

Architecture

You Win Some, You Lose Some

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT HAS been suggested that we frequently leave our readers out on a limb, drawing their attention to crises of the environment and conscience without telling them how it all came out. This column, therefore, is dedicated to those who keep score.

The first item concerns Federal law and is only a couple of years old, which is pretty fast action on the national legislative front. It started with the granddaddy cliffhanger of them all, the Old St. Louis Post Office, which has been an on-again, off-again preservation story for a long time, and even now teeters on the brink of failure-success.

But the real plug-puller for this one was existing Federal legislation which declared that surplus Federal property which the 1882 Second Empire structure was, could not be transferred from Federal ownership—in this case to the city of St. Louis which had plans for renovation and commercial reuse—except for non-profit or museum purposes. The law included prohibitions on canoeing and campfire building as well as profit-making, and effectively and ludicrously sealed the fate of an important part of the country's heritage.

We wrung our hands in this space, and the General Services Administration, owner and caretaker of Federal properties, leaped into the breach to promote proposals for revised legislation. This was a fairly new role for GSA, which previously had been among the first to push its "surplus" landmarks into the bulldozer's path, but which, under Administrator Arthur F. Sampson, has been inventorying old buildings as assets rather than liabilities.

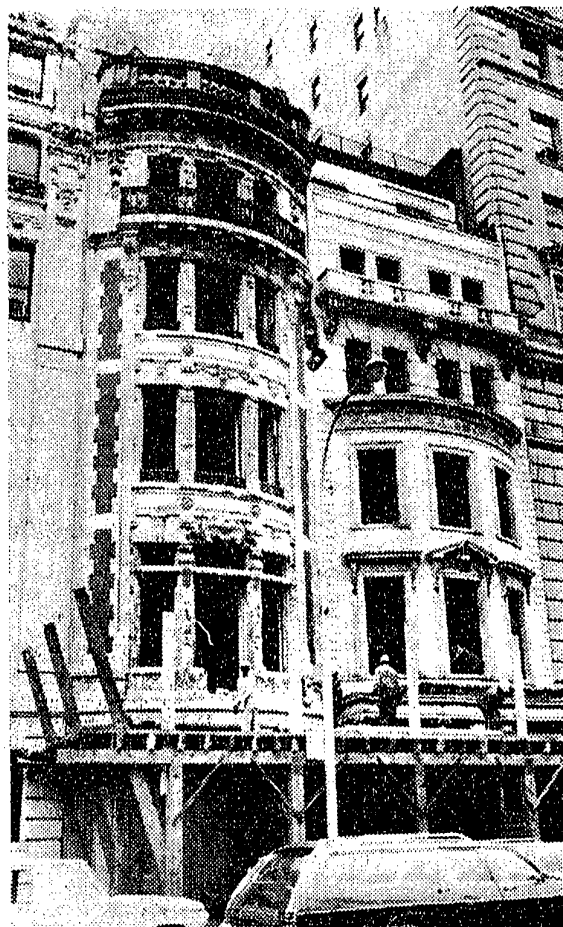
The legislation that took shape proposed that transfer of Federal property be permitted for revenue producing activities, as long as

the Secretary of the Interior found the proposed uses compatible with a historic monument. It is lovely to report that President Nixon signed the bill into law this summer, even as we all vacationed, as part of the Administration's environmental program.

In July we wrote of the rape of Portland, Oregon, a city that has since accused us of long-distance slander, in the matter of the new and old buildings of the First National Bank of Oregon. We called the new building—an inescapable 40-story tower of notable insensitivity to the natural and man-made environment—a blot on the lovely Portland landscape. Our judgment was based on studies of plans, model photos and montages and a visit during construction to judge its relationship to and impact on the site. In this case, one didn't need the corpus delicti to perceive the crime.

The old building, a superior and substantial example of classical revival reminiscent in style and detail of the Lincoln Memorial, was about to be razed by the First National Bank of Oregon as "just another piece of real estate." The controversy was lively in the press and on TV. The mail here was heavy, and Portlanders largely reacted with surprising gratitude for having their eye publicly blacked. They seem to be as nice as their city.

The upshot, in case you have been holding your breath, was the purchase of the old building by the Oregon Pioneer Savings and Loan Association, and its designation as a landmark—a designation that had been previously revoked. The proud new owners, Ward H. Cook and Ward V. Cook, president and vice president respectively of Oregon Pioneer, were photographed prominently for local news stories in front of and inside



The New York Times (Tom Madden)
Workmen begin demolition of Fifth Avenue houses
"The loss of amenity is no small thing"

the impressive structure, which they will use as their headquarters—a fact they announced to Portland in a full page ad.

Another building of which we wrote, historic Windsor House, in Windsor, Vt. was saved from a bank that wanted to demolish it for a drive-in facility, and has been brought to near-victory by a dedicated group, Historic Windsor, Inc. The big news is that Historic Windsor received a Federal grant for \$92,000, the first grant made to Vermont under HUD's Open Space program. A loan must still be obtained for the building's interior conversion, and Windsorites are looking for a sympathetic banker.

And now that we've told you some happy stories, we come to a sad ending. Back in New York, community efforts backed by two City Councilmen and the Municipal Art Society failed to save two handsome Beaux

Arts houses on Fifth Avenue facing the Metropolitan Museum. Two more will join them in rubble to make way for a new apartment building.

It was a doomed attempt, because the buildings had no landmark designation, and the owners were buttressed by the supremacy of property rights, even if the community's staying action had not been summarily dismissed for technicalities in court. In spite of the well-organized citizens' group behind it, time and the owners were against negotiation, so that any other outcome was unlikely. It is therefore important to examine the reasons for failure.

The New York landmarks law has one of the nastiest little loopholes ever devised, as we have been pointing out for years. Designation can only take place once every three years, for a six-month period, and the other two and a half years the Landmarks Commission must vir-

tually sit on its hands. Meanwhile, the wreckers' hands aren't idle. If hearings have already been held, the commission can designate in an emergency, but it cannot institute any fresh proceedings during the moratorium period.

This sop to real estate, the price of getting the law passed in the first place, can be handled with just so much skill or discretion by the commission, but it is a killer, in the most literal sense. As the Municipal Art Society makes clear in its after-the-debacle analysis, it is time for revisions of the law, including repeal of this crippling clause, and the extension of protection to landmark interiors, which is lacking now.

But even the correction of the law might or might not have saved the houses, which would have had to qualify for landmark status largely on the grounds of their architectural importance. They were fine examples of turn-of-the-century French taste, and workmanship that will never be seen again, but they had an even greater value that is unacknowledged in either law or theory in this country.

The British call it amenity, and they have an Amenities Act by which legal protection is given to groups of buildings, streets, parks, squares or any distinctive feature that can be defined as giving a special grace or liveability or desirable style, character or asset to an area. An amenity classification needs to be added to the historic district classification in the New York landmarks law, with the British precedent as example.

The Fifth Avenue block, even in part, was a demonstrable amenity, just as the full block below it from 78th to 79th Streets is an even more valuable amenity in terms of completeness, architectural character and quality, rich and beautiful detail and human scale, and the preservation of a special kind of style, light and sky. This enriches resident, neighbor, passer-by and the total city alike. It is a matter of the whole being even more valuable than the parts. The loss of amenity to a city like New York is no small thing.