

Architecture: This Is Silver Lining Day

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Architecture

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WE present with pleasure a silver lining column today, or some evidence that civilization can prevail over cash flow. Here are a few happy endings, and one postscript of ironic semi-success.

In reverse, the postscript first. It is really a postscript to a postscript, in which we noted that the remains of New York's Pennsylvania Station had been pulverized for Jersey Meadow fill and mentioned that a couple of the Doric architrave's great eagles had escaped. We are informed by two Philadelphia correspondents that four more of the birds came to rest on fortuitously vacant piers of the Market Street bridge over the Schuylkill River, placed there by the Fairmount Park Art Association with the cooperation of the Penn Central, where they look "amazingly out of place" according to one observer, and "extremely handsome" according to another. New York is generous with its art and architecture, particularly when it impedes the cash flow. Like the famous nouveau riche lady, we throw our old diamonds away.

As we have also observed, many cities are throwing their old railroad stations away. A Washington, D. C., correspondent, Frederick Gutheim, has pointed out two exceptions: Washington's own Union Station, a solid Roman, D. H. Burnham extravaganza which will become the capital's visitors' center, and a Baltimore depot already converted into an art school.

When we ran a piece recently on the imminent destruction of the Penn Central Rotunda in Pittsburgh for a large redevelopment scheme to be called Penn Central Park, the following Monday brought a correction from the office of the architect of the project, Vincent G. Kling and Associates.

"At present, it is our intention to retain the Ro-

tunda and utilize it as a central point for a transportation interchange facility," the confirming letter reads. Since the head of the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, leading the preservation fight, had known nothing of the switch in plans the previous week when we went to press, we feel a little like Cupid. We hope the landmarks people, the architects, the railroad and the city of Pittsburgh will now live happily everafter.

"Early in the design of Penn Central Park, highway alignment seemed to dictate the removal of the Rotunda," Dan Peter Kopple of the architects' office writes. "However, revisions in the plan and refinements of the highway design (subject to the approval of the city and state authorities) will allow the retention of the landmark. It is our intention to utilize it as a concourse through which mass transit passengers will flow as they enter Penn Central Park. Work on that aspect of the project has been delayed pending decisions by the city and the state relative to the transportation systems to be utilized in the area. We envision the Rotunda as the joint between the mass transit station and the major pedestrian concourse which is the spine of Penn Central Park."

Silver lining item number three is the happy resolution of the fate of the Woods-Gerry mansion in Providence, R. I. This fine 1863 house by the noted New York architect, Richard Upjohn, is to be saved and restored as a

display center and administration offices by its owner, the Rhode Island School of Design, with \$215,000 voted for that purpose by the school's board of trustees.

The episode is interesting, not just as one more old house saved from the carnage of progress, but because, like most silver lining stories, it was darkest before the storm and it illustrates how even educational institutions (next to real estate the most relentless destroyers of history and culture in the country) can learn.

The Rhode Island School of Design bought the historic house in 1959 for \$100,000 with the understood purpose of tearing it down. Salvation has been a yearly battle for a decade, while the building was stripped by vandals and the trustees voted, like a broken record for demolition.

A security guard was finally placed at the building last May. Would it be pushing too hard if we reminded anyone that this was not some pragmatic, non-visual institution unconnected with the arts, but the Rhode Island School of Design?

John Ware Lincoln, architect, critic and chairman of the school's Division of Design, details how the preservation battle was finally won.

"The essential lesson is that eternal vigilance is the price of salvation," he says. According to Professor Lincoln, last summer, the new president, Talbot Rantoul, held off demolition, "pleading that he could not start his term of office with brick dust

and damnation on his shoulders. In September a stunned few (of the art faculty) got busy, for the tenth time, but now with students, who cleaned out one room, found a fine parquet floor under a ton of rubbish, painted walls white, cleaned flues, hung paintings, glazed windows, set up sculptures, borrowed rugs and Barcelona chairs, and escorted an executive committee of trustees to the room."

You could call it student activism. With fires burning in the Carrara marble fireplaces, the trustees voted preservation funds. A crash restoration program (318 hours on the ballroom) and a crash course in trustee education paid off.

Finally, from another correspondent, Morrison H. Heckscher, assistant curator of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum, a silver lining report from New York City.

"May I share my pleasure in finding several recent examples of enlightened building policy by institutions on Manhattan's upper West Side?" he writes, noting that institutional destruction of landmarks is notorious. He lists, on the credit side, the distinguished brick and brownstone buildings of Teachers' College, between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenues from 120th to 121st Streets, fully revealed in the last few years by cleaning and restoration. "We found beautiful bricks we never knew we had," says Mrs. John H. Fischer, wife of the Teachers' College president.

Another example, the Association Residence for Women at 891 Amsterdam Avenue, an 1883 building of substance by the celebrated architect, Richard Morris Hunt, has had its handsome, dormered exterior carefully restored. Interior renovation in 1965 includes 52 baths at a cost in excess of half a million dollars, made out of parts of Victorian-size closets. There are period parlors and sun-filled, high-ceilinged rooms facing on a garden that is a New York rarity, and polished maintenance that is a vanishing art. (New York also throws its dirty buildings away.)

The former New York Cancer Hospital on Central Park West at 106th Street, now the Towers Nursing Home, has cleaned up the superior brickwork of its 1887 "French" facade by C. C. Haight. "In each case," Mr. Heckscher correctly notes, "the integrity of the exterior has been respected." We expect only the wretched aluminum entrance canopy and unnecessarily poor graphics of the nursing home.

In each case, it might also be added, there were probably not sufficient funds to build anew, and the best was done with what was there. The gain is the city's. When and if the land value and cash flow situation changes, a full dose of Professor Lincoln's "eternal vigilance" will be needed. But this is silver lining day and we prefer to see in all of these examples the beginning of an enlightened trend.



The Association Home, 891 Amsterdam Avenue, at 103d Street, an 1883 building of substance by Richard Morris Hunt
An exception to the rule that New York throws its old buildings away

Leo Friedman