Garden of EdenUpdated: Architecture
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 24, 1974; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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Architecture

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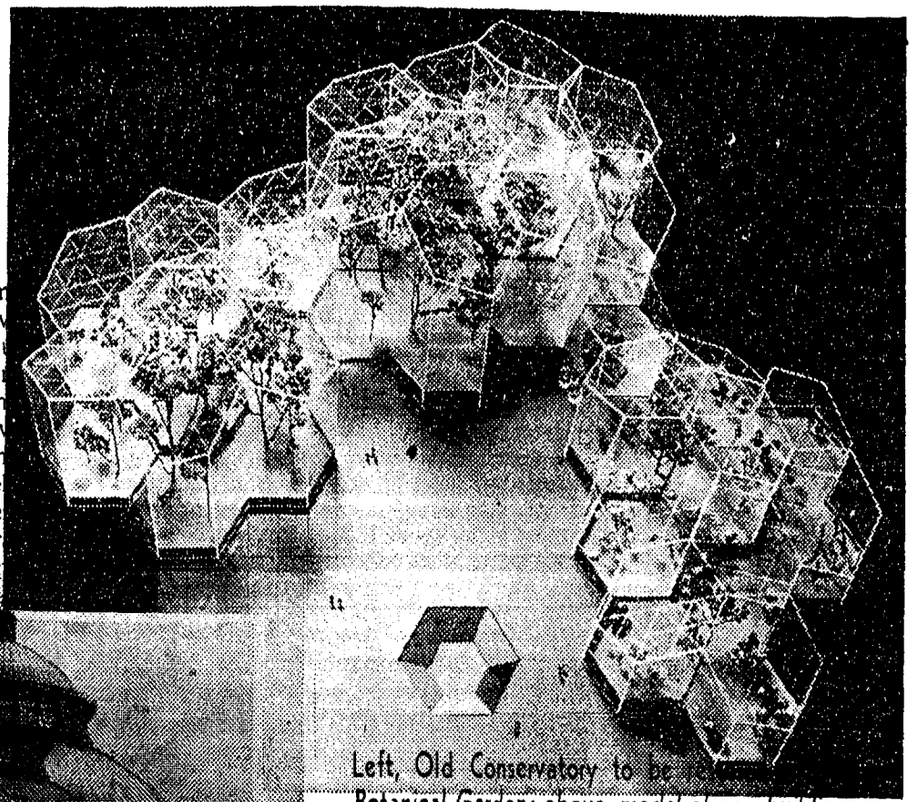

Left, Old Conservatory to be ... Botanical Garden; above, model of new building

"The sheer joy of color and scent"

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN this era of activist reaction and no repose, looking at plants is not something that turns a lot of people on. Not so the Victorians. Their Public Gardens and Botanical Gardens were prime cultural and recreational resources.

The great English conservatories drew crowds, and these giant greenhouses, in turn, were transformed into such epochal edifices as William Paxton's Crystal Palace for London's International Exposition of 1851. The metal frame construction of these buildings and the subsequent mutations led eventually to the technology of the skyscraper. The 20th century owes the 19th century more than it can ever acknowledge. And it is both thoughtless and churlish about repaying the debt.

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It does so mostly by default and abuse. Loss of pleasure and contemplation of nature (one of the original purposes of our parks) is matched only by the loss of landmark structures. Botanical Gardens that were a source of pride to so many cities are suffering neglect and vandalism, one of the chief recreational activities of our time. Conservatories everywhere have been bulldozed or allowed to rot. New York's splendid Botanical Gardens in Brooklyn and the Bronx struggle desperately against increasing economic odds.

It is good news, therefore, that the 1899 Conservatory of the New York Botanical Garden, located on its 240-acre preserve in Bronx Park, is about to be restored rather than demolished, as long planned. The decision is part of a three-stage, 20-year master plan that will improve land use, rebuild the Conservatory, and eventually construct a new facility, a Plants and Man Building. The horticultural consultant is landscape architect Dan Kiley, and the architectural work is being done by the firm of Edward Larrabee Barnes.

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The Conservatory, designated a New York landmark in 1973, was built in two stages, from 1899 to 1902. Over the years it has deteriorated badly; in the Botanical Garden's words, "time and lack of funds have taken their toll." Innumerable panes of glass are gone due to weakened frames, structural metals have corroded, the ventilation and heating systems are inoperative, and the inaccessibility of the high central dome and upper parts of the structure. It isn't easy to keep 17,000 panes of glass in repair.

It is nice to report that of the numerous architects interviewed for the job, the best were reluctant to tear the old building down. Mr. Barnes and his associate project architect, Alistair Bevington, are doing both the rebuilding of the Conservatory and the design of the new facility. They plan to restore those north and south rotunda entrances, return the cupola to its original glory, and replace ornament and arched windows and details wherever possible. Broken glass and defective mullions will require extensive repairs, and a new steam plant is being connected to a new heating system.

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The scale of reconstruction is mind-boggling, and complete, accurate detail seems remote. But the spirit and substance of the restoration will be faithful. Work will proceed over a five-year period, and the estimated cost of $2.5-million will be met with help from Federal grants and city funds.

The interiors, originally in formal arrangement of potted trees and plants, will become a series of garden glass galleries where people can sit, wander, and indulge in the unaccustomed experience of "the sheer joy of color and scent." A little sheer joy can't hurt in today's grim world.

The rebuilt Conservatory is to be oriented to traditional horticulture, or the immediate beauty and pleasure to be derived from plants. The projected new Plants and Man Building is much more ambitious: it will be directed to botany and ecology, with scientific education as its goal. This building, which will require $7.5-million in private funding, is the final part of the master plan, and it may be quite a while before it becomes reality.

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What is unfortunate, because it is without doubt a proposal of singular structural and esthetic drama. The building promises an enchanting and exciting experience as well as a thoughtful lesson in the relationships between man and growing things. The Botanical Garden's thesis is that this relationship has been misunderstood and abused to the point of environmental catastrophe. But quite aside from its noble polemical aim, the new building is such a remarkable synthesis of art, technology and nature that one would wish to see it quickly built.

In essence, it would be a crystalline structure of informally clustered glass hexagons. Each hexagon would contain a biome, or specific climate zone, such as tropical rain forest, desert, or tundra. The hexagons are designed as 45-foot modules that can be grouped according to the dictates of program, expansion, or even to spare the oak and gum trees of the site.

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The modules are to be supported by slender pipe columns, tubular beams and diagonal tension rods, completely sheathed in glass. Because of the flexibility of the system, walls can rise to any height, and even "grow" later. The rain forest, for example, would be housed in a chamber of seven modules rising to a height of 90 feet.

The concept of the hexagonal megastructure came from an architecture student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Marsha Previti. Miss Previti brought it to the Botanical Garden people, who called in Mr. Barnes, to everyone's mutual delight. As it has been developed, the building is also intended to be a model of pollution control and energy conservation.

For the president and vice president of the Botanical Garden, Howard S. Irwin and Carlton Lees, the Plants and Man Building will be the realization of a dream. For the visitor, it will be an incomparable learning and sensuous experience. And for architecture, it is a worthy successor to the Crystal Palace tradition, a hard act to follow. We hope to be there on opening day.