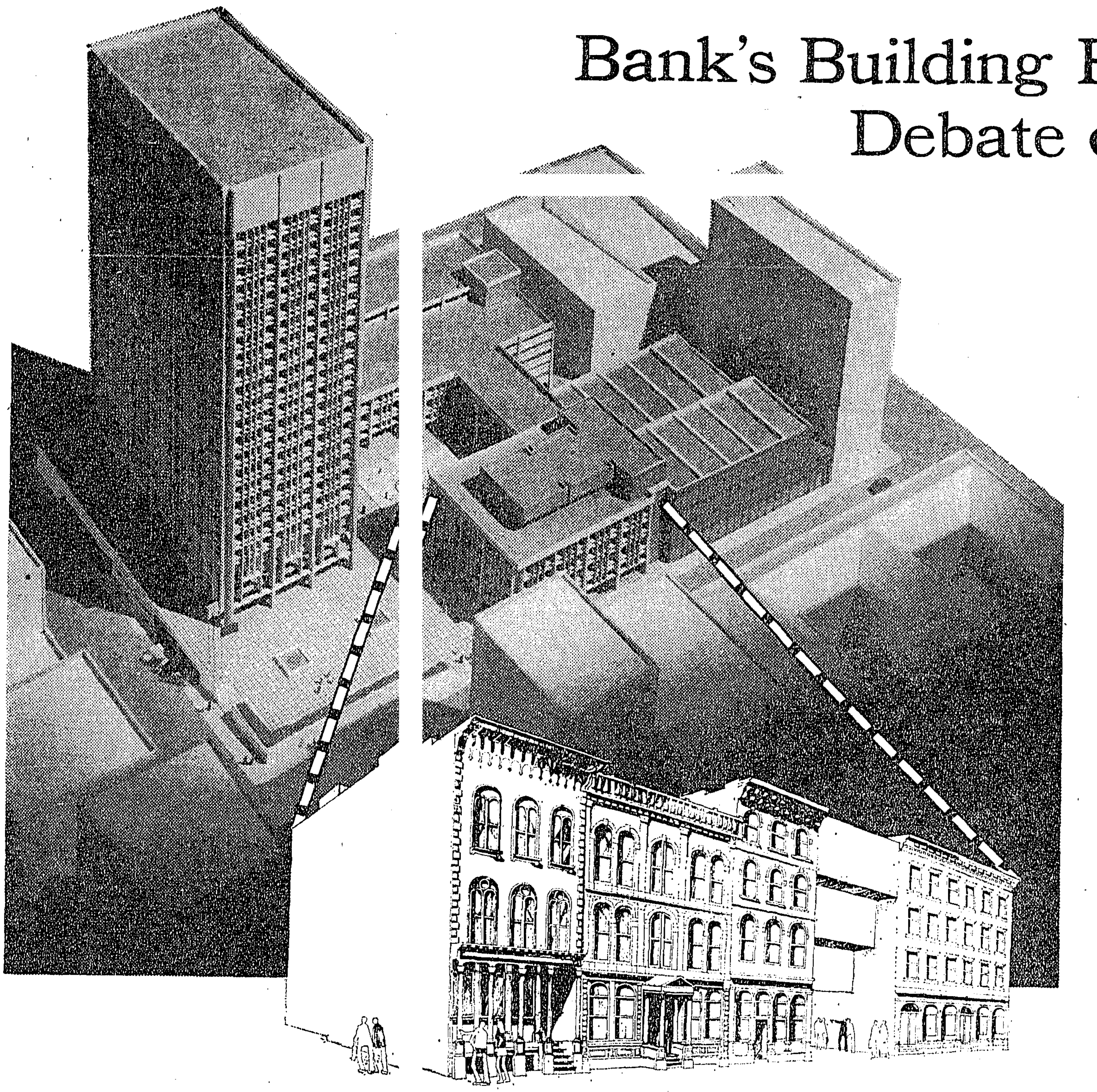

A question being debated in Richmond, Va., is whether the First and Merchants National Bank should raze the 19th-century buildings depicted in the drawing and replace them with structure shown in model. Tall building is bank's proposed $22-million headquarters.

Bank's Building Plan Sets Off Debate on 'Progress'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Many components of the American dream are being questioned in the nineteen-seventies, and one of them is something called progress.

For the American city, progress has been defined as real estate development. It is the source of prosperity, tax revenues and regeneration. Its basic premise is out with old and in with the new.

But the process is no longer receiving unqualified public approval. Ironically, the results are being rejected just at the time when cities are in greater need of revenues and regeneration than ever.

A typical debate about progress is taking place in Richmond, Va. Similar controversies are being aired in large and small American cities, from crossroads towns to New York. The Richmond case history illuminates them all.

The controversy in Richmond centers on plans for a new, $22-million headquarters for the First and Merchants National Bank, designed by the New York office of the national architectural firm of Welton Becket and Associates. Carneal and Johnston of Richmond are associated architects.

By putting its new building in the city's commercial heart, the bank will contribute importantly to badly needed central business district revitalization. The three-acre site consists of a full block bounded by Main, Cary, 11th and 12th streets and one third of the block from 10th to 11th streets.

The new 25-story office building tower will be Virginia's tallest building, and it is spoken of conspicuously in the bank's promotional material as a landmark.

