Architecture: Of Symbolism and Flying Saucers Of Symbolism Super-Anachronism
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New York Times (1923-Current file); Dec 4, 1966; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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Architecture

Of Symbolism and Flying Saucers

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

HOW do you finish an anachronism? How do you complete a cathedral begun too late, beset by conflicts in symbolism, construction, art, and costs, overshadowed by skyscrapers, clinging to obsolete crafts, mismeasured for glory and miscalculated for meaning in the modern world?

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, on Morningside Heights, was conceived in 1891 as the world's largest and latest of the great medieval line that ran from Arles to Amiens. There was only one thing wrong. It was not the product of a cathedral-building age. The medieval cathedral was a superb structure, the creative flowering of a special confluence of forces at a particular moment in time. Its synthesis of technology, necessity, timeliness and expression is the basic formula of all great architectural art.

Out of context, the formula is not reproduceable. The same moment, and the same results, never come twice. Wishing and archeological copying will not make it so. This is an ineluctable reality of art and life. Until it is understood, we will continue to have the pious reproductions, the dead reconstructions, the vacuum-packed imitations and the false, nostalgic standards that, at best, evoke only the second-hand suggestion of the artistic glories of some other age, or at worst, throttle creativity and subvert values in our own.

When the design for St. John the Divine was projected, the church spire was already losing out to the commercial tower—a kind of symbolism, if one wished to look for it, that the cathedral was no longer the physical capstone of the city or of society, and could no longer offer the comforting assurances of an older, more familiar symbolism merely by increasing the size of its traditional forms. The medieval cathedral already belonged to history.

And so the Cathedral sits, unfinished, not through the inexorable process of the evolutionary architectural change of the Middle Ages, but through serious conflicts over aims, objectives, symbolism, and commitment of church funds in the 20th century.

The misconceptions of its builders are reflected accurately in the vicissitudes of its construction. When a church evolved from Romanesque to Gothic from the 11th to the 13th centuries, art and history, not a board of trustees, made the decision. When St. John the Divine was redesigned from Romanesque to Gothic, Ralph Adams Cram, the Gothic revivalist who replaced the original firm of Heins and La Farge in 1911, opted for the change, and it really didn't matter.

It was not important because neither style grew out of the conditions of the time. Neither was a creative act. The game was archeological and the choice was arbitrary. The basis was personal taste. Art is never taste. It is the synthesis and catalyst of the complex factors of any cultural era, modified, if you will, by taste, but taste alone is

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cold, thin stuff, tenuously related to a genuine esthetic product.

What all this leads up to is the simple fact that it doesn't really matter how the cathedral is finished now — a subject that is currently the cause of some little rarified furore. It is merely, again, a matter of taste. The forms and meanings of the building are so totally removed from the social, spiritual and esthetic mainstream of the 20th century that the result, whatever the decision, will inevitably be cold, thin stuff.

A careful and conscientious effort has been made by the firm of Adams and Woodbridge to solve the problems that exist. The cost of the central tower planned for the crossing and of the completion of the west towers would be prohibitive today, even if stonemasons were available for the work, which they are not. The "temporary" Guastavino dome, guaranteed for ten years and going for half a century — a testament to that fascinating and now equally historic form of tile construction — is to be replaced.

Super-Anachronism

The architects have been forced, ironically enough, by that same evolutionary process of art and history that the Cathedral ignored, to go to modern concrete construction in the name of cost and practicality. They are providing elevators in the piers that will support the beams for a "modern Gothic" glass and concrete lantern to substitute for the unbuildable crossing tower, because labor to change an electric light bulb, for example, it too costly today to permit the bulbchanger the inefficiency of toiling up stone steps. Count the anachronisms, architectural and otherwise, in that sentence. You can only finish a super-anachronism like St. John the Divine with more of the same, and there is not much to be said in praise or blame.

The other ecclesiastical architectural question that came up last week was "How do you keep God on Macdougal Street in Greenwich Village?" The question, posed by the Tenth Church of Christ, Scientist, at 171 Macdougal Street, is to be answered by remodeling the old building.

