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The Historic Skinner Building: Engaging the Past, Exploring the Future [Report]

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Authors	Krupczynski, Joseph
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The "new" Skinner Coffee House, the former Palatine Hotel, at Main and Hamilton Streets in Holyoke, Massachusetts, c. 1916. Founded in 1902 as a two-room settlement house serving the city's mill workers, the organization moved up the street one block to this spacious location as its programs expanded and the needs of the community grew.



THE LIFE AND DEATH *of the* SKINNER COFFEE HOUSE

BY JUSTIN SHATWELL

More than a building, it was a community's memory. So why couldn't it be saved?

if you drive down Main Street in Holyoke, Massachusetts, you'll see the old block-long storefronts, broken and gapped now as tenement after tenement is condemned and demolished. Sometimes you can still see the rubble strewn around these empty lots, but mostly they've been cleared away, leaving fresh, undisturbed lawns of grass. Preservationists hate grass—each tiny meadow a monument to a battle lost or an opportunity missed. Like the devastation of Alzheimer's, each fallen structure shreds our common history.



The Skinner Coffee House averaged 20–25,000 guests per year throughout its long history. CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Women's Club lunch, 1949; holiday craft bazaar, part of the Coffee House's 80th anniversary celebration, November 1982; girls show off the dresses they made in sewing class, c. 1920; the Women's Club celebrates the Coffee House's 60th anniversary, 1962; cooking class, c. 1930.



It was this legacy of community spirit and social activism that first drew Joseph Krupczynski's attention to the Skinner Coffee House.

In Holyoke, preservationists remember one loss more painfully than the others. At the corner of Main and Hamilton, the Skinner Coffee House once stood. It was a building that could have—by all rights, *should* have—been saved. Not a single person wanted to see it destroyed. But ultimately, not enough people really wanted to see it saved, either. In cases like this, the grass always wins.

ON A COLD NIGHT IN EARLY DECEMBER 2005, a small group of well-dressed academics hurried from their cars up the gray steps of Holyoke's cathedral-like city

hall. Leading the group, and carrying a portable projection screen under his arm, was Joseph Krupczynski, an architect and professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Of Polish and Puerto Rican ancestry, Krupczynski represented the cultural blend that was so much at the heart of this city. His entourage comprised five graduate students who had enrolled in a workshop with him.

Their class had only one assignment: to save the Skinner Coffee House. That evening they were meeting with the mayor of Holyoke, Michael J. Sullivan, for their final exam.

The mayor rose from his seat at a long, stark conference table to greet his guests. He did not intend to be persuaded that evening, and the preservationists knew it. Funds for the building's demolition had been procured, and the first round of bids had come in that very morning. Nothing short of two million dollars would save the Coffee House, and there was nothing in Krupczynski's PowerPoint presentation that suggested he could get it. Still, the building deserved a hearing, and the mayor was willing to listen. The students clicked the slide projector on and made their case.

COURTESY OF WISTARIAHURST MUSEUM (HISTORIC PHOTOS); MATT KALINOWSKI (JOSEPH KRUPCZYNSKI, MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN)



Now in his fifth term, Mayor Michael Sullivan has spent years dealing with his city's problems on a personal level.

HOLYOKE HAS ALWAYS been a scrappy working-class community, with a history of taking in the unwanted. An industrial city built along the wall of the Pioneer Valley, it has been compared to an escalator. As successive waves of immigrants flocked to fill the city's industrial jobs, they began in the poorest neighborhoods along the river, then slowly climbed their way to

the affluent hills. French Canadians, Scots, Poles, Germans, and Irish all eventually reached the summit. But they all started in South Holyoke and the Flats.

The South Holyoke and Flats neighborhoods are on the city's east side, squeezed between the canals and the Connecticut River, separated from downtown by a row of mills and smokestacks. These neighborhoods have always struggled. In 1910 the average residence in the area housed 11.9 people, the third most crowded rate in the country. It was in South Holyoke that the Skinner Coffee House had stood like a beacon for so long, serving both communities.

The Coffee House was a modest four-floor walk-up that had begun as a flophouse for traveling lumber salesmen and prostitutes in the late 19th century. The building received new life in 1916 when it was purchased by Isabella and Katharine Skinner, two members of Holyoke's thin upper crust who were seeking to honor the philanthropic legacy of their late father, a Holyoke textile baron.

Originally intended as just a place where factory girls could get an affordable

meal, the Coffee House quickly ballooned into an engine for social change, a true community center. It served as a base of operations for any project that addressed the area's problems. Volunteers prepared hot meals for seniors, offered English language classes to immigrants, and made rooms available to battered women in need of refuge. They held dances to keep children

off the streets. The building became a second home to many, and it opened its doors to everyone, regardless of class, ethnicity, or color. Residents regularly whiled away days or evenings at the Coffee House attending sewing classes or card games. There was even a smoking lounge in the basement for elderly gentlemen.

Although the Skinners abandoned the building in the 1940s, the city government continued to operate it as a community center into the 1990s. By that time, most of the textile and paper mills had long since ground to a halt, and the immigrants spilling into the area were coming from Puerto Rico instead of Europe. The Skinner Coffee House welcomed them as it had every other wave of newcomers, and Spanish became just the latest in a long line of languages that echoed down its hallways.

In 1994, although the building's mission still drew support and volunteers, the Coffee House was closed. A bad roof and structural insecurities had rendered it unsafe. It was simply used up. It had led a noble life, but unless it received a significant overhaul, its journey was over.