The East Main Street blocks included in the bank's site and directly adjoining it contain some of the best and most typical examples of 19th-century commercial American architecture, with a preponderance of cast-iron fronted structures of a kind prized by historians and preservationists.

This type of building is being increasingly recognized by nonspecialists as a valuable historical and esthetic part of the American scene. St. Louis has destroyed a remarkable 19th-century cast-iron waterfront that was a museum of the genre. New York has one of the few other homogeneous survivals in its SoHo district.

The bank will demolish all of the old buildings on its site.

The group next to it, which is generally considered of greater architectural value, will remain. In the model shown on this page, this group is to the right of the bank's new low building. The bank had an option to purchase these also, but when it determined its boundaries, the option was dropped. As a result of the owners' and tenants' uncertainty about their future during this period, this finer row is now in flux. Of the continuous historic group, the lesser now will be bulldozed, and the ultimate fate of the better is consequently uncertain.

When the location of the bank's new construction was first announced last summer, local preservation groups protested.

In July, representatives of the Historic Richmond Foundation, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, the Valentine Museum, the White House of the Confederacy, the Virginia Museum and the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission made an appeal to the bank and the architects for "the historical value and architectural integrity of the iron-fronted buildings on Main Street."

In September, the bank revealed its designs, which made it clear that none of the 19th-century buildings on its land were to be saved.

The scheme the bank unveiled was a curious compromise. To respect the scale of the remaining cast-iron architecture beyond the bank's property, the architects propose to construct a new, small "pavilion," in addition to the 25-story tower, that will be similar in size to the old buildings to be torn down and in exactly the same location. The preservationists consider this a dubious improvement on keeping the real thing.

Because this new, low building continues the cornice line of its 19th-century neighbors, the architects stress the "compatibility" of their design, as a transitional element between modern tower and historic structures. They also point out that they are not destroying the "best" buildings, which are on the rest of the block. They say that they do not favor keeping the more mixed group on the bank's site, in any case.

The new "pavilion" that replaces the historic structures will have a ground

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Bank's Plan Arouses Debate on 'Progress'

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floor arcade and shops, with offices above. Its rear will face a plaza that will connect the 25-story tower and an L of parking garages that encloses the plaza's other sides.

After the design was published, the preservationists asked a member of the architecture department of the University of Virginia to suggest an alternative proposal that would keep the historic buildings.

The schematic drawing that he produced does not represent a fully worked out plan, but is meant only to be a suggestion of how the old structures could be restored and incorporated to serve as the pavilion. What it shows, clearly, is how much more colorful and interesting their historical variety is than the bland anonymity of the modern replacement.

The bank's architects point out that the backs of the old buildings, which would then be exposed, are unfinished. No one else sees this as an insurmountable obstacle.

More serious objections—whether or not the bank could have the amount of square footage that it considers essential and economical through the alternate scheme — have not been worked out since it has not been carried beyond a preliminary stage.

The logic used against saving the buildings is that Richmond cannot save its old buildings because they present unsolved economic problems. Preservationists reply that this is indeed true, and that the bank could help solve them.

A little probing reveals what the problem really is. It comes down to a question of business attitudes and the extent of the developer's responsibility to the city beyond the hardest economic bargain he can drive. It is a matter of values, and money.

What the First and Merchants National Bank is putting up is a giant economy landmark. Reckoned in terms of total square footage for that $22-million cost, the bank is paying about $30 a square foot, or $35, if one wishes to be generous, or a close-to-bottom bottom figure for this kind of commercial construction.

Whether a bank of notable assets and position is best served by as cheap a building as it can respectably construct is extremely questionable, particularly when it begs other urban issues. Certainly the city is not. The bank is giving nothing to the city of Richmond beyond the "magic" of new development and what the toughest business practice dictates as an astute investment, all other conditions ignored.

In the case of a "landmark" building and the bank's "image"—which is stressed in the publicity about the new building—speculative standards leave a lot to be desired. This is a minimum monument.

Actually, the bank is getting a bit more than it is paying for. The architects have done their best within the economic restrictions and are to be commended, at least, for competence. They have managed to provide a greater sense of urban amenity than is standard for that kind of building, at that price.

The completely standard product today, and most institutions want nothing more, is a tower on an open plaza that relates to nothing around it. The architects have made a sincere and partially successful effort here to create a more human and usable space by adding arcades and shops to the program, through the pavilion structure, in particular.

This is done, however, by skillful jockeying so that it will not cost the bank a penny more. Shops are rentable. Parking garages are cheaper above ground than below, which also eliminates plaza waterproofing and makes the addition of the smaller pavilion building feasible.

The idea of adaptive reuse of landmark structures that is working so well in other cities was given short shrift because of cost. Moreover, by not saving its own historic row, the bank has probably doomed the better row beside it. Land values will rise with the bank's new construction, which will condemn the adjacent buildings, no matter how fine.

The reverse is also true. If the bank had begun by preserving those on its own site, the incentive would have been provided to restore others on the street as well. Ideally, the bank could have restored and converted the entire row. As the bank sees it, that would have made it Santa Claus. As the preservationists see it, the bank is Scrooge.

As others see it, the issues really being raised concern the relationship of the city's past to its present, and what new construction gives a city in functional, societal and architectural, as well as economic, terms. Questions are being asked everywhere about institutional attitudes toward development objectives and the effect of rigid investment patterns. Ultimately, the problem is the quality of the urban environment, and who is responsible for it.