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RUBBLE'S BACK IN TOWN

THE RAZING OF A BUILDING ON 17TH STREET WORRIES PRESERVATIONISTS.

Stuart Steers

The destruction of a historic 17th Street hotel to make way for a parking lot has many wondering if Mayor Wellington Webb's vaunted commitment to preserving Denver's heritage is just another blast of hot air. With Denver's downtown real estate market heating up, the demolition of other historic buildings suddenly seems a real possibility. Nearly three dozen such buildings are on the endangered list.

The Kenmark Hotel, built in 1910 at the corner of 17th and Welton streets, hit the dust several weeks ago. The Kenmark's German owners didn't want to pay to maintain the building and weren't interested in renovating it. They decided to clear the site and wait for the right time to sell the property, playing the speculative Denver real estate game.

Unfortunately for those who live and work in Denver, the result is a gaping hole on one of downtown's most vital streets. If the razing of the Kenmark sets a precedent, historic preservationists fear that Denver's financial district could come to resemble an urban wasteland like 15th Street.

"The loss of the Kenmark is a significant event," says Brad Segal, a Denver planning consultant and trustee for Historic Denver Inc., a preservation lobbying group. "I don't think people are tuned into it. It devalues the 17th Street corridor from an urban-design standpoint."

No one viewed the Kenmark as an architectural masterwork, but the five-story brick building was an important part of the cityscape along 17th. The gravel lot that's replaced it would be more at home in a cattle yard than as part of a sophisticated urban center.

The owners of the property insist the building was too unsafe to remain standing.

"It was disintegrating," says Ed Suharski, a Denver real estate investor who represents the property owners. "The wiring was bare and the plumbing broke daily. It hadn't really been maintained for thirty years. It just wasn't viable to renovate it."

Under the well-publicized 1994 rezoning of downtown, property owners lost the right to tear down buildings and turn them into parking lots. But they didn't lose the right to demolish their buildings unless those buildings were designated historic landmarks. City officials say there was little they could do to stop the demolition of the Kenmark, which never received formal historic designation.

"Yes, we've ended up with a dirt lot, but it's not a parking lot," insists Denver planning director Jennifer Moulton.

Moulton says the owners want to turn the property into a parking lot, but they will have to get the city's permission to build one. Denver will probably require them to landscape the property or add public art in return for the okay to do so.

If Denver's residents want better protection for their history, Moulton says, they'd better get out and fight for it.

"We didn't have the community backing to do stronger downtown zoning," says Moulton, a former historic-preservation activist. "Zoning is a very emotional issue. If you change the zoning, property owners think you take something away from them."

Moulton says the real answer may be new zoning that forbids the demolition of existing buildings unless owners have a building permit for a replacement structure. However, she says the Denver City Council would not pass such legislation without an outcry.

But Segal insists the Webb administration has been lackluster in its support of historic preservation, especially compared with former mayor Federico Pena's persistent efforts to create the Lower Downtown Historic District.

"I don't see the same level of commitment from this administration," he says. "Lower Downtown was successful in part because of strong support from the mayor's office. It was a big part of LoDo happening. Pena took some risks, and those risks paid off."

A majority of LoDo property owners opposed the 1988 creation of the Lower Downtown Historic District, seeing the

prohibition on demolition as a violation of property rights. That legislation narrowly passed city council after a bitter fight. Ironically, those same property owners were the first to benefit from the renaissance that followed historic designation.

Historic Denver, which has been fighting the destruction of Denver's historic buildings for more than twenty years, has taken some big hits recently, just as its most successful project--lower downtown--is garnering national attention. While preservationists from around the country come to Denver to see LoDo, Historic Denver has lost battles to save both the I.M. Pei-designed paraboloid on the 16th Street Mall and the Kenmark.

Moulton was president of Historic Denver when she was appointed city planning director by Webb in 1991. That appointment was regarded as evidence of Historic Denver's new influence, but now many preservationists are disenchanted with the mayor's administration. They say the ballyhooed rezoning of downtown, which was supposed to offer new protection for historic structures, has failed.

"The Kenmark [demolition] is pretty disappointing," says Kathleen Brooker, president of Historic Denver. "When we went through the B-5 [downtown] zoning process, they said you can't tear down buildings and put up a parking lot. This is not a great first demonstration of that."

Brooker's group has put together a list of 34 historic buildings in central downtown that are worthy of historic-landmark status. Several of those may be in imminent danger, including the Colorado Building at 16th and California streets, the Vail National Bank Building at 17th Street and Glenarm Place, the Title Building at 17th and Stout streets, and the Women's Bank Building at 17th and Champa streets.

"Downtown won't be a special place if we lose those 34 buildings," Brooker says. "It won't attract visitors. If we want to expand lower downtown's success, we need to take a few lessons."

Real estate speculation has long been the bane of downtown Denver's historic sites. In the early 1980s developers leveled whole blocks, hoping to make a fast buck during Denver's high-rise boom. When the real estate market collapsed, downtown was left with rows of parking lots.

While the city allowed the demolition of the Kenmark, just one block away Denver is poised to spend millions to fill up two vacant blocks along the 16th Street Mall.

The Denver Urban Renewal Authority is offering a \$24 million subsidy for the planned \$90 million Denver Entertainment and Fashion Pavilions project. That development would fill up two parking lots along the mall between Welton Street and Tremont Place. Ironically, those blocks--which once included the legendary Denver Theater--were leveled during the Eighties boom. Downtown boosters have long considered the row of parking lots along the mall to be a major civic embarrassment, and the city has tried to spur development there for much of the past decade.