

# Design Notebook

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*New York Times* (1923-Current file); Jul 30, 1981; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times

pg. C10

## Design Notebook Ada Louise Huxtable

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### The fight to save an 1840 Vermont inn.

**H**ISTORIC WINDSOR Inc. is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year in the Vermont town from which it takes its name. The celebration is being held in Windsor House, an impressive Greek Revival structure built in 1840 as the finest inn on the route between Boston and Montreal.

Ten years ago Windsor House stood deserted and deteriorating on a declining Main Street. The growing number of boarded-up windows signaled a falling tax base and lost retail activity drained by neighboring shopping centers — the twin ills of many older New England towns.

Windsor House was scheduled for demolition for a drive-in bank. At that time there was an epidemic of drive-in banks; they were destroying or mutilating traditional Main Streets everywhere in the name of friendly nonstop service and the conveniences of the motor age. The Vermont National Bank differed from the rest only in its single-minded conviction that it would be bad business practice to sacrifice a drive-in to a landmark. The bulldozer was the next step.

I remember this well because I wrote an article about the mindless spread of drive-in tellers in 1972 and the equally mindless banality of the drive-in buildings. The column, called "Your Friendly Bank Knows Best," directed particular attention to the plight of Windsor House. Local citizens had formed Historic Windsor Inc. the previous fall, and it was struggling against what seemed like hopeless odds to save the building from the friendly bankers. With that kind of friend, Windsor didn't need an enemy.

Ultimately Historic Windsor found a couple of genuinely friendly banks — the First National Bank of Springfield, Vt., and the Connecticut River Bank of Charlestown, N.H. Both gave loans at crucial times as part of a complex and ultimately successful rescue effort. Other friends included Federal and state agencies and individuals and foundations.

The struggle for survival began seriously in 1972 with the listing of Windsor House on the National Register. That made it eligible for a matching grant for exterior restoration from the Fed-

eral Department of Housing and Urban Development. This was followed by challenge grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Vermont State Arts Council, which were also matched. A large long-term, low-interest loan from the Federal Farmers Home Administration was vital to the success of the project.

The turning point was the Bicentennial, with its heightened awareness of the national heritage. And the force that made it happen was the concern and persistence of the members of Historic Windsor Inc., who do not seem to care much about being credited by name.

What they do care about is Windsor and Windsor House, which is now doing very well, thank you, after a long haul. When the exterior restoration was completed, the group's director worked in the empty shell with an electric heater and a bottle of water until interior renovation could proceed.

Today the first and second floors are occupied by the Vermont State Crafts Center at Windsor House; the third floor is the headquarters of Vermont Public Radio. Two private tenants, a restaurant owner and a dentist, rent space at moderate rates. The Crafts Center is sponsored but not subsidized by the state and it is not self-supporting, but income from retail sales has been increasing yearly.

This is a nice turnabout in 10 years. What is even nicer is that it is not just a preservation story; in places like Windsor the saving of such a building becomes closely linked with politics and economics and the revitalization of the town — in this case, the problems of Main Street and the search for a broader economic base and related retail functions.

The town's own vision has been enlarged by the Windsor House experience. The rehabilitation of the landmark building for useful activities rather than as a sterile historic house museum has given a badly needed and very real boost to the area. And there has been a shared perception of community goals and needs.

The visitor to this part of Vermont, with its views of Mount Ascutney and the Connecticut River, will find more than unusual beauty and conventional souvenirs. For those who cannot keep away from shopping centers, there are some to the north and south, and they are still hurting the town. But the State Crafts Center at Windsor House sets a standard that no mass-produced shopping center goods can duplicate.

There are lovely things at Windsor House — one-of-a-kind handmade objects of great individuality, usefulness and charm. A white stoneware coffee pot from the Haskell Pottery or a shining, substantial raffia-handled teapot by Robert Roberge will make any

kitchen an art-filled and comforting place.

A simple slatted, oil-rubbed, cherrywood chair by Stephen Moore recalls the look and logic of Thonet and Chivari but adds an individual, flowing grace of line that will only grow better with the years. A soup tureen and plates by Deborah Jurist, decorated with trailing miniature blue flowers, could be equally at home for a country meal or a city table.

Vermont is known for its weavers, and there are rugs and hangings by Christine Knippenberg, Hal and Jane Sawyer and Elinor Steele. Quilts are executed in sophisticated designs. For devotees of traditional crafts there are grain weavings and paintings on velvet and even hand-blown glass canning jars.

Prices are as modest as \$4.95 for handwoven placemats and napkins and range up to \$500 for woodcuts and special-order quilts. The carefully chosen work of 250 Vermont artisans covers many styles and uses.

As a nonprofit enterprise Windsor House must still raise \$20,000 to \$50,000

**The Windsor House, a Greek Revival structure built in 1840 as an inn, houses the Vermont State Crafts Center in Windsor, Vt. Items include, top to bottom, a cherrywood chair by Stephen Moore, a pottery pot by Paul and Jeanne Haskell and earthform pottery by Betty Ann Libby.**

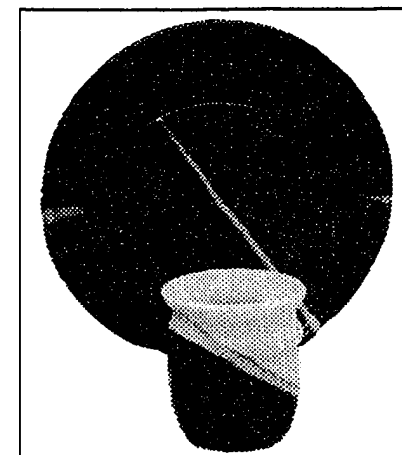
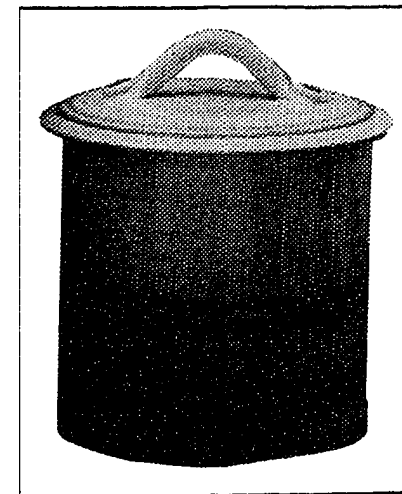
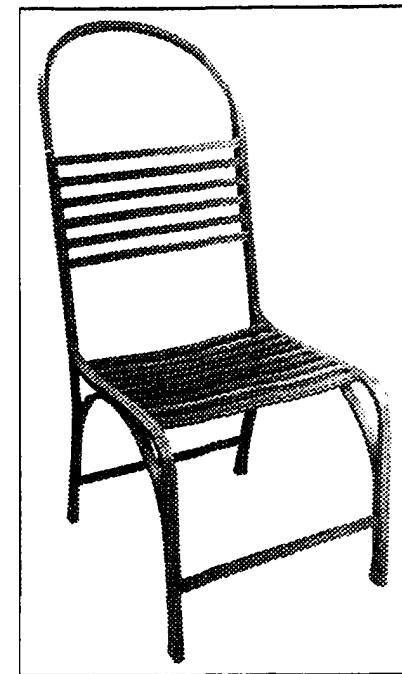
yearly to support its programs, which range from courses and workshops to participation in regional conferences. The fallout touches everything from the quality of the environment to the economic survival of Main Street.

If there is a moral to this story, it is not a very happy one. Much that made the preservation and recycling of Windsor House possible is about to pass from the scene. Without the restoration of the building's exterior by a Federal preservation grant from H.U.D., nothing else would have followed. Lacking the long-term, low-interest Government loan from the Farmers Home Administration, the private loans could never have been repaid. Grants from the National Endowment and State Arts Council were

generously matched by the local Rotary Club and businesses and individuals; alone, however, the private benefactors could never have stretched their resources far enough to do the job.

The Reagan Administration's cutbacks in arts and preservation programs are bad news for projects like Windsor House and for places that are finding such undertakings successful tools of urban revitalization.

It is not just the past that is involved but the future. When the Connecticut River Bank made its loan it cited Windsor House's value to the community through the recognition and encouragement of the public uses of history, art and craftsmanship. You can't say as much for a drive-in teller.



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