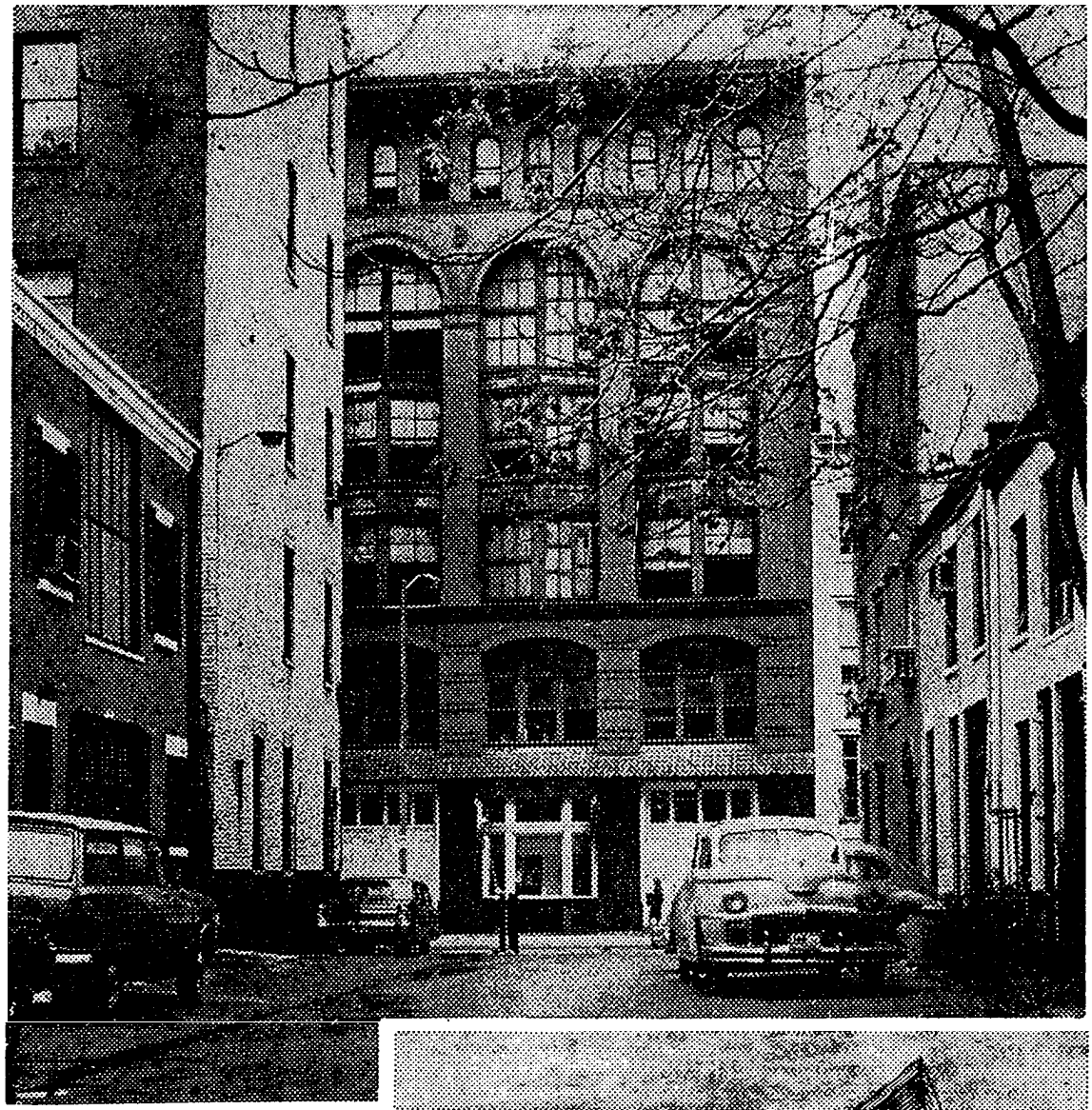
No one would question the need for better facilities than those provided by what was originally a loft or factory. But architectural historians, including this writer, regret the loss of the building's late 19th-century facade, as a superior example of what the Victorians called, with fine, free historicism, Romanesque and/or Renaissance, an arcaded style closely related to Richardson and Sullivan, and particularly felicitous here in proportion and detail.

