A Nation Of Shopbuilders
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

A Nation Of Shopbuilders

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

PROFESSOR John Coolidge of Harvard's Fogg Museum writes to tell of "one happy episode" in the otherwise unhappy and continuing architectural attrition of our cities. His good news concerns the salvation and restoration of a rare and charming Art Nouveau shopfront in Cambridge, Mass., and he is right; it helps.

Mr. G. S. Rosborough, Jr. communicates from St. Louis in the same spirit. Mr. Rosborough is president of the Measuregraph Company, and when he was faced with tearing down a small, old commercial building for a parking lot—an "axiomatic" business decision—he opted for renovation instead, inspired, he kindly suggests, by comments here "on that kind of thinking."

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Mr. Robert Larson, editor and publisher of the Albia Newspapers, has written to tell about the near-comprehensive renovation of the business district of Albia, Iowa. The town has spruced up whole blocks, not by the standard "modernization" formula of hiding old fronts behind slabs and sheets of garish plastic, enamel and glass, but by joyfully restoring the Victorian façades. Paint and repairs make assets of their period style and decoration.

I doubt if these episodes could have occurred, and I am certain that I would not have gotten simultaneous news of them from various parts of the country, ten years ago. The case for the retention of sound structures, the eye for history and art, the valuation of the character of the old over the often characterless new, and the understanding that "environment" includes these things, have all been extremely rare—as rare as that Art Nouveau shopfront. (Professor Coolidge suggests that it is one of very few of this style and possibly the only one of this quality in the United States.)

But most significant is the recognition of the value of the American commercial heritage, a field in which so much of American art and history live. And die — in cases such as the current controversy in Richmond, Va., where new construction by the city's leading bank dooms an outstanding block of 19th-century commercial architecture to demolition and threatens others in the act of revitalizing downtown.

Commercial architecture at its best is a pragmatically and magnificently American achievement. Scholars have placed it in the mainstream of art history. Its styles are not the most familiar or the most popular; historic house preservation and Williamsburg models are far better understood. It ranges richly from Greek Revival banks and business buildings of the 1830's and 40's through ornately handsome and technologically innovative "palaces of trade" in stone and iron of the 1850's to the 1890's, and culminates in the American masterpiece, the skyscraper.

As these buildings are lost through thoughtless demolition or remodeling, the sterile void they leave in the urban environment has become tragically evident. Their sense of place, style and the American past are irreplaceable. Increasingly, 19th-century commercial structures are going on the National Register as an officially recognized part of the national heritage.

In Cambridge, the Art Nouveau shopfront was to go the usual "modernization" route to oblivion. It had survived, growing shabbier and shabbier, from a 1907 remodeling of an 1869 building on Massachusetts Avenue facing the Harvard Yard. It became apparent that a new tenant, Gnomon Copy, planned to redo the front last year. A group of "local enthusiasts," may their tribe increase (and it is), went into a fast preservation act with the help of the Cambridge Historical Commission, which had already documented the building.

They contacted the head of the real estate trust that owns the structure, Mr. Theodore Storer, and by one of those lovely chance encounters in bars on which the world so often turns, one of the local enthusiasts, Laurence McKinney, met the owner of Gnomon Copy, John Sytek. Did Mr. Sytek know that he had one of the few Art Nouveau shopfronts in the United States? No, Mr. Sytek did not know. Would he consider abandoning his remodeling plans in favor of restoration? Surprised by his hidden treasure, Mr. Sytek agreed to retain the old front. Mr. Storer agreed to refurbish it.

Restoration was a lengthy and painstaking process. After it was well started, the shopfront was damaged in the summer riots. (There is a sad litany of these pointless, sickening incidents: Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House was vandalized during disturbances at the University of Chicago, and New York's "townhouse" explosion demolished a landmark house on West 11th Street and threatened others, as well as taking lives.)

The work was completed and Professor Coolidge concludes: "The storefront has been saved permanently. Everybody concerned is now so aware of its historic importance, not to mention its charm, that if it should not survive performing its original function, it will certainly go to a museum." One might add the obvious—one good storefront on a city street is worth a dozen in the Smithsonian or the Boston Fine Arts.

In St. Louis, Mr. Rosborough decided to renovate his small factory building of 1918 as a supplementary unit for his large plant. This is the kind of industrial structure that can be seen in or near any city. Two-story brick, with "factory windows" and a stone-trimmed parapet, it is one of thousands of the routinely modest offspring of Albert Kahn's early Detroit automobile factories—another notable and highly respected American architectural contribution.

New floors and utilities inside, and a new entrance, some window changes, paint and color and a small amount of decorative fudging outside, made a sound building stylish. The conversion was done by Prisma, Inc., with Gary Glenn, architect, and Frank Schwaiger, designer. The fudging is some paint-applied architectural *trompe l'oeil* that introduces Prairie School (still another great American style with a commercial emphasis) or Wrightian details—a historically sophisticated choice. See Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building, demolished in Buffalo in 1950, one of the very best examples of American commercial architecture, destroyed for a parking lot.

"The feeling was afoot that this neighborhood was 'through' because it was all old buildings," says Mr. Rosborough. "Our building has high visibility and the reaction has been completely out of proportion for the investment involved. It was more color and taste than money."

And common sense. Rising construction costs suggest that practical considerations as well as esthetic sensibility make restoration of sound buildings a national and desirable procedure. A shopfront, a small factory, part of a town—these are not really such small things. Could this, as that old song goes, be the start of something big?

Edward Jacoby
Art Nouveau storefront rescued in Cambridge, Mass. *"Recognizing the American commercial heritage"*