices, and created an enclosed indoor mall on the south end of Park Street. The plan, which failed to pass at a special town meeting in December 1970, was scaled back and presented a second time at a town meeting in June 1971.



Plans for the enclosed mall connected the Jones, Armory and Mausert blocks, as well as three brand new buildings. "It would have been a great thing for the town," Sommer said. "It would have been the first mall in the Berkshires. It may have saved our downtown, just like if Pittsfield had put a mall in their downtown [on North Street]."



Then: Originally, Project Pleasant Park called for the demolition of the four buildings south of the Mausert Block (where F.W. Woolworth Co. was located until it closed in the 1990s). The plan, as presented in June 1971, called for the elimination of only two of those buildings, the building that housed the Sweet Shoppe and the Carlow Building.



Now: "At that time, pretty much the same as now, taxes in town were high," Sommer said. "There was a Tax Payers Association that was against us."



Then: Project Pleasant Park also called for the demolition of all of the buildings north of the Mausert Block, save for the Jones and Armory buildings, up to School Street. Included on that list were the Miss Adams Diner, the old Adams Fire House, the former Atlas Theatre and the Adams News building on the corner of School and Park streets.



Now: Community Development Director Donna Cesan said the town has been actively implementing a Downtown Development plan since 2003. Funds obtained through the federal Community Development Block Grant program have funded facade improvements, ranging from new signs and building facelifts to wheelchair ramps.