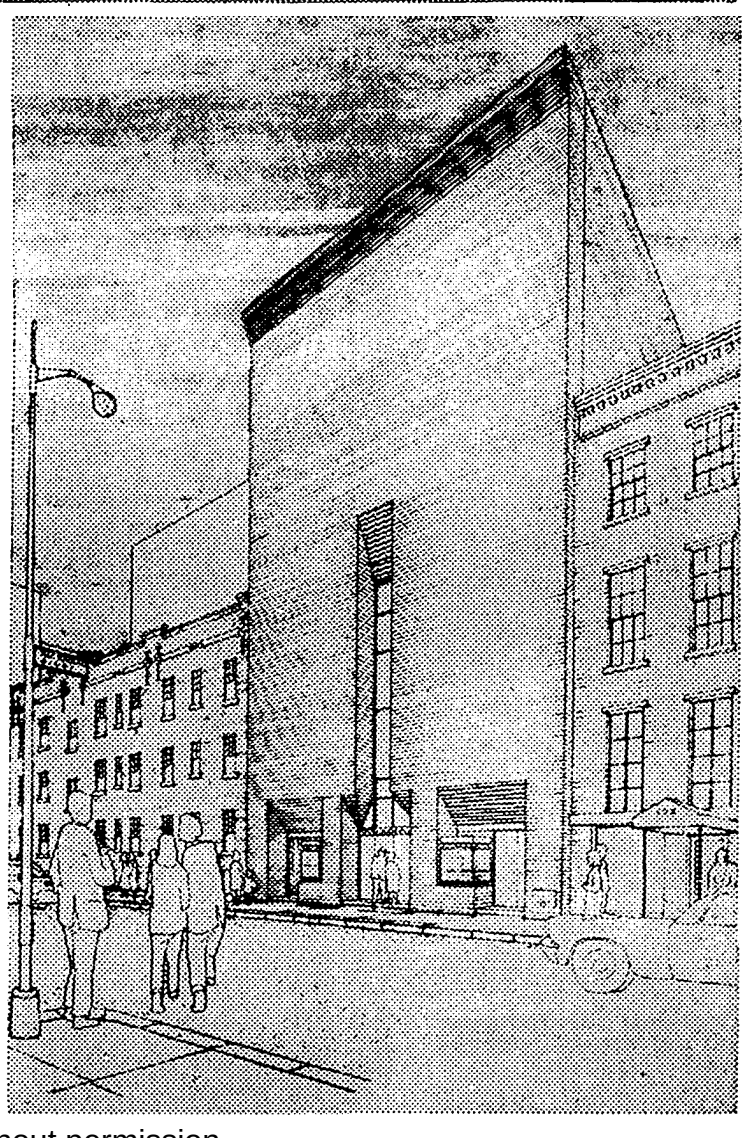
It seems possible that the Deity might be persuaded to stay behind that interesting historical facade, refurbished and with appropriate interior changes. The new front promises to be not much better than bleak, compared to the richness of the old one, in spite of the good intentions and reputation of the architect, Victor Christ-Janer. The past is slated to go, and we can only hope that God gets the message. In terms of art and history, once more, the church has not.

Which brings us to the final ecclesiastical architectural question of why religious building today is in such a curiously depressing and distressing state. Few religious institutions now fall into the trap of mock-medieval. They seem to be going for mock-modern instead. Almost all have adopted modern design as a kind of trademark of the contemporaneity of their outlook and needs.

And that is precisely the trouble. They distort today's architecture into a trademark, or gimmick, and not much else. Never has so much progressive technology ended up as so many visual tricks. Never has so much experimental structure been so decoratively misused. Never has the doctine of free esthetic expression been so abused, or engineering advances so superficially vulgarized for effect. There are exceptions, of course. But they are aggressively outnumbered by churches poised like moon rockets, synagogues of country-club luxe in jazzy concrete shells, and far-out flying saucer chapels.

Perhaps it is still just a matter of taste. Or of a lot of bad architects. But more likely it has to do with the unresolved relationships of spiritual needs and physical symbolism in the 20th century, for which no number of flashy cantilevers or catenary curves provide convincing answers. If St. John the Divine sought safe, standardized symbolism, the modern church pins its faith too often on specious novelty. The matter comes back, once more, to the validity of solutions that are a legitimate and natural expression of an age, as opposed to those that are wilfully or arbitrarily conceived. It is an area of pitfalls and complex philosophical possibilities. But it comes full circle to art and history again.





The Tenth Church of Christ, Scientist, 171 Macdougal Street. Its 1891 facade, above, will be replaced by a modern front, right, in remodeling plan.

"How do you keep God on Macdougal Street?"