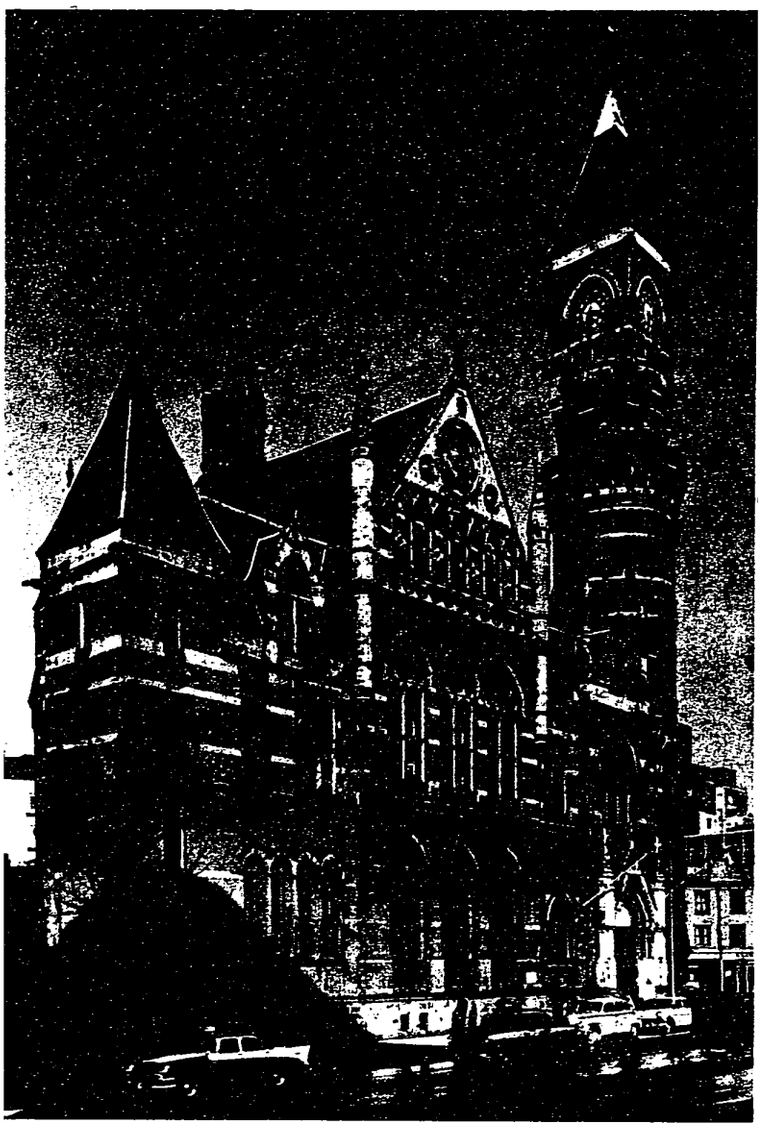
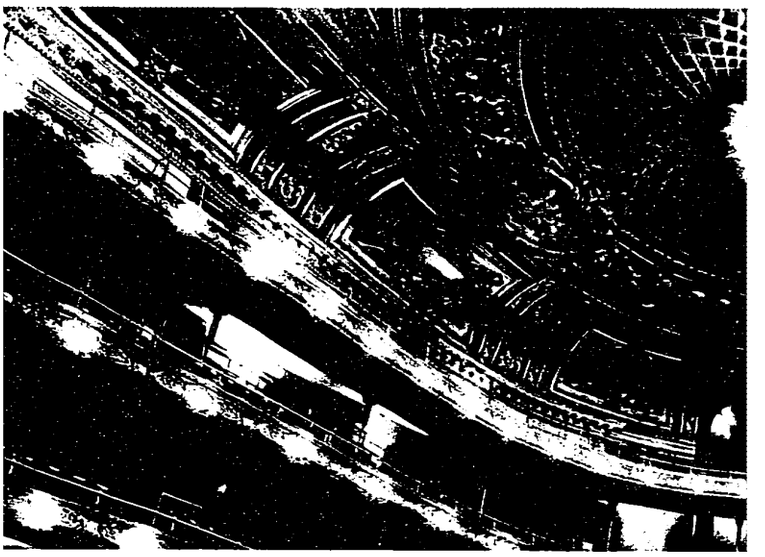
To Keep the Best of New York: To Keep the Best of New York
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 10, 1961; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. SM44

A TREASURY OF NEW YORK ARCHITECTURE



COURT OF CONTROVERSY—Colorful, picturesque, grotesque—Greenwich Village's Jefferson Market Courthouse was the last word in stylish Victorian design in the Eighteen Seventies; it was voted one of the "ten most beautiful buildings in the United States." Unused as a court since 1945, and several times slated for demolition, it may be saved by the efforts of Villagers, who value it as a landmark and wish to convert it into a library.



