

Architecture

A Matter Of Urban Delight

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

PIRANESI, anyone? The master never produced a more impressive ruin than the Singer Building under demolition. Curious New Yorkers who risk a piece of Pavonazza marble on the head by looking beyond the hoarding that surrounds the 57-story tower built in 1908 will find a scene of rich, surrealist desolation.

Domed vaults supported by bronze-trimmed marble columns wait inside in half-light and plaster dust for the sledgehammer. Marble has been stripped from lobby walls. The distinctive tower, a triumph of "modern" steel construction that added its Beaux Arts silhouette to the picturesque bouquet of early skyscraper spires, will probably be replaced by one more "flat-top," diminishing the character of the downtown skyline. Obsolescence and U. S. Steel have condemned another New York landmark.

The Jerome House on Madison Square is also lost. Even with the delaying action of the landmarks law, which gives time, but no guarantee of salvation, no re-use could be found for the building. The unique quintet of Greek Revival structures at Sailors' Snug Harbor on Staten Is-

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land has had its landmark designation overturned and is awaiting an appeal decision, upon which demolition of four of the five will rest.

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On the brighter side of the preservation picture, there are two highly successful landmark conversions: the Astor Library on Lafayette Street is now the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre and the Jefferson Market Courthouse on the Avenue of the Americas is a new branch library. Both add color, warmth and historic and esthetic enrichment to the hard commercial style of the modern New York scene.

The Pyne Block on Park Avenue is being restored and remodeled for a variety of institutions. The Chamber of Commerce has opened the baroque opulence of its Great Hall—how different commercial standards were 67 years ago—for Friday visitors and the delectation of a public

with sensibilities dulled by the narrow range of current construction and limited to the esthetic kicks of standardized banks on every corner.

(Some of our best friends are banks, but there ought to be a law against putting them into the ground floors of all new and remodeled buildings. They are inexorably driving out the normal and necessary street interest of the city. Surely someone must have begun to notice this trend toward a major urban disaster.)

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Few of us had hope for even this much preservation success a few years ago. Now even the doubting Thomases find the rewards of opulent period detail and space a special source of urban delight. The restored buildings make it painfully clear that in most of today's expensive construction delight is a mortal economic sin.

Certainly into each life a little environmental delight should fall. And a little

beauty, elegance and life-style as well.

Life-style is something we understand poorly in this country. "Love" is the big "thing" now, and the more rigorous and rewarding pleasures of the mind and senses that set the stage for living (and loving) are ignored for a sloppy sensuality. We are still—due to puritanical traditions and faulty education—strangely unknowing in what makes life-style: the quality, character and excellence of the structures, spaces and cities that form the settings within which we function and which have an inestimable, deep-rooted effect on the lives we lead.

A thousand things contribute as one walks along the city streets. There was the Olivetti showroom, also a landmark, that brightened the west side of Fifth Avenue between 47th and 48th Streets for at least the last 10 years.

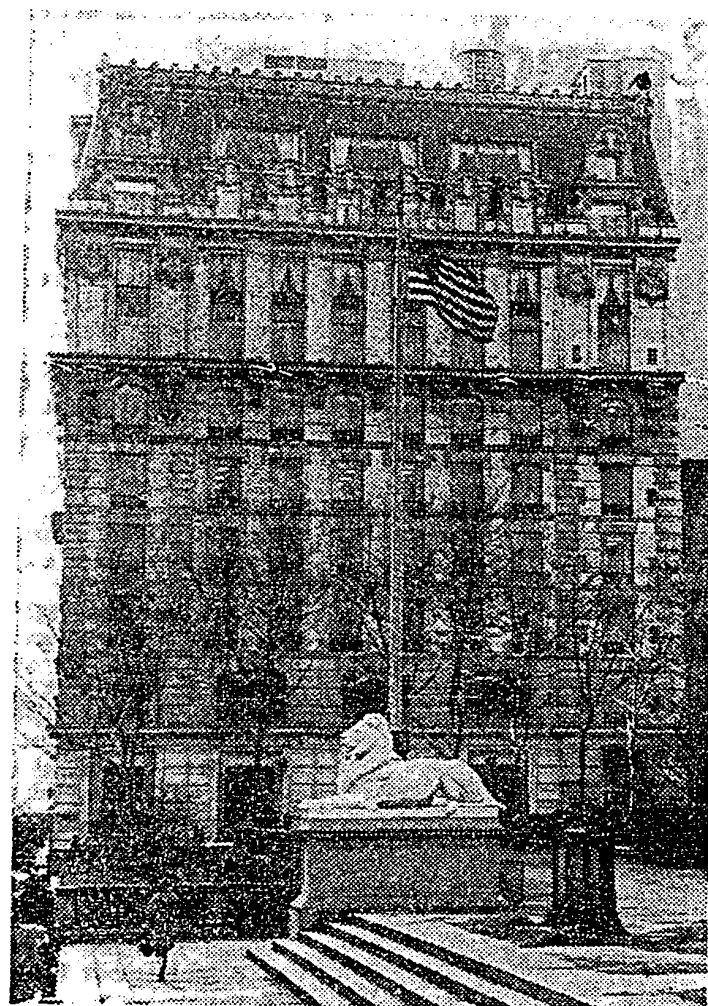
It is gone now, and so is a considerable measure of delight. There was a huge sand-sculpture wall by Costantino Nivola—one of the few cases where art and commerce have not made a pretentious and awkward alliance—and a galaxy of unconventional display devices for business machines, by the talented Italian firm of BBPR, that rose from a sea-green marble floor. Outside, the citylorn left troubled messages on an open-air typewriter, a touch of big town humanity.

