

John Dickson: Old Berkshire Athenaeum saved again

By John Dickson

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PITTSFIELD >> Since September 2013, the yard in front of the Superior Court and the old Berkshire Athenaeum on Park Square in Pittsfield had a chain link fence, construction trailers, portable toilets and gravel. Much of that time, a green-curtained scaffold blocked the public view of the majestic stone work and prominent stained glass windows behind it.

And yet, in practically no time at all, the scaffolding and fencing has been taken down, and fresh green sod lies in their place. What we see now seems much the same as it looked before work started. According to the contractor, Mike Mucci from Allegrone Construction, that's as it should be.

"People stop by," he told me, "and look up at the building and ask us, 'What did you do? I don't see any difference.' We take that as a compliment."

In fact, much has changed, and that should also be a compliment. A closer look will reveal the steel braces gone from the front façade, but still in place on the sides and the rear of the building. Some onlookers might detect gray mortar between the stone work on the front, as opposed to the red on the other three sides. Few passers-by would be able to remember the broken stained glass sections or the cracks in the wall.

Only a trained eye with perfect memory from the summer of 2013 would be able to notice the front façade is straight. Gone is a bulge that protruded away from the building as much as five to six inches in places, that had been building for years and created an emergency safety concern for the staff inside the building and the many people coming into the building to go to the courts or the registry of deeds.

Almost five years ago, the state, which operates the courthouses and registry of deeds in the building now, took the first steps of what started as a "small repair," according to architect John Krifka. Because of the conditions of the building, though, what took place behind the green curtain over the last two years has turned into a monumental effort to secure the front façade and preserve a building almost 140 years old.

This Victorian Gothic structure, unique in the downtown core, housed for 100 years one of the busiest libraries in the state. Bearing witness to the rapid economic growth of the city, it still stands, despite the flight of industry, and contributes to the city's plans to attract new business and arts and tourism.

But, it also carries for many residents the fond association of books and knowledge and community, lending a sense of dignity, pride and identity.

The project involved taking down almost every stone on the façade, and re-laying each one, secured to the building to ensure they do not move again. That's relatively easy and straightforward to say. But think about that for just ten seconds, and what that might entail.

Each of the thousands of stones went back in exactly the same place. One could liken it to a giant jigsaw puzzle except that the pieces weighed from 50 pounds to 10 times that weight, they may have been chipped or cracked over the years, and they had to be affixed to a new concrete and steel structure behind that stones, and they needed new mechanical strategies to prevent water from working in behind the stones, and the stained glass windows also needed repair and the entire package needed to maintain the historic integrity and appearance of a building that is listed as a contributing feature to the original Park Square historic district.

And, the building remained open to the public. And the work was completed in two of the harshest winters in recent memory.

An even greater appreciation for this effort emerges upon examining the historical record of the building, plagued as it has been by shifting and bulging for well over 100 years. A letter in 1897 from William Plunkett, the president of the Berkshire Athenaeum Board of Trustees, indicates the need to repair the leaks in the roof, just 20 years after the building opened. "No one can tell," he wrote, when it may give out and cause serious trouble."

Water getting behind the stones, then expanding in the frozen winters and contracting and allowing more water to enter, pushed the stones away from the walls. Steel girders and reinforced foundations were put in place in 1945 to hold up the roof and stabilize the building. Then steel bands were installed around the building to hold the stones in place in the late 1970s when the building was re-purposed for the courthouse and registry of deeds.

Those steel bands are no longer needed. When the stones were re-layed, a new concrete wall, with steel reinforcement, was poured behind the stones each time a layer of 2-3 feet stones was put in place. Repairing stones and reshaping them to fit and align required a slow, precise care more akin to surgery — if the doctors were manipulating 50-300 pound organs or bones.

Finally, flashing at both the roof line and at the base will prevent water from entering behind the stones. Hard to see, but along the base are small round "weeps" that serve as drains for any water that might be able to enter through the mortar during the storms that the northern façade bears the brunt of through the year.

Similar precision and care went into repairing the stained glass windows, the first comprehensive repair since the original construction. All the shifting over 139 years resulted in cracked and broken glass in the 46 panels on the two large windows on the front façade, with only small, colored pieces of plastic mounted as temporary replacements to keep out the weather and maintain a poor facsimile of the graceful windows. New concrete molds (or tracery) were produced to hold the repaired windows in place, and each section of this tracery was fastened securely to the surrounding stone work with metal anchors.

The project's architect, Bill Gillen, said that, despite the new sod and the removal of the scaffolding, the project will continue with small follow-up activities over the course of the year, ending, "with a whimper."

That would be too bad, as those many people who worked on this project over the past two years of active construction have saved a unique treasure for the city, its residents and its many visitors.

The old Athenaeum, renamed the Bowes Building, for the county commissioner who helped to save it after the library moved out, has been saved again. Most of us who will pass by it for years to come, will pay the compliment to those many people involved in this effort: we won't notice any difference. The wall is straight and will remain so.

John Dickson is chair of the Pittsfield Historical Commission. He received a masters' degree in public history last year from UMass., writing a thesis on the Berkshire Athenaeum.