



## PEMcast 008.1 Historic House Crush

June 28, 2016 | Duration: 14:35  
[Episode notes & images on Connected blog](#)

### Transcript:

[INTRO MUSIC]

**Host, Chip Van Dyke:** The demolition of the original Pennsylvania Station in the mid-1960s was a humiliating defeat for historic landmark preservation. The Beaux-Arts style train station covered nine acres of midtown Manhattan in granite, glass, and steel.

**Host, Dinah Cardin:** Penn station was built to reflect the might of the American railroad industry, specifically the Pennsylvania Railroad. The full story – the how’s and the why’s of Penn Station’s demise – were covered in a recent *99% Invisible* podcast. We’ll leave a link to it in the show notes.

**Chip:** But back to this show. So, it's October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1965. Two years after the start of demolition.

**Dinah:** New York is still dumping the rubble of Penn Station into a landfill in New Jersey.

**Chip:** That same day the New York Times front page, above-the-fold story is about the impending demolition of yet another historic location. This time it wasn't just one building; it was over one hundred buildings, and they were all in the historic American town of Salem, Massachusetts.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

**Chip:** Welcome to the PEMcast, conversations and stories for the culturally curious, from the Peabody Essex Museum in historic Salem, Massachusetts. I'm Chip Van Dyke.

**Dinah:** And I'm Dinah Cardin. For the next few episodes of the show, we're focusing on historic buildings and the stories they tell. Whether it's a palatial estate or ramshackle hut, if it has withstood the test of time, then that building probably has a story.

**Chip:** Here in Salem, we're surrounded by buildings from early in our country's history. In fact, at the museum, we have many historic homes – some of which are open to the public. And the stories they tell reach back centuries. But the story we have for you today really only started about fifty years ago.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

**Elizabeth:** October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1965, The *New York Times* published a story with the headline, *Foes Fear Plans Will Mar Old New England Heritage* – which is probably not a terribly snappy title by today's standards.

**Chip:** That's Elizabeth Padjen.

**Elizabeth:** I'm Elizabeth Padjen. I'm an architect and journalist based in Marblehead, Massachusetts.

**Chip:** Why was Salem on the front page of the New York Times in 1965?

**Elizabeth:** A very powerful person saw a tragedy unfolding, and decided to do something about it.

**Dinah:** That powerful person was Ada Louise Huxtable, an architecture critic for the *Times*.

**Chip:** It was early in her career, but she was quickly becoming one of the most powerful and feared critics in the country.

**Elizabeth:** Ada Louis was smart. She was witty, fun to read. And as her career went on, she was incredibly powerful.

**Dinah:** And luckily for Salem, she had a personal connection to the North Shore of Massachusetts.

**Elizabeth:** She was the consummate New Yorker. She grew up in New York, but she had family in Marblehead, the town right next to Salem.

**Chip:** Describe for us the Salem of 1965, the time that this article was written.

**Elizabeth:** The closest I can imagine is maybe some recent photographs of Detroit, where you see things that are vacant. And—and yet, you have somehow this sense that there, at one time, there was some kind of grandeur there, there was something splendid there once. Where there was a city or community that was vibrant and prosperous.

**Chip:** Her story described a city in economic despair, and the conflicts that arose while trying to solve that problem.

**Elizabeth:** On the one hand, there were the politicians and planners who decide that the solution really was to pretty much wipe out all of the downtown.

**Chip:** Thirty nine acres – over one hundred buildings – were considered for demolition.

**Elizabeth:** On the other hand were the people she called the traditionalists, the people who really saw that something of their heritage, of their character, the irreplaceable assets of the city were about to be destroyed forever.

**Chip:** One building the planners would not be tearing down was Old Town Hall, an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Federal style brick building in Derby Square. If you Google “Federal style,” the first image that comes up is Old Town Hall in Salem.

**Elizabeth:** To their credit, the planners knew enough to not tear down Old Town Hall, but what they did decide to do was to wipe out all the buildings around it that gave it its context and its, its setting, and replace them with parking garages and the equivalents of shopping buildings, retail buildings. So poor little Old Town Hall was sitting there in the midst of these mega blocks.

