

New York's Architectural Follies

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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NEW YORK'S longest-run show, the Architectural Follies, goes on. Performances last week as usual.

First, the comedy act. The New York Bank for Savings announced that it will build a 27-story apartment house next to its main office on Third Avenue at 72d Street, utilizing the same "Colonial design" as the earlier building. Horace Ginsbern will be the architect.

Since the earlier building is a Williamsburg-type Governor's Palace, and a 27-story apartment building is a high-rise tower that was not only structurally and stylistically impossible but also as remote as a space ship in Colonial times, this will be an amusing design trick. The "Colonial" label seems to be no more than a wistful thought, however, because the rendering shows a typical New York 27-story apartment house with familiar curtain wall and projecting balconies that might have made George Washington giddy. Funny? Boffo.

But this kind of joke is something that New York should have outgrown long ago. It is a hangover from the days before modern cities recognized their own magnificence. It doesn't work, as architecture or nostalgia.

Witness the original Bank for Savings building that is to inspire this addition. We banked there, until we were shifted to a newer neighborhood branch that was all "modern," with a wall-length pseudo-Mondrian subsequently painted out so that everything was reduced to safe, washable, plastic-coated mid-dlin' gray and green, including the plants. Call it the Plastic Esthetic.

Saving money—considered a dubious virtue today, anyway—becomes a singularly depressing experience. Dreams die easily at the Bank for Savings. In the main office, they die in an inflated, dehydrated, imitation Colonial shell, built with all of the handcrafted Colonial sincerity of big city commercial construction, housing the unparalleled mechanical impersonality of the modern banking operation. Were banks first to reduce people to numbers? This one has the intimate 18th-century charm of its IBM computers. There is nothing sadder or funnier than this kind of misuse, or abuse, of meaningful architectural style.

It's sad and funny to see it

done again by the Franklin National Bank at Madison Avenue and 48th Street. Watching this building being transformed from 20th century to 18th century was one of the top midtown acts of last season's Follies. First, there was the steel frame, strong, severe, handsomely rectilinear, (the bones are best in most buildings), suggesting the logical shape and design that its covering surface might take, subject only to the architect's talent, imagination and respect for the inspiration of the structure. Painstakingly, brick by brick, the lie was laid up for anyone to observe.

Eighteenth century arches were hung on the façade like theatrical scrim. Originally, of course, arches like these were carefully built up to wedge-shaped, locking key-stones to make openings in a brick wall without having the wall fall down. They were as natural and beautiful for masonry construction as the thin curtain wall is for the metal-framed building today.

Presto change. The hand is quicker than the eye. The arches aren't arches because the masonry is nonsupporting. It's all backed by steel. Fooled you. What we have here is a kind of large architectural practical joke. It is tiresome, like most practical jokes. But the undertaking was carried out in consistent comic spirit to the end. The opening luncheon, which featured authentic Colonial cooking, was served by waiters in knee breeches. (Authentically Madison Avenue.)

So much for comedy. The tragedy last week was the start of the razing of the Brokaw mansion. The hoarding went up at week's end. Major demolition began on Saturday. Saturday, obviously, is not a normal building trades working day and the wrecking crew got double time for its efforts. The Campagna Construction Corporation, the owners who will build a new apartment house on the site, were taking no chances. It was a dandy way to do enough massive damage

at a time when no normal channels are functioning, to assure the building's doom.