IT WAS THIS LEGACY OF COMMUNITY spirit and social activism that first drew Joseph Krupczynski's attention to the Skinner Coffee House. "Architecturally, it was not an outstanding building," he admits. "There were certainly more beautiful buildings in Holyoke." It was what the building stood for that mattered. The Skinner Coffee House was the Ellis Island of Holyoke. In a community marked by its diversity, it was the one building that could tell everyone's story.

Krupczynski had a history of social work in South Holyoke and the Flats. He was in charge of a federal grant that funded community projects that doubled as real-world classrooms for his students. Mostly he worked on urban renewal. He believed that the area could utilize its historical resources and its Puerto Rican identity to spark a renaissance of cultural tourism that would preserve these neighborhoods' identities and raise the standard of living of their residents. He could cite any number of examples where similar plans had worked. But each building lost took him further away from his goal.

Krupczynski walked into the Coffee House's hearing before the Holyoke Historical Commission in July 2005 without any idea of what he would say or do. He walked out with a temporary reprieve. He had four months to save a building that had stood 120 years. He was hopeful, but not optimistic. "There was a small chance that we could frame this in a certain way," he remembers, "and then some angels could come in and drop us two million dollars." At the beginning of September, Krupczynski found himself in a UMass classroom with five grad students. After a brief round of introductions, they set out to find their miracle.

THE MAYOR LISTENED INTENTLY AS Krupczynski's team retold the story of his city on that December night. They said little that he didn't already know. A hometown boy, he'd lived through much of the history they talked about. To him, each patch of grass in the Flats was a building he could remember, not just an abstract tragedy.



Despite a four-month reprieve and a desperate battle to raise money to renovate the Skinner building, the bulldozers and backhoes ultimately rolled in May 2006.

Sullivan has spent four consecutive terms dealing with Holyoke's problems on a personal level. He keeps up with former high school sports stars and gives them advice when they're going through rough times. He attends community theater, and when he turns to you and says, "That was good enough for Broadway," he does it with an unblinking stare that lets you know he's not just being cute. He believes in the city's kids. He believes in Holyoke. "We're near the top of a lot of bad lists," he concedes, but he contends that it just means they're fighting. Holyoke's "problem," he points out, "is that it has too *much* affordable housing. It's the only place where many working-class families can live in the Pioneer Valley."

Education, public health, and small-business programs abound in the city. Sullivan recognizes that his citizens don't always have much, but he fights to make sure they don't have it taken away. Suffice it to say, he identified with the history of the Skinner Coffee House. In fact, he agreed with most of what the preservationists had to say. But after the final slide had clicked off the screen and all eyes had turned to him, he cleared his voice and explained why he couldn't help.

ULTIMATELY, THE SKINNER COFFEE HOUSE was targeted for demolition because of a plate of half-eaten empanadas. One day early in 2005, Sullivan saw the remains of

someone's meal in the building's recessed doorway. Next to the plate, where conceivably someone's head could have been, was a shattered brick that had recently fallen. The liability was his, so he had to act. He tried and failed to sell the structure. He even offered to give it away, but there were no takers. The city couldn't afford to fix it without cutting some program that serviced the community, so he made the only decision he was left with.

Now Sullivan looked across the conference table and grimaced. "Holyoke is like a huge buffet that has everything you could possibly want on it," he remarked. Then, making a tiny circle with his thumb and forefinger, he added, "But you only have a plate this big. It can't get any bigger, so you have to be careful about what you choose."

Krupczynski's team was disappointed, but not surprised. They contended that demolition was premature, but aside from that they didn't disagree on any specific point. They'd had much the same experience as the mayor. Developers, granting agencies, even a few universities considered their plan, only to pass. For all their efforts, they couldn't generate much grassroots support either. Even then, those who were interested had little to give.

Around that table on that December evening sat a handful of people who loved Holyoke, who believed in what it was and what it could be. They could continue to work late, to skip dinners, to

hold meetings, but ultimately their sacrifice couldn't miraculously produce the two million dollars they needed to keep the building standing.

The Skinner Coffee House had fallen into the impossible situation that so many other cultural treasures have over the past 60 years. As affluent Americans abandoned their cities for suburbia, they left the architectural and historical gems of our urban past to those with the least means to preserve them. Dismissed as slums and ghettos, cities like Holyoke have a hard time attracting the attention of investors and the media. To many, such communities are eyesores to be ignored and forgotten. Unfortunately, in cities suffering from urban blight, when you ignore them, they really do just disappear.

IF YOU DRIVE DOWN MAIN STREET TODAY, you won't find any remnants of the Skinner Coffee House. The dump trucks carted away the last brick more than a year and a half ago. The tiny meadow that sprang up in its wake has been paved over. Now a handsome wrought-iron fence stands along the old foundation, and the parishioners of the Greek Orthodox church next door use it as a parking lot.

Life in South Holyoke and the Flats goes on. Every morning, Sullivan (now in his fifth term) gets dressed, goes over his schedule in his head, and prepares for another day of confronting the challenges of his city. Krupczynski continues to meet with community and business leaders, trying to locate the next opportunity before it's too late. Holyoke's struggle against poverty and neglect continues unabated.

Across New England this fight happens every day. Our mill towns are battling to turn back the tide and improve their present, ensure their future, and preserve their past. But they can't do it alone. So go ahead and take a trip down Main Street someday—before it's just a road through a meadow. Maybe you'll see something worth saving. 🍷

See the Skinner renovation plan at:
YankeeMagazine.com/10Things

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