ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Surviving Downtown 'Progress'

Prime downtown land attracts investment, and investment is concerned with the most foolproof way to make money, not with a city's quality or style. In the past, those who noted the difference felt powerless against "progress," which was given a kind of divine priority in the municipal scheme. But today people are surprisingly aware of the investment abuses in the hearts of their cities; they get out and picket and make feasibility studies and enlist publicity in the most resourceful fashion.

The battles are legion. In two current examples, Seattle has just lost a downtown block to a dubious new project, and San Francisco teeters on the edge of a decision to keep or destroy a fine old building. In each case a public subscribing to an increasingly sophisticated set of urban values is ranged against the so-called power structure, which is heavily and usually personally invested in change and the proposal at hand.

In both Seattle and San Francisco the public judgement of the issues has been right. But in Seattle the opposition was too tentative and lacking in critical clout, and the fight was lost. In San Francisco the protesting public is amazingly strong and well-informed architecturally and urbanistically, and it could still win.

Seattle's battle involved the destruction of a block of old downtown buildings, which had excellent street scale, for a huge new project by Minoru Yamasaki and Associates that is an architectural and urban mistake. It is a dreadful mistake esthetically, with a cornball try for novelty that puts a tower on a curved, tapered base for a Popsicle effect that might gladden the heart of Claes Oldenburg—or then again it might not, since he has an impeccable instinct for putting the right Popsicle in the right place. The right place for this Popsicle might be some corner of a cartoon California—one of the 20th-century limbos where nothing, and no one, relates to anything else.

It is an even worse and less excusable mistake urbanistically because it involves that proven disaster, the podium base, a city-killer that is long overdue for indecent burial. The podium base, which raises and separates the building from the street, is a murderer of all appropriate street scale and relationships. It is part of another cliché: open space around the podium base. Open space, like the Popsicle, is also great in the right place, but used with the podium it is a double destroyer of the tight-knit life processes of the properly functioning city.

Seattle need only look to nearby Portland, for example, which has almost committed a kind of downtown suicide with repeated instances where the hapless pedestrian passes blind podiums (which occasionally disgorge cars from parking garages in their interiors) and disjointed plazas (which sometimes are actually raised on podium bases).

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The building is strictly deadpan dreadful—gimmicks masquerading as graces. It is being put up as an investment, naturally, by the intellectual and educational leaders of the community, or those who should be most informed about such things. The landowner and builder is the University of Washington. While public controversy swirled around the project, it was approved by the university's prestigious Board of Regents, with the single exception of James R. Ellis, who knew exactly what he was talking about and was shamelessly overridden.

The name of this discredited architectural game is scalelessness, discontinuity, inhumanity and crimes against urban nature. Some buildings are built; others, such as this, are perpetrated. Its defenders need not point out that I have not appeared to study the design on the site. This building would be a bad idea even through the wrong end of a telescope.

In San Francisco, it is retailer Stanley Marcus who has the bad idea. He plans to demolish the City of Paris store on downtown Union Square (1896 exterior, 1909 Beaux Arts interior featuring a splendid, glass-topped rotunda) for a new Neiman-Marcus. By now, he must be stunned by the local response. Rather than feeling themselves blessed, San Franciscans are fighting the proposal right down the line.

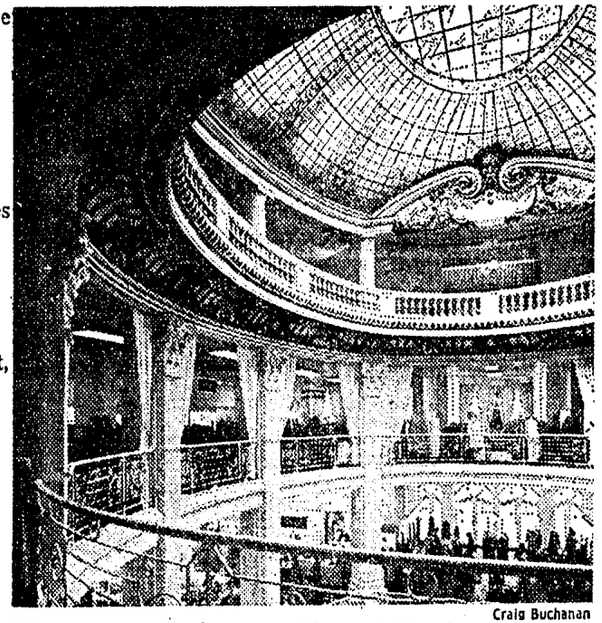
A petition against demolition has easily picked up 55,000 signatures. Twenty civic and environmental organizations have endorsed preservation. What is involved at present is a civic drama in which the building will or will not get landmark status as a deterrent to the bulldozer. (Even landmark status can only delay the wrecking for a year.)

Designation has been recommended by the San Francisco Landmarks Advisory Board. The recommendation was overruled by the City Planning Commission. The case is now before the Board of Supervisors which can, in turn, overrule the Planning Commission.

The argument of the preservationists is that the old store could be beautifully renovated for the new one, without loss of local history or style. However Neiman-Marcus is apparently determined not to let history, art or sentiment interfere with its established merchandising techniques.

Both sides have produced engineering studies to prove that conversion is (*A*) feasible, or (*B*) infeasible. To mollify the critics, Richard Marcus, the family member who appears to be in charge of the project, has proposed incorporating the elaborate glass dome into the new building. But no one appears to be very taken with this kind of tokenism.

Testimony before the Board of Supervisors, which will decide for or against landmark designation this week, has produced some interesting twists. William M. Roth, who turned the old warehouses of Ghirardelli Square into one of the country's most successful merchandising complexes, came on strong for the practicality of conversion. Margo Warnecke, daughter of architect John Carl Warnecke who is to design the new Neiman-Marcus building, spoke up against her father—albeit respectfully—to urge preservation. According to Miss Warnecke, her father made a strong attempt to interest the Marcuses in restoration, without success.



Craig Buchanan

The rotunda in the City of Paris

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What San Francisco will get if the Neiman-Marcus plans go through is totally predictable. One cannot say unequivocally that there are no new stores worthy of being called architecture, but a fairly general statement to that effect can be made with safety. Stanley Marcus has demonstrated pride in the name architects he has commissioned, but he has not delivered much architecture. By and large his architects produce what every modern store designer produces—bland boxes. In the case of the Neiman-Marcus stores, some pointless pretensions have been added. But they are still basically containers for merchandise of a consistent sleek banality. It is hard to believe, given the nature of the design problem, that this store will be any different.

One thing that Union Square does not need is such a box, with or without fancy trim. It needs the historic and esthetic balance of the City of Paris building, and it needs an enlightened merchandiser to take that interior, using it or adding to it, to make one of the most special specialty shops in the country. It's all there, crying for a stylish imagination and a sense of urban and artistic responsibility. San Franciscans are right. Mr. Marcus is wrong. More power to the people.