

Uglification Has Followed Ruin': "Curiously, Bath consulted the ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Jul 22, 1973; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 103

'Uglification Has Followed Ruin'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ALL of you who are about to go overseas and have not yet seen Bath in your English travels had better go quickly or you might just miss it. According to the May issue of the British journal, The Architectural Review, the perfect Georgian city is now a city in extremis, and its salvation demands strong national measures.

A passionately detailed documentation called "The Sack of Bath," by Adam Fergusson (Compton Russell, Ltd.) makes a powerful case against the official destruction of much of the city's historic fabric, and "Vanishing Bath," by Peter Coard (Kingmead Press) is subtitled "a record and an indictment." Except for one drawing, according to the introduction, "every building, every detail illustrated has been demolished, removed or threatened."

Publications and their cries of crisis have been picked up on a national scale by the British press. No one with any love of art, urbanity, or the architectural graces of the past as expressed in one of man's most sophisticated creative acts—the social art of building—could ignore the message.

The damage has been done over a relatively short period of the city's history—the last 20 years. The Review states that while no one is sure just how many Georgian buildings have been demolished in Bath since 1950, the number is more

than 2,000. Of the "listed" buildings, or officially recognized landmarks in various categories, 308 are known to have been destroyed. The show pieces are still there—the Royal Crescent, the Circus, Queen Square, Gay Street—but the background fabric, the artisans' and the workers' houses and the commercial structures that make the remarkable, period totality of the place that is its supreme beauty, have been steadily decimated.

Lord Goodman, in his in-

"Curiously, Bath consulted the 'right' people and tried to make the 'right' decisions"

troduction to Mr. Fergusson's book, states that "it is almost incredible that a city so loved for the character of its buildings should have suffered the indignities already inflicted on it and still remain exposed to increasing and even lethal risks. If this can happen to Bath, there is no architectural shrine safe from violation."

It has been an insidious kind of process, neither sinister nor violent, but made up of piecemeal decisions of expediency or simple misjudgment that might have seemed necessary or desirable at the time, but suddenly, in the 1970's, add up to enormity. The damage has snowballed until the chip-

ping away can be seen as a massive and irreversible tragedy.

"Folly," Lord Goodman calls it; "stupidity is more difficult to control than evil." In such situations of scenic or architectural desecrations, there are rarely evil men.

The factors involved have been threefold. There has been a 20-year-old local city development plan of the Bath Corporation, created and followed during a period when planning philosophy and practice were going through

an upheaval of hindsight and change. Traffic, or the automobile, has had its inevitable impact on the tight core of a historic city. And atrocious new building has gone up where historic buildings came down. That should carry deadly penalties for those who have, as the police say, perpetrated it.

Mr. Fergusson's indictment, "the erosion of a historic city's character by the conscious, systematic destruction of its minor period architecture," is not simply a warning or an epitaph. He believes that there is still hope, and that Bath—or what is left of it—can be saved. Two things promise help. Under the 1972 Town and

Country Planning Act, permanent funds are now available to preserve buildings in conservation areas, provided a plan is submitted. One problem in the past has been the formidable preservation funds required, although Sir Colin Buchanan suggested, in his Bath report, that even available funds were not fully used. In January of this year, a joint working party of local and national agencies was set up to establish the plan.

But, according to Mr. Fergusson, the Bath Corporation, still bent on "development" and blind to "minor monuments," continues to tear down period buildings by the dozens, "as rapidly and determinedly as ever before." Streets that Jane Austen knew are gone, and so is the house where Fielding wrote "Tom Jones." Comprehensive development area has followed comprehensive development area; uglification has followed ruin.

Because what is taking the place of the historic buildings is the most patently puerile offense to architecture and the environment that has been conceived in a long time—a kind of sham mansarded, sterilized "recall Georgian," with nothing to commend it from either the 18th or the 20th centuries. Its banality and insensitivity are total, and it is being approved and built, in everything from single buildings to five-acre development, by everyone from the Bath City Architect and the Corpora-

tion's Planning Department, both of whom have a lot to answer for, to Bath's architectural advisor, Sir Hugh Casson, ditto. The Technical College, by Sir Frederick Gibberd, a member of the Royal Fine Art Commission, is an unspeakable violation of scale and style. A new hotel and future law courts desecrate Robert Adam's Pulteney Bridge.

Curiously, Bath consulted the "right" people and tried to make the "right" decisions. And yet who in his right mind can look at the proposed tunnel, or the models of buildings even now scheduled, without knowing that they are all wrong?

The Review's editors suggest a nationally established Old Town Corporation to handle such places as Bath, which rank as national treasures. It would operate like the New Town Corporation that built the British new towns after the war. Home rule advocates will scarcely applaud, but then, there is little to applaud in the Bath Corporation's record.

Meanwhile, "irreplaceable, unreproducible, serendipitous Bath, the city of period architectural vignettes with tiny alleys and corners and doorways is being wrenched out pocket by pocket," Mr. Fergusson writes, and he documents it case by case.

Bath fans can now recite with Sir John Betjeman:

"Goodbye to old Bath. We who loved you are sorry. They've carted you off by developer's lorry."



Ballance Street in Bath, England, in 1945, above, and in May, 1973
"Stupidity is more difficult to control than evil"