**Dinah:** Urban renewal plans like the one in Salem were cropping up everywhere around this time.

**Elizabeth:** Baltimore was one. New York. Philadelphia. Boston. Uh, Boston perhaps being best known for what became later seen as the tragedy of the West End, when forty some acres – a neighborhood

actually the size of downtown Salem – was completely wiped out because it was seen as tenement slums. You can't say it was all bad. In Boston, the renewal area around what we know now as Government Center actually was to the benefit of the city, which also was struggling at that time.

**Dinah:** Suburbanization and new shopping malls were enticing people away from the cities.

**Chip:** Salem was hit especially hard in the early sixties. In just five years, they had lost twenty five percent of their tax base.

**Elizabeth:** At some level, you have to sympathize with the proponents of this plan. They were scared. Imagine what they were facing. You have to remember – the post-war culture and the baby boom itself – there was an excitement about the idea of the new. Restoring an historic structure takes some care and ingenuity. Bulldozing is easy, and it gives the immediate message that change is on the way. So there is some impetus to taking that route.

[MUSIC FADE]

**Elizabeth:** There's no question that Ada Louise's influence on Salem was enormous. You can imagine how energizing that story was for the citizens here who were fighting City Hall, and what it meant for them to have her on their side.

[AMBIENT SOUNDS OF FARMER'S MARKET]

*Emily: Those really are big.*

*Woman: Yeah.*

*Emily: Do you guys have different kinds of basil?*

*Man: Uh, yeah we have spicy (indistinguishable)...*

**Emily:** If the urban renewal plan of the 1960s had taken place, it would be really easy to get here. So, when people say, "Oh, Salem, it's so hard to get there," I think, thank Ada Louise Huxtable! *[laughs]* Like, what would – who cares if you can get here easily if it's not, if there's no reason to come?

**Chip:** Emily Udy works for an organization called Historic Salem. It's one of a few organizations in the area advocating for the preservation of historic buildings. I met her at Salem's Farmer's Market in front of Old Town Hall. Yes, that Old Town Hall.

**Emily:** Are you shopping for anything in particular?

**Chip:** Usually, I just come down here and see what strikes me. But what about you?

**Emily:** I'm looking for sugar snap peas and honey sticks.

**Chip:** And honey sticks?

**Chip:** Families were milling about, talking to the vendors and friends they ran into, buying herbs and vegetables. Maitland Mountain Farm spicy pickles – the best, they aren't paying me to say that. Kids running up and down the steps, including two of Emily's own. It's hard to imagine now how any of this could be possible if Old Town Hall had been surrounded by parking garages and box stores. And although Ada Louise Huxtable gets a lot of credit for saving places like this, Emily reminded me that one person can only do so much.

- Emily:** She had a platform at the *New York Times* to, to make a difference. But there was a host of local people working for a decade to turn the whole thing around. There's not one person that could ever save a place or a building, it's, it is a community process.
- Chip:** One of the ways Historic Salem is rallying the community around historic preservation and reuse involves tiny house-shaped plaques. It's one of the first things I noticed when I moved here.
- Dinah:** Emily's organization has placed something like eight hundred plaques on houses all over Salem.
- Emily:** We do house histories around the city, we have about eight hundred plaques showing who built the house, when it was built, and what their occupation was.
- Dinah:** Each plaque tells a quick story about the house. Some are simple.
- Chip:** *Built for William Duncan, merchant and captain, in 1833.*
- Dinah:** Others are more complex.
- Chip:** *Mason-Roberts-Colby-Nichols, built on highway by ye Common, 1768. Moved to Federal Street, 1818, by 60 oxen.*
- Emily:** So, when you read the house history, suddenly just hearing the names, it is a place that you can touch, where the history happened. And not just the big history, but the day-to-day history. It sort of gives the community an appreciation for the preservation and that's going to be the most effective way to advocate for reuse. It's the stories that you tell that are going to convince people. People know they like a place. To understand specifically why they do – and, and it's because of those things – that they've experienced, that they've lived here, they've met people, they've had fun – that they've experienced that, and you can't do that at forty-five miles an hour.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE AND AMBIENT MARKET SOUNDS]

*Emily: Is this your chowder right here?*

*Woman: That's chowder right there, correct. Would you like a taste of chowder?*

*Emily: Yes, I will.*

*Woman: Okay.*

- Chip:** About a week after we met up, I received an e-mail from Emily. She wanted to follow up on a question I had for her, which was something to the effect of "Why should people care about historic preservation?" She included an article all about how families and children benefit from building strong family narratives. Its claim was that children are better at facing challenges when they know a lot about their family history. It went on to say how this applies to many types of organizations, including the military, cities, and even countries. I'll leave you with this, it's the last part of Emily's e-mail. She said, quote, "If our city can tell a strong narrative that defines who we are, and we're willing to defend the importance of that narrative by joining together, we're creating a resilient community." End quote.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

- Chip:** I'm here now in the booth with Caryn Boehm, producer of the show. Caryn, what do you think of the show so far?