Olivetti will move to still another New York landmark, the small, superb, eight-year-old Pepsi Cola headquarters on Park Avenue, a Skidmore, Owings and Merrill crystalline palace that always seemed to confound its mass-taste, Pepsi generation-oriented owners even before they outgrew it.

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Which brings up the question of how old must a landmark be? Must the aura of another age be part of it? What if George Washington didn't sleep there?

Historic importance is only one category of landmark definition. A landmark is properly a building or space, or complex of structures, or part of a structure, of superior style and execution, old or new. It is marked by the kind of creative excellence of design and quality of construction that add civic



Republic National Bank kept 1902 landmark facade
Beautifully restored, it complements the library

and esthetic luster to the city—and that special measure of delight. It is characteristic of its own moment in history, past or present. Its loss subtracts substantially from the city's atmosphere and worth.

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An object lesson in how to treat a landmark is provided, not at all coincidentally, by two Fifth Avenue banks. A few years ago, the Republic National Bank of New York bought the Knox Hat building on the southwest corner of 40th Street and the Trade Bank and Trust acquired the old Black Starr building on the southwest corner of 48th Street.

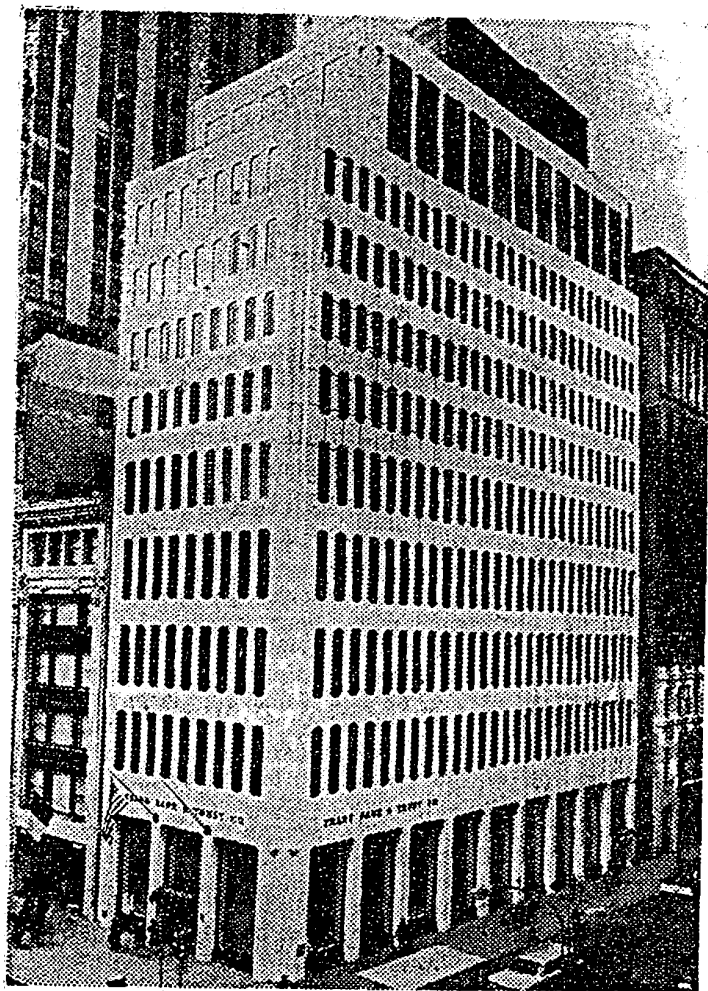
Both were turn-of-the-century gems in variations of French style: the Knox building, designed in 1901 by John H. Duncan, was a prime example of Beaux Arts and the Black Starr building, put up in 1912, was one of Carrere and Hastings's best small classical confections. The two buildings are of similar size and were handsomely scaled and detailed. Both were considered landmarks, although this was before the city's landmarks designations.

The Republic National

Bank, headed by a young Lebanese with a collection of international banks and a taste for tradition, has been beautifully restored outside. Its ornate stone with bronze trim frames and complements its neighbor of the same period, Carrere and Hastings's magnificent 42d Street library. Kahn and Jacobs were the bank's remodeling architects. The pleasure quotient for these two and a half blocks is very high.

(Inside, the bank's owners have chosen to indulge a curious taste for a kind of Beirut Louis XVI atmosphere out of Brazil by way of palatial Portuguese reproductions that might be called French Seraglio.)

The Trade Bank and Trust did not preserve its landmark, which was really the finer building of the two. It bought beauty and transformed it into up-to-date banality. Carrere and Hastings's facade was destroyed for a slotted marble slipcover of pompous vacuity. Art and delight were demolished for a lesser contemporary cliché. This is the kind of before and after that could make one cry. The money may not be any greener on 40th Street, but it certainly seems so.



LARRY FRIED

Trade Bank and Trust refaced 1912 landmark building
Art and delight demolished for a lesser cliché