Where Ghosts Can Be At Home
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 7, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D25

Architecture

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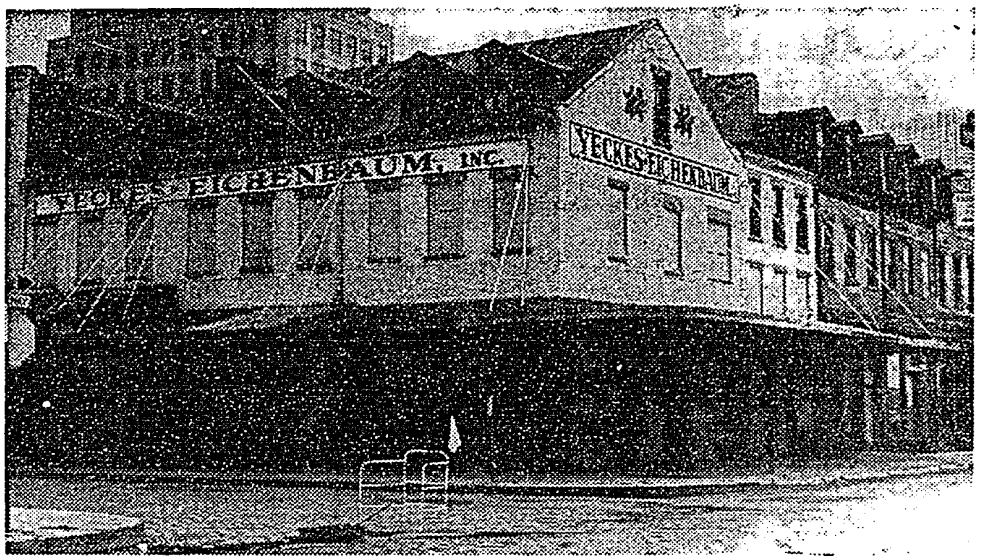

The New York Times (Sam Falk)
These early 19th-century houses in Washington Market will be saved
A generation of teenyboppers never knew them at all

THERE are no flags flying to mark it, but a large battle has been won in New York. After years of callous wholesale destruction of the city's architectural heritage there is now a near-total reversal of official policy toward the past.

The Housing and Development Agency, the city's superbuilding department, has asked for and is currently getting from the Landmarks Preservation Commission reports on what should be saved, historically and architecturally, in the city's 25 urban renewal areas. The City Planning Commission is about to designate a waterfront urban renewal site in lower Manhattan with preservation as its prime objective.

Of its lucid, readable report on the Washington Street renewal area, the Landmarks Commission makes this statement: "The report itself is a landmark. This is the first time in New York City that a government agency charged with the task of historic preservation has been required to report to the agency in charge of urban development." It has now surveyed 13 areas and has 12 to go.

Asking for professional guidance sounds about as simple and logical as coming in out of the rain. But although expertise has always been generously available in New York, it has been conspicuously unwanted in city circles.

The city's action comes only after 20 years of ruthless and indiscriminate bulldozing of Manhattan's most historic areas carried out with a singleminded insensitivity compounded about equally of bureaucracy and ignorance. It took 15 years of that time to get a landmarks law and commission, an achievement that surprised a lot of professional New York cynics.

Remember Brooklyn Bridge South? The city crushed the life and color out of it and handed the wreckage to the developers for urban renewal superblocks. We won't bore you with the losses again; they are recorded in New York histories and architectural textbooks. They are also preserved on hundreds of feet of underground movies and uncounted photographs by artists, historians and observers of the New York scene who roamed the rosy brick rubble—there is no brick quite as handsome as that of the 18th and early 19th centuries—with recording film and grim despair. (You meet some of the most interesting people on demolition sites.)

In the old, established order of things the Washington Street site, which included the Washington Market, would have gone exactly the same way.

It may be an indulgence to point out, for that useless thing called history, that the old Washington Market, now semi-demolished as part of a 38-acre renewal area, was a very special place, like Covent Garden in London or Les Halles in Paris, the latter also on the way out. (There is already a frozen-food teenybopper generation that never knew it.)

Not only were its shabby "genteel" brick houses and commercial buildings, which ranged from the 18th through the mid-19th centuries, similar in material, scale and style, but they had accumulated an extraordinarily handsome set of spontaneous graphics in the signs painted on the old houses.

The area was "redolent," in the Landmarks Commission's word, of old New York, and equally redolent of garlic and pearly onions, and gleaming with the fresh color of avocados, tomatoes and eggplants. It was filled with the bustle of early dawn activity for a city still stonily asleep. Hopelessly nonfunctional for the 20th century and, we assume, now happily transferred to safe, sanitary and totally sterile in every sense of the word new accomodations in the Bronx, the old market had Hogarthian energy and Georgian style.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has recommended strongly that a group of six virtually intact early 19th-century houses in the market—some of the oldest in New York—be preserved and utilized in any redevelopment scheme.

They are at 29, 31 and 33 Harrison Street and 327, 329 and 331 Washington Street, between Harrison and Jay. They form a corner and an almost complete block. It has also suggested that three more houses, 314, 315 and 317 Washington Street, on the block below, be moved, if possible, to fill out the block. It has further been urged that the city's earliest remaining cast-iron front, erected in 1848 by New York's innovating builder James Bogardus, be dismantled and reused in some fashion.

The Housing and Development Agency has accepted these recommendations. It has announced officially that any "sponsor" will be required to find a use for the Harrison-Jay Street row and must restore the houses as part of its bargain with the city.

Certainly the houses are shabby and derelict to the average eye. A diamond can be passed over easily in the dirt. But even to the average eye it is clear that this group of buildings, again in the words of the Landmarks Commission, suggest "an earlier time and a different way of life." Behind the grime and commercial remodeling are the dormered roofline, the domestic two and a half stories, the Flemish bond brick, the dentil cornices, splayed, double keystones and incised block lintels that are the delight of those who collect rare examples of the stylistic past.

Just across Lower Manhattan, the City Planning Commission is about to recommend an 11-block, 38-acre site for urban renewal that will focus on the early 19th-century Schermerhorn row at Fulton and South Streets on the East River. This group of buildings is one of the few that still evoke sailing-age New York. In this case, preservation is not incidental to the project; it is its purpose.

The restoration area, to include a South Street Maritime Museum and sailing ships anchored at the foot of Fulton Street, is being sponsored by the South Street Seaport, Inc., a private preservation group. The city's renewal role will be to make land assembly possible. The kind of faith, hope and civilized vision that New Yorkers are not supposed to have got the ball rolling, and now the city has picked it up.

We need both the South Street and Washington Street projects. They are only a drop in the bucket of what has already been destroyed. Both have the singular virtue of being *in situ* preservation —original buildings still on their original sites. Nothing beats keeping the old city where it belongs and where its ghosts are at home.

But unless enough instances of the old city are integrated with new construction, there will be no real urban contin ity. We will simply have acquired an occasional embalmed architectural freak. The objective of preservation is the retention of the full range of styles, sensations and references that record the city's history and achievements visually and environmentally.

So please, gentlemen, no horse-drawn cars, no costumes, no wigs, no stage sets, no cute-old-stores, no "recreations" that never were, no phony little-old-New York. There is a tendency in American restoration for corn to conquer all. In Europe, old buildings are used naturally and normally, not reduced to cultural kitsch. That is perversion, not preservation.

The past becomes real by its legitimate and handsome contrasts with the present. Spare us the "antiqued" fakery, the "'authentically copied" falsehoods that mock and cheapen the real thing. Give us the best of contemporary style, life and uses in the old buildings. Now that we have won the battle, let's not lose the war.