Only the Phony Is Real: Architeeture
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pg. 138

Architecture

Only the Phony Is Real

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WE thought of writing about the architecture of Watergate this week, a dubious landmark built with foreign investment and made notorious by domestic intrigue — but beyond saying that it's the only building in Washington with teeth, which we've said before, there's not much to note except that it's a common corruption of modernism masquerading as pretentious posh. Washington was taken in by Watergate, architecturally, long before it got taken in by the events inside.

Scratch almost every major happening or trend and there's architecture behind it. Consider country music, for example, which has not only swept the rest of the country but is even conquering the effete East. Like the architecture of Watergate, its roots are as real as its commercial corruption has been inevitable.

Country music got to be what it is in Nashville, as everyone knows, and it is equally well-known that its temple is the Grand Ole Opry House, a Nashville landmark of considerable historic and esthetic interest. The building was constructed originally as the Union Gospel Tabernacle in 1892, at a cost of $100,000 contributed by the public and Captain Thomas Green Ryman after his conversion by the Reverend Sam Jones during a persuasive sermon on "mother" or "liquor."

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From 1904, when Captain Ryman died, the building was known as the Ryman Auditorium. During the 1920's and 30's, it was host to every important dance, opera and theatrical troupe that toured the country. Grand Ole Opry was established in 1925, and after a series of radio studios and smaller theater homes, moved into the Ryman in 1941. The rest, as they say, is history.

Although it was neither an opera house nor a legitimate theater, the Ryman has one of the most star-studded his[tories] of the performing a[rts] in the United States. As ar[chitecture], it is a vernacu[lar] version of the Ruskinian Gothic—a style with a hig[h] casualty rate because its fashionableness in the 19th century is matched only by its unfashionableness now except with the ex[perts]. Taste turns, usually, after an entire era has been de[stroyed]. The building [is a] unique combination of [popu]lar architectural and c[ultural] history. Enough so, in fact, to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Well—and this won't surprise anyone — the Ryman Auditorium is on the way out. It is about to be demolished by the National Life and Accident Insurance Company. National Life is the owner, among its other corporate enterprises, of Grand Ole Opry.

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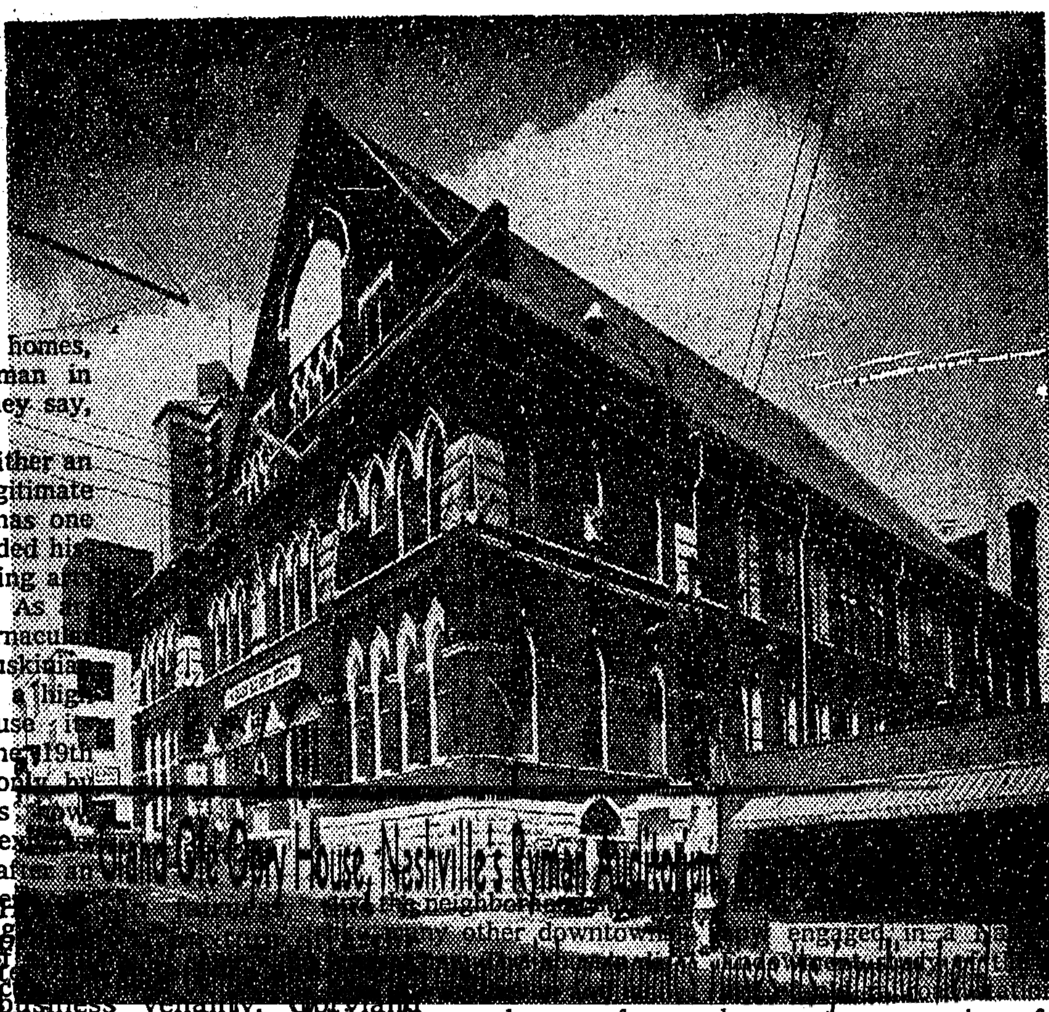
In one of those glorious cultural confusions of past and present in which only the phony is real, there is going to be a *new* Grand Ole Opry House. It is being constructed now in a $38-million amusement, or "theme" park called Opryland ten miles from Nashville, also owned and operated by the National Life and Accident Insurance Company. It will be a modern, $12-million extravaganza containing the country's biggest TV and radio facilities, as befits a multi-million dollar industry based on simple little country tunes.

