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Opinion

Before bringing the wrecking ball

The Cornell building is a standing textbook of early 20th century creativity, and it says something about Westport's agrarian roots

The hamlet of Westport is blessed with two distinctive buildings that greet travelers arriving from the Northway, the rail station that is home to the Depot Theatre and what's generally referred to as the Cornell building at the entrance to the Essex County Fairgrounds.

It is buildings such as these that give historic towns their sense of presence and generate favorable first impressions among newcomers.

Yet the Cornell building is threatened with demolition, as Essex County supervisors move ever closer to replacing it with a modern but painfully nondescript office space that will mirror the regrettable architecture of the health building at the other end of the fairgrounds.

We understand the supervisors' position. For 20 years or more, there have been efforts to refurbish the Cornell building, all of which have come to naught. All this time, the condition of the artful building with its distinctive architecture has gotten worse and

worse, to the point it is more embarrassment than asset.

The supervisors cannot be blamed for wanting to put an end to the foot-dragging. Nor, in a practical sense, are they incorrect about the relative durability and efficiency of new construction. And finally, there appears to be grant money that would pay a significant part of the freight for a new building, which is always a plus.

But before they apply the wrecking ball, we hope they will give the situation further thought.

Most obviously, structures such as the Cornell building do not grow on trees. Its design is beautiful and interesting and comes with an architectural pedigree that makes it worthy of preservation not just in a historic and aesthetic sense, but in an educational and emotional sense as well. The Cornell building is a standing textbook of early 20th-century creativity, and it says something about Westport's agrarian roots, giving the hamlet a unique spot in hearts and

minds of visitors and locals alike.

Advocates of new construction say it is ultimately cheaper than refurbishing an old building, which in reality, is a strong argument for, not against, preservation.

For the last half-century, there has been the notion that the cheapest construction is the best construction, and the result can be seen everywhere in boxy strip mall pharmacies, vinyl-sided branch banks and school buildings with facades as blank as a refrigerator door.

Featureless buildings have led to featureless towns indistinguishable from one another from coast to coast. Many of these cookie-cutter towns would treasure a building as inspiring as the Cornell building since their own architects seem to have studied at the School of the Lowest Bidder.

A historic building speaks to a community's past, but it also speaks to its community present. Do its leaders have the vision, creativity and sense

of place it takes to keep its historical assets in good stead?

No one said historic preservation is easy. But is it worth it? A hundred years from now an agriculture building built to resemble the current health building may still be standing. But the best you can say for it is that no tears will be shed at its demolition.

— The Sun Editorial Board ■