

# Your Turn: An Aud Proposal

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Imagine a renowned author reading from her new novel on Monday, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist delivering a lecture on Tuesday, student leaders meeting on Wednesday to discuss volunteering efforts, a screening of locally produced films on Thursday, a video game competition on Friday and a rave on Saturday night.

That could be the future of the Worcester Memorial Auditorium.

Worcester residents should be ecstatic about the Architectural Heritage Foundation's proposed acquisition of the Aud. The deal between the city and the Boston-based group will result in almost \$100 million in renovations to the 1933-era white elephant that has been vacant since 1999.

Together with the WinnCompanies' expected redevelopment of the Lincoln Square Boys Club and Trinity Financial's conversion of the former Worcester County Courthouse into apartments, the news is more evidence of a city on the rise. The Aud and WPI's Gateway Park would anchor one end of an axis of growth that runs through CitySquare — the redeveloped Galleria Mall site — and the soon-to-be-built stadium for the soon-to-be-renamed Pawtucket Red Sox and the hotels, apartments, retail and restaurants proposed for the nearby vacant Wyman-Gordon property. City officials appear to be hoping these projects will ignite a real estate boomlet as investors buy up and renovate the empty spaces above Main Street's first-floor shops, offices and restaurants.

Some argue that gentrification is going to be a serious problem. Worcester Magazine has written about the concern over the years. To me, however, that's not the debate we should be having. If Worcester grows, it's going to have to add more expensive housing that reflects an increasingly attractive market. That's a good investment climate. Without private investment, there's nothing, even when taxpayers pony up bigtime.

Instead, we should be floating ideas and interrogating future visions for the city assuming it's going to grow. Many of the projects mentioned above are in their incipient stages. Some are still seeking financing. Even the completed projects, like the apartments downtown, have yet to realize their full potential. We don't know how they will affect the city when they all come online. The baseball stadium and other imminent developments are going to massively change the Canal District in some unforeseeable way. Today we might want to consider how

the community will address the problems that inevitably arise from these projects or, better yet, do some thinking on how to avoid problems altogether or proactively improve things.

The Aud is a good case study. The Architectural Heritage Foundation has two years to close on the deal, according to the Telegram & Gazette. The foundation envisions a “innovative digital technology, arts and education center” that might include a restaurant and IMAX theater. All of that sound great. The details have yet to be parsed out, though. In the next two years, city officials, restorationists and the public will have an opportunity to discuss the Aud’s future. That gives everyone a chance to think creatively.

Here’s a leftfield proposal: The Aud should incorporate a Worcester version of a British debating society, the Oxford Union.

Most Americans associate the Oxford Union with snobby young men holding forth on politics. That’s a caricature. It’s true the Union convenes debates, but it also hosts balls, notable speakers, runs a pub and library and offers members snooker rooms and meeting and study space. The American equivalent, the campus center — think cafeteria, bookstore and student-run radio station — is a pale comparison.

To understand why the Union is applicable to Worcester, one has to understand that the University of Oxford is a collection of more than 40 independent units like The Queen’s College, St. Edmund Hall and, coincidentally, Worcester College. The university is only an umbrella organization. A student from Christ Church might have little reason to interact with someone from Green Templeton College. It’s not like they never cross paths. But students dine, study and sleep within their colleges.

The Oxford Union was created as a venue to bring Oxford University students into one place where they might meet friends, exchange ideas, compete against each other in serious debates and silly games, hear speeches from ex-heads of state and other luminaries, enjoy a pint — maybe not so easy given the drinking age in Massachusetts — or attend a black-tie dance. Importantly, while the Union serves University of Oxford students (and faculty), it is independent of the university. It’s a charitable trust run by elected student leaders, so the people running the show know what their like-minded constituents want.

Worcester could benefit enormously from somehow following the model. Nearly 32,000 students attend Worcester-area schools, according to the Higher Education Consortium of Central Massachusetts, or HECCMA. I’ve known many of them over the years. Colleges and universities spend more than \$1 billion

annually in the city. As someone who teaches at two local colleges, I've witnessed and benefited from that largesse.

What's always struck me most, however, about higher education in Worcester is the lack of interaction between students from the different colleges. Worcester college students aren't mingling enough. They meet on athletic fields. They sometimes work together in internships or odd jobs. They might hook up at a party or bar. But, based on random chats with college students over the years, Clark University kids don't appear to hang out with Holy Cross kids who don't appear to hang out with WPI kids who don't know any Clarkies. There are exceptions. They don't change the rule. Worcester has no Beanpot, the hockey tournament that has pitted Boston College, Boston University, Harvard and Northeastern against each other for 67 years. Folks studying at Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College — who represent almost two-thirds of local students — usually also work part or full-time jobs or have family responsibilities. They're busy living their lives.

The HECCMA statistic that highlights the separateness is 1,310, or the total number of cross course registrations in Worcester colleges and universities from 2013 to 2016. In other words, only 4 percent of Worcester-area students in higher ed took courses at schools other than their own in that time period. WPI engineers and Clark geographers are not taking theology courses at Holy Cross, whose students in turn are not enrolling in geography or engineering courses across town. In a video, HECCMA noted that more students availed themselves of this remarkable opportunity to take courses with the best minds from the consortium's 11 institutions when the schools provided transportation.

That observation coincides with increasingly few teens bothering to earn their drivers' licenses in an era when they talk to friends on their smartphones via texting or social media. Students today are already products of a culture that walls them off from each other. A Worcester Union could bring them together from disparate campuses, creating a new community whose synergy would contribute to the city's renaissance.