**Caryn:** I am just loving this mental image of I have sixty oxen pulling an entire house through downtown Salem.

**Chip:** Yeah, that house is huge, I don't know how much of it they had to pull, but...So, I dragged Caryn in here against her will to talk to you about the Historic House Crush initiative that PEM is doing this summer. Can you tell us about that?

**Caryn:** Yeah. It's a social media campaign we're doing, but more simply, it's a hashtag. We kicked it off last summer with an Instagram meet up – or InstaMeet, if you will – to celebrate the re-opening of PEM's Ropes Mansion.

**Chip:** So, if I get on Instagram right now and I search HistoricHouseCrush, I will come up with something...

**Caryn:** Hashtag HistoricHouseCrush, all one word.

**Chip:** Mhmm.

**Caryn:** Uh, you'll find some really beautiful images of Ropes Mansion, but also hundreds of other posts from around the world. It's been great to see other people using this hashtag – posts from Spain, Serbia, Belgium. One of the reasons I've really come to love Instagram is that it brings together these great communities of people.

**Chip:** I should say too that Caryn also runs the Peabody Essex Museum Instagram feed, and you should totally follow it. So, that's @peabodyessex on Instagram.

**Caryn:** And on Snapchat!

**Chip:** And on Snapchat, yeah. I downloaded Snapchat the other day, I still don't quite understand it.

**Caryn:** We're all still figuring it out, but it's been a fun experiment, so far.

**Chip:** So, you've got this hashtag that you're relaunching, and you mention that it was a social media campaign. Is there anything else that's going on this summer?

**Caryn:** Yeah, we've got a lot of great content planned for it. Blog posts, video content, Snapchat stories, the PEMyoga series outside on the side yard of Rope's mansion. That's another hashtag, by the way, #PEMyoga. And this three-part podcast series, of course.

**Chip:** Of course. So anyway, yes, if you've taken a great photo of a historic place – maybe it's on PEM's campus or somewhere else in the world, it doesn't matter – just be sure to hashtag it with #HistoricHouseCrush on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. That way, our Historic House Crusher community can see it. Thanks.

And thank you, Caryn, for coming in, and congrats on your new job title, by the way.

**Caryn:** Thank you.

**Chip:** What is it, again?

**Caryn:** Creative Engagement Producer.

**Chip:** That's awesome.

**Caryn:** It's very awesome.

**Chip:** So, Dinah's away on assignment in New York for our next episode, do you want to do the end of the show with me?

**Caryn:** Yes, of course.

**Chip:** That's our show, thanks for listening. So, this is part one of a three-part series we're doing on historic houses. Look for part two very soon, and through the magic of editing, I can will a clip from the future, and place it right here. The power of editing.

**CLIP:** *I don't know if you have ever been there in the night time. In the night time is the best time. The night time is the best time. You can feel the vibes, and you can feel—if you really pay close attention – I don't know if you're spiritual or not, but I get it all the time – you can imagine, like, the family, the woman, you know, the work, the laughter, the cries. There were so many things that happened in that place – and it happens now-a- days with immigrants. Come on, we have a cell phone – when I came here, we didn't have no phone. We didn't even have one of those regular phones that you dial. We didn't have anything. It just doesn't represent one group of immigrants, it represents everyone.*

**Caryn:** You can find the show notes to this episode, along with pictures and links, on our blog, [connected.pem.org](http://connected.pem.org). You can find us on [iTunes](#), [Soundcloud](#), and pretty much anywhere you listen to podcasts.

**Chip:** Producers for the show are Dinah Cardin, Caryn Boehm, Whitney Van Dyke, and myself. Corbett Sparks is our audio engineer. Lisa Kosan was our story consultant for this episode. Special thanks to Elizabeth Padjen and Emily Udy for taking the time to talk with us.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

[END]

Music credits for this episode:

[By the Coast \(2004\) by Antony Raijekov CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)  
[People Over the Mountain by Tim Kays CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 US](#)  
[Wounds by Ketsa CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)