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Questioning the Merits of Propping Up City Hall

By STEVEN YACCINO JUNE 30, 2014



An engineer checked on the wooden beams that support the Milwaukee Repertory Theater in May.

Darren Hauck for The New York Times

MILWAUKEE — City Hall, built in the 1890s and still one of the largest of its kind in the country, is slowly sinking.

And like a cherished old home in need of constant upkeep, this historical landmark has become a perpetual money pit.

“It’s a gorgeous building, and one we’re certainly proud of, but it’s costly to maintain,” said [Michael J. Murphy](#), an alderman who noticed an alarming crack in the wall of his office at City Hall several years ago, a symptom of its shifting foundation.

As with other century-old structures in downtown Milwaukee, the threat to this iconic building comes from below. The old wooden pilings that support the base of City Hall, timbers anchored deep into the marshy soil more than a hundred years ago, are decaying. So far, the northeast corner of the aging structure has “settled” 2.16 inches over the past three decades — a small change, but serious enough to raise concerns about the possibility of more structural problems.

Many taxpayers here have mixed feelings about the possibility of repairing the foundation, particularly after spending tens of millions of dollars to restore the building’s exterior — a botched face-lift that led to more corrective work. They cannot imagine Milwaukee without the building’s German Renaissance Revival architecture; its 400-foot clock tower is most fondly remembered for its role in the [opening credits](#) of the sitcom “Laverne & Shirley.” And yet, in the next breath, the same residents recite a list of social services and infrastructure needs they would rather finance.



The Milwaukee City Hall, below, was built more than 100 years ago on a wooden foundation.
Darren Hauck for The New York Times

“What happened to the poor?” asked Michael Thomas, a Milwaukee resident who works downtown. “This building is taking too much money.”

By the time City Hall opened in 1895, having cost fledgling Milwaukee more than \$1 million, it was considered a symbol of city’s status as the capital of German immigration in the United States. It was the third-tallest structure in the country at the time, behind the Philadelphia City Hall and the Washington Monument, according to the building’s successful [2005 National Historic Landmark nomination](#).

From the start, upgrades have been a constant. The clock’s face was replaced after a fire in 1929. During the Great Depression, seven people jumped to their deaths from the top of an interior atrium (someone else died of a stroke after a jumper nearly landed on him), [according to the City of Milwaukee’s website](#), leading to the installation of protective wiring along the center rails that remained in place for half a century. The roof was replaced in the early 1970s; the skylight was restored in 1978 and again in 1997.

Then in 2006, the city embarked on an ambitious restoration of the building’s exterior, costing \$76 million. Today, scaffolding again surrounds the building after a part of a terra cotta urn tumbled to the street in 2011. No one was injured, but the city settled a lawsuit with its

contractor, who is expected to finish correcting the problem this fall.

Now concerns about the building have shifted down to the subbasement, where 41,000 tons of bricks essentially rest on century-old wood.



A rotted beam that was removed from the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's substructure and displayed in the office of its managing director, Chad Bauman.

Darren Hauck for The New York Times

“A lot of cities have made a mistake over the years and they’ve lost a lot of their character and their history,” said Mr. Murphy, the alderman, who examined some of City Hall’s rotted pilings. “We feel very strongly that this building should be around for another 100 years.”

City employees have noticed cracks and shifting doorjams since the 1980s, when officials started monitoring the building’s foundation, which is supported by 2,500 wood pilings. The use of timbers was a common construction practice around the turn of the century, particularly in swampy areas like Milwaukee, but that method was replaced by modern steel and concrete foundations by the mid-1900s. When submerged in groundwater, these logs, some more than a foot thick, are said to have the strength to last centuries. But let them dry, and rotting can accelerate.

Several other old buildings in Milwaukee have encountered similar concerns, believed to be related to possible drops in groundwater levels

and underground irrigation systems that were designed to keep timber pilings submerged in water.

There are competing theories about the lack of liquid in these other locations. One explanation points to historically low water levels in the Great Lakes in recent years. Another, [more contentious](#), theory is that the groundwater is seeping into a deep underground sewage tunnel that runs beneath the city. Old buildings are supposed to have so-called recharge systems to keep the pilings wet, but some owners may have let those systems fall into disuse or disrepair over the years, specialists contend.

Consider the case of the [Milwaukee Repertory Theater](#), across the street from City Hall. Situated in an old power plant from the 1890s, the theater has dealt with slanted floors, cracked walls and doors that would not open as the building's foundation has dropped about an inch a year since 2011.



A beam that is part of original foundation is tagged to monitor the rate of sinking.
Darren Hauck for The New York Times

In the theater's basement, past shelves of props and stage furniture, a gap grows between two crisscrossed metal beams that stretch overhead, supporting the floors above. As the bottom beam sinks with a section of the floor, the building's engineer has started wedging pieces of scrap wood into the space just to maintain adequate support for the ceiling.

“It isn’t going to cause immediate danger in the next year,” said Chad Bauman, the theater’s managing director, who has already raised most of the \$1.75 million needed to stabilize the wood pilings with steel and cement this summer. “But it’s a matter of years, not decades.”

Other structures that have had similar issues include Milwaukee’s downtown Boston Store and the historic Mitchell Building, both also built in the late 19th century.

[Ghassan A. Korbán](#), the public works commissioner for Milwaukee, declined to comment on the extent of City Hall’s problem, or the fix he will recommend, until a full report is presented to elected leaders in the coming weeks. A spokeswoman for the department said the watering system under the building had always functioned properly.

Whatever the final explanation, a solution may not be cheap. As a more thorough investigation of the issue began last year, officials estimated repairs could cost the city \$15 million.

“Buildings like this are salvageable,” said Dennis Barthenheier, a contractor who has used concrete to reinforce the pilings of nearly two dozen sinking structures in downtown Milwaukee. “But it’s not a cheap date.”

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