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Brad M. Ward: Demolition of crane bay means lost opportunities

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BRAD M. WARD
VIEWPOINT

The recent demolition of the historic crane bay at the former **General Motors** stamping plant site on Indianapolis' west side didn't just dismantle a piece of our city's industrial history. It also eliminated an opportunity to build on that history in a way that would perpetually benefit the public and demonstrate how the private and public sectors can collaborate to feed innovation, quality of life and economic activity.

Though the metal structure was not listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it was a landmark in every sense of the word. The last remnant of an industrial complex designed nearly a century ago by Albert Kahn, the 20th century's most

innovative industrial architect, the crane bay enclosed the massive overhead cranes essential to large-scale manufacturing facilities. It served as a tangible memorial to our city's industrial boom and the hard-working factory workers who played such a role in our region's growth.

Initially, everyone seemed to agree that the bay should serve an ongoing role. Following the GM plant's demolition in 2013, the bay anchored plans for the property and was held up as a way to combine architectural history with future-focused development. As recently as last year, plans called for transforming the landmark into an entertainment pavilion as part of an expansion of [i White River State Park](#) that includes a promenade and overlook offering views of downtown and the White River.

[i Indiana Landmarks](#) fully supported that vision, and [i Lilly Endowment](#) generously made a \$30 million grant to White River State Park, most of which was for the crane structure's redevelopment. And people from across the region applauded this investment in a space that would benefit all Hoosiers.

Faith in the vision was built on experience. Across downtown, the Bottleworks District, centered around the historic Coca-Cola Bottling Plant, has boosted commerce and drawn national attention and kudos. A few blocks away, a former Ford Motor Co. assembly plant's rebirth as a mixed-use complex has helped spur ongoing revitalization along the city's East Washington Street corridor.

Similar examples can be found across the state. In Fort Wayne, the Electric Works complex—a nearly \$300 million adaptation of the city's historic General Electric factory—sent revitalization ripples throughout the surrounding community, and in Terre Haute, the former Miller-Parrott Baking Co. factory is now

Miller Parrott Lofts, an affordable housing complex for senior citizens.

Down on the Ohio River, the city of Lawrenceburg's purchase of the largely vacant Liberty Theater and rehabilitation of it as a live music venue and community gathering space have boosted downtown revitalization efforts.

We believe other historic places have similar potential to spark local revitalization, including Gary's shuttered Roosevelt High School and the vacant Mineral Springs Hotel on Paoli's courthouse square.

At its core, the preservation of such places supports strong, sustainable communities. By reusing historic structures, communities seize unique opportunities to create distinctive places to live, work, shop, play and learn and give cities and towns a sense of character. They draw from the past to create the qualities many new communities try to create in order to attract businesses, talent and families.

Certainly, as preservationists, we mourn the demolition of the GM stamping plant crane bay as a loss of historic architecture and an irreplaceable remnant of our city's past. But we also lament the lost opportunities the crane bay project represented—opportunities for creative collaboration, community gatherings, economic benefits and more—and we hope future opportunities aren't similarly dismantled. •

Ward is president and CEO of Indiana Landmarks.

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