National Life is politely, but adamantly against saving the old Grand Ole Opry.



Grand Ole Opry House, Nashville's Ryman Auditorium

[illegible] business vitality. Opryland puts it all together in one tremendously profitable commercial package. "When these good people come to Opryland and later the National Life agent calls," the company's head man, William C. Weaver, has been quoted in Business Week as saying, "they'll have something to talk about. We'll have ways and means of getting people's names and addresses at Opryland. I think it will be a right interesting tie-in."

Opryland — one tends to gag on the name—is being controlled by the owners to avoid amusement park honkytonk, but the inevitable rash of motels and restaurants is springing up around it, with all the trappings of the commercial tourist trade.

A good number of people, including the National Trust for Historic Preservation, want to see the Ryman preserved. As usual, the issues are complex. The building is in a deteriorating downtown, and the neighborhood [illegible] many other downtowns [illegible] engaged in a [illegible] [facil]ities for modern performances are obviously inadequate. Curved wooden pews and a "Confederate Gallery" and an atmosphere that has become a country music tradition and trademark—featured in TV presentations—are no match for superelectronics. The question of the old building's reuse is problematic, and the most compelling kind of commercial economics raises its familiar head.

"We are trying to keep an open mind," Mr. Weaver says. But National Life accepts no opposition reports, and it refers to preservation promotion as "agitation." Impatience, even in reply to such authorities as the dean of architectural historians, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, is thinly masked.

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In the name of reasonableness, the company has sponsored studies that have come up with the not surprising notion that preservation is "economically unfeasible" due to extraordinary costs for rehabilitating the old building. This is par for the course. There is probably no landmark rehabilitation that was not called economically unfeasible before it was successfully done.

The latest study is a report by Jo Mielziner, who, whatever his accomplishments in the field of stage and theatrical design, is not the most qualified expert on old building renovation and re-use, to put it mildly. Mr. Mielziner concludes, comparing apples and oranges in an interesting range of non-sequiturs, that because the old tabernacle served drama in a makeshift way and its design and construction are provincial rather than sophisticated, it does not deserve to be saved. The sources he quotes, such as Antiques magazine, are already refuting his inferences.

The experienced architects to call on for proper evaluation, men such as Giorgio Cavaglieri who redid the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater from the old Astor Library, or the firm of [illegible] have not seen a sign of a beckoning finger.

Although National Life says it is not concerned about competition, it shows no enthusiasm for leaving a competing house for country music in Nashville proper. There is more than enough country music to go around. Even with its discomforts and inadequacies, the Ryman would probably continue in demand. With the astronomically burgeoning investment in and profits from Opryland, it is odd that National Life should complain about the costs of keeping the Ryman operable. It could probably keep and subsidize the old building if it were interested in community service and public image as well as profits. It might even get both.

Because destroying the Ryman is more than demolishing a touchstone of Nashville's past. Pulling out means abandonment of a neighborhood that needs help, and speeding the death of downtown. That's fine for the kind of redevelopers who wait like vultures to produce sterile new urban pap. But good urban design practice would have suggested long ago that the area should have been renewed in terms of historic rehabilitation and that a most important key was the Ryman and its related economic uses. There is more than one way to kill a neighborhood.

The final indignity is that National Life intends to use the bricks and some of the artifacts of the bulldozed Ryman to build—we kid you not—"The Little Church of Opryland" in the new amusement park. That probably takes first prize for the pious misuse of a landmark and the total misunderstanding of the principles of preservation. This travesty has convinced a lot of people that demolition is an O.K. thing. Among them are Billy Graham and Tennessee Ernie Ford, who is reputed to be waiting to sing the first hymn. Well, as we said, in today's world only the phony is real. Gentlemen, for shame. You at least should be on the side of the angels.