

Blowing Up Our History

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Years ago, I visited downtown Charleston, SC. Down the main street there are several houses next to each other called "Rainbow Row." They are beautiful historical homes, each of them--as their name suggests--painted a different color of the rainbow. The Rainbow Row houses, in order to preserve their historical import, have strict rules governing them. Owners of these houses are not permitted to paint them different colors. They are not allowed to make additions to the homes, and they must be kept just as they were when purchased. There are even strict rules for repainting them: for example, there is an official "Charleston Green," a color whose composition is some mysterious mixture of green and black. And the flower boxes, which of course have live flowers, must always be full and vibrant and perfectly maintained.

In Dayton, Ohio, it seems, we have a different approach to history: we blow it to smithereens.

It was November, 1999. A cold day, which is common for Dayton, but at least the sun was shining. Several hundred people stood with me to watch the last moments of the Rike's department store building downtown. In the weeks leading up to that day, the Dayton Daily News had been flooded with complaints and outrage and wistfulness and deep childhood and grown up memories of that old, old department store. Many did not want it torn down. Many had worked there for years. Many remembered the front of the store at Christmas time, when they had fantastic displays of mechanical toys, pressing their noses against the windows while thick flakes of Dayton snow swirled outside. Then there were the employee Christmas parties, the shoes, the jewelry, the fine suits and silk dresses. There was old man Rike, who knew everyone who worked there and addressed them by name whenever he stopped to say "hello." To this very day, I was told, the store still smelled like the perfume they once sold there.

There were many who didn't want it to go. But no one listened on the board. They wanted that very street corner to build the Schuster Center, and that corner they would have. Why is it like this in Dayton? Is it because there are so many engineers here, eager to build the future on the razed earth of the past? Is it because of the spirit of innovation here is much stronger than the spirit of preservation? (You may think I am unfairly singling engineers out here, but I disagree. I once went to an AIAA-DCASS meeting where the speaker was talking about the Wright Brothers, and how great their engine building was for that time. One of the engineers in the audience in front of me leaned over to another one and said scornfully, "Who cares? That was a long time ago.") Some were in the crowd to pay their last respects. Others, because they knew the building was going to be blown up by an enormous amount of dynamite...and *could there be anything freaking cooler than that??*

I admit it, I had no memories of the Rike's building myself. My parents had never lived downtown, and if they took me there it was when I was very small. But standing in front of the building that day, after having read everyone's accounts of it, I felt sad for that grand old store. It seemed like it wasn't going to get what it deserved. It was a beautiful building. Someone...several someones...had busted their backs to put in that lovely stonework on the side. Didn't their efforts...didn't the memories people had...didn't any of that matter?

They stopped the demolition clock for a moment...apparently, a homeless guy had been found still living in the building. They got him out in a few minutes, and the demolition clock started again. And then...BOOM! A series of booms...a couple I felt right in my chest, like you can with very large, very close fireworks. No one was allowed to stand less than a block away from the building, and I was about three blocks away, which still didn't seem far away enough. And then came the thick, rolling cloud of grey, billowing dirt. I wasn't prepared for the speed of that cloud...we suddenly realized it was coming to get us. It was overtaking us, even as the building was coming down. We ran a few more blocks away. But I had to look back. It was the most incredible thing: there was a second dust cloud, rising up the height of the building, right over where the building had stood, taller than the building had been. The sunlight glinted off it, rising higher and higher in the sky. Up to the clouds above.

Then, it was all gone. There was nothing but a huge, huge pile of cement and rocks and cable. I had no idea how many truckloads it would take to transform all that rubble into something. Something that looked like an impossible promise. At the moment, it was just an incredible, massive eyesore. Right in the middle of town. I've since been to the Schuster Center. It is fantastic. The sound is great. It is certainly a creature of the 21st century. The first time I sat in my seat for a concert there I thought perhaps the aliens had landed and given us the secrets of this new architecture. And the Schuster planners even tried to replicate the Rike's Christmas displays in the Winter, when there are mechanical toys in every window around the inside, moving sleekly among the artificial snow.

But Rike's is gone. Someday, the people who remember it will be gone, too. Does none of that history matter? Recently in Dayton, despite massive protests, the Joe Desch building, where codes were broken to save our country during the greatest war ever, was also destroyed. "Who cares about that?" I can hear a particular engineer sneering. "That was a very long time ago."

Someday, I suppose, his grave will be covered with moss. Then, it will be broken up by the winter snow. A little robot will come by and pave it over with asphalt. And Rainbow Row will still be there.