DOME OF TRADITION—The Metropolitan Opera's Gay Nineties glitter, gilt and glamour will go the way of the legendary society *grandes dames* who adorned its famous "Diamond Horseshoe," when the Met moves to its new quarters in Lincoln Center a few years hence.

STATELY COMFORT—A turn-of-the-century opulence marks the Hotel Plaza's Oak Room, one of the few New York "period" interiors that remain substantially unchanged. Its rich woodwork and ample proportions are reminders of an age when luxury, elegance and decorative delight were not exorbitant "extras." Frank Lloyd Wright, a frequent Plaza guest and apostle of modernism, often said he saved it from the sins of "remodeling."

To Keep the Best of New York

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT was the idle vanity of old New York that its monuments were built to last. "If not swallowed by an earthquake," Harper's Weekly boasted in 1864, "they will stand as long as the city remains."

Unfortunately, few of them have proved immune to a special kind of earthquake called "progress." For almost every glittering new giant that is going up, a substantial old structure has been reduced to dust and rubble and unceremoniously carted away. Behind each brittle glass facade is the ghost of an earlier, and often better, building. (Only the gilded rhetoric of cornerstone-laying is deathless.)

As new construction continues and urban renewal reaches unprecedented proportions, more fine buildings will be demolished, and more historic neighborhoods destroyed. Shall we continue this careless handling of the past? Will New York not be a poorer place without the varied architectures and the assorted landmarks that record other times as vital as our own—and considerably more adventurous in taste? Shall we accept long-term civic loss for short-term realty profit?

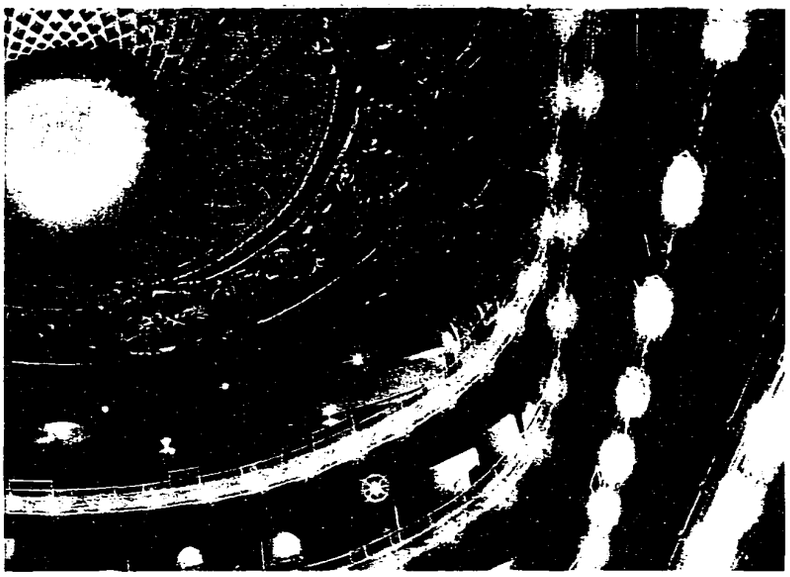
This city has suffered serious casualties in recent years. The splendid Greek Revival dwellings at Fifth Avenue and Washington Square North, historic houses of such notable elegance that they were long known simply as "The Row," were replaced by apartments of consummate mediocrity after a bitter neighborhood battle. Rhinelander Gardens on West Eleventh Street, by the eminent nineteenth-century architect James Renwick, was demolished by the city for a school. George B. Post's huge and ruggedly handsome Produce Exchange at 2 Broadway, New York's most famous landmark of the Eighteen Eighties, was wrecked with considerable difficulty for a large, and far less distinguished, successor.

NEAR misses: Carnegie Hall, saved at the dramatic ultimate moment; Grand Central Terminal's monumental waiting room, reprieved from the threat of bowling alleys, and the stalwart Dakota Apartments, bought by tenants to keep it from being torn down. The drastic "modernization" of the Edwardian interiors of the Hotel Plaza was effectively stopped by that pioneer and champion of modern architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright, who spent more time at the Plaza than at either of his self-designed residences in Wisconsin and Arizona.

The most dramatic demolition of all will be the razing of a record number of New York's oldest buildings, from the Battery to Brooklyn Bridge, for redevelopment projects. The wholