

Architecture

In St. Louis, the News Is Better

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN New York, Grace Church seems to be going ahead with its plan to demolish its two 19th-century Gothic Revival houses for a new school and community activities building, wringing its hands all the way to the bulldozer.

In St. Louis, the news is considerably better. Adler and Sullivan's Wainwright Building of 1892, a landmark of skyscraper design that was to be torn down for parking, will be saved.

If anything, one would have thought that the Wainwright situation was the more hopeless of the two. Nothing is more obsolete than an old office building, or more relentless than commercial land values, and nothing is harder to save than a sizable and antiquated investment structure in a central business district, with the pressures of redevelopment pushing it deeper and deeper into the red. Talk about odds!

But the Wainwright will be restored and used as a state office building by the State of Missouri, on the unanimous vote of the Board of Public Buildings, and with the hearty endorsement of Governor Christopher Bond. The new user, and happy ending, were found after the National Trust for Historic Preservation had initiated the unprecedented step of taking an option on the building from the present owners, when they decided to demolish.

The Trust's purpose was to find a buyer—with the owner's cooperation. It was a big gamble that worked. It meant taking an activist role, with the obstinate vision of what had to be done.

For Grace Church, the commitment to preservation never seemed to be that great. For one thing, it was being weighed against survival of the congregation and a desperate lack of funds. There was always uncertainty and division among church members on the worth of the old buildings, with some believing that a new one would be better, as well as cheaper. When conversion proved to be the more costly route, the die was cast.

And while the Wainwright Building, a seminal skyscraper at the top of Louis Sullivan's work, was listed on the National Register, the Grace Church buildings did

not even have city landmark designation. Unfortunately, there are no nuances of designation in environmental terms; a building either "makes it" or it doesn't, and although "amenity" factors are increasingly being considered, they raise legal questions. Nor has National Register listing saved a lot of buildings; it has just made more illustrious rubble. But the determining factor for Grace Church was that the obstinate vision that makes things happen against odds was simply never there.

The difference is chiefly one of values perceived. Not long ago, a government agency would have been accused of losing its senses if it proposed to take over an 82-year old, 10-story structure that needed both repair and conversion. Not so today. The State of Missouri is quite aware, and even proud, of its role. Moreover, it is putting its money behind its intent. The State project will restore and "recycle" the Wainwright Building and construct an adjacent "compatible" new structure on the same downtown block. The conscious aim is to aid center city revitalization while preserving the local and national architectural heritage and adding to urban quality. That takes both vision and values, and deserves full credit and applause.

It is a lot more vision than Chicago is demonstrating. Louis Sullivan's home town has already destroyed two fine Adler and Sullivan buildings—Garrick Theater and the Stock Exchange. It piddles around with designations, and just recently refused to list two other early buildings of the historic, and irreplaceable, Chicago School, the 1891 Manhattan Building by William LeBaron Jenney and the 1893-94 Old Colony Building by Holabird and Roche. D. H. Burnham's 1895-96 Fisher Building may get the nod.

Here and there, Chicago is designating a token out of the priceless unity of its early skyscraper heritage, unique in the nation and the world, and permitting developers to destroy the rest. This is particularly deplorable because Chicago has had submitted to it a carefully and professionally researched



Adler and Sullivan's Wainwright Building, St. Louis, Mo.
A landmark will be saved

zoning proposal that would create an air rights transfer bank that could be progressive, practical and profitable. That proposal has been backed officially by the Department of the Interior as a device for making a National Urban Park of Chicago's early skyscraper district—and the Federal government is not given to impulse sponsorship.

But Chicago continues to measure the urban environment almost exclusively by the real estate yardstick and the public interest is being atrociously served while private, speculative interests are served all too well. Other cities move toward broader zoning laws, while Chicago drags its feet.

The vision and values that Chicago lacks are surfacing all over the country. Bulldozer clearance is being replaced by rehabilitation; "recycling" of old buildings in the dual interest of the energy crisis and the quality of environment is being practiced as well as preached. Many cities are tending one or more historic districts. Handsome and profitable conversions of older structures are becoming commonplace.

rich in architectural and historical values and with the additional rarity of variety and human scale, is about to be bulldozed for a monolithic new structure for the Federal Home Loan Board Bank.

One of the interesting things about Washington is that eternal vigilance is not enough. It is the nature of bureaucracies everywhere that a lesson demonstrated is a lesson never learned. Government agencies have a kind of built-in circuitry that insures retreading their errors to infinity. That is one kind of "recycling" that is utterly dependable.

The present disaster, therefore, has an awfully familiar ring. About a decade ago, GSA was prepared to commit the same kind of barbarism on Lafayette Square. It was going to demolish the humane and historic houses of two sides of the square for a pair of Federal white elephants. The project was stopped by White House intervention.

Today, Lafayette Square is the Capital's shining example of preservation, rehabilitation and reuse. It is there—not very far from the 17th Street block—as a successful object lesson for all to see, including GSA. What really surpasses belief is that GSA and assorted other official bodies have given their O.K. to the bulldozer even after the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation reported against the plan. One surmises that it must be the same uncontrollable "sinister force" at work that erased that tape. There is no reasonable explanation for such damage. The environmental quality of the block is beyond dispute.

Who is going to turn the bulldozer around this time? It took a President to do the job before. Again, it is a question of values, complicated, no doubt, by the usual assiduous Washington political game - playing, including angle-figuring, status-seeking and skin-saving. It is not the monuments of men, but the less noble politics of power, that are immortal.

Note: As we went to press, one building was suddenly demolished by GSA in spite of an agreement to wait, and a court order had stopped the bulldozers temporarily on the grounds that GSA is in violation of the 1966 Historic Preservation Act.