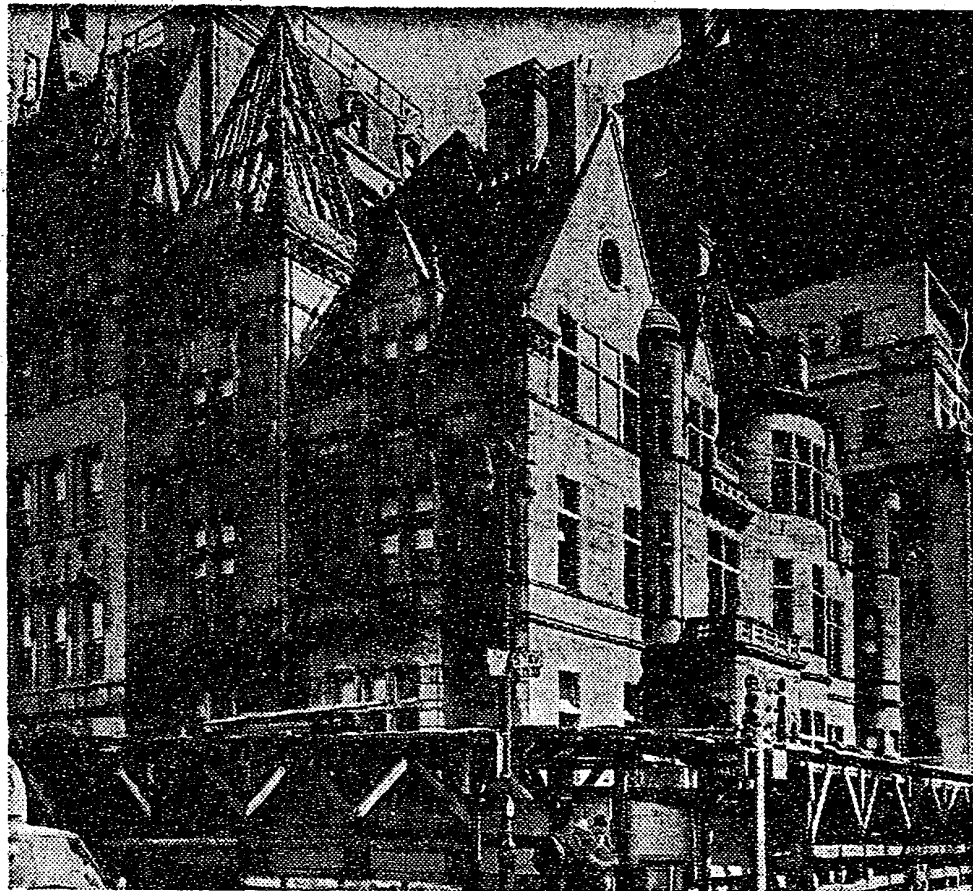
No Marquesa de Cuevas had a chance to step forward with \$2 million to save it, as with the Pyne houses on Park Avenue. Even if another equally public-spirited good fairy existed in New York, by Monday it was too late. Perhaps the American Institute of Architects, which produced a nice scroll for the Marquesa, could arrange for a suitable trinket for the Campagna Corporation. Something like profit rampant on the seal of the city, upside down.

There is no denying that this is the most dramatic act in the Architectural Follies in a long time. There's nothing quite like a good house-wrecking. Come one, come all. You are cordially invited to a demolition-watch-ing at Fifth Avenue and 79th Street. It's a great performance of a kind being given with increasing frequency in Manhattan, one that could replace the "happening" as the most chic of avant garde

anti-cultural events.

Watch an architectural landmark demolished, piece by piece. Be present while a splendid building is reduced to rubble. See the wrecking bars gouge out the fine chateau-style stonework. Hear the gas-powered saws bite into the great beams and rafters. Thrill to destruction. Take home samples. Hurry to the show.

On second thought, don't hurry. As long as the city fails to act on its proposed landmarks protection bill, there will be many more performances. Good demolitions could outrun "Abie's Irish Rose." Free demolition-watchings will be offered in all of New York's best styles and periods: High Victorian, Early Skyscraper, Cast-iron Commercial in the path of the lower Manhattan expressway, Greek Revival on the waterfront. If this isn't going to be faced as a public responsibility, it might as well be taken as a public spectacle. Anyone coming from City Hall?



The New York Times (by Sam Falk)
Isaac Brokaw House, Rose and Stone, architects, 1887
". . . there's nothing quite like a good house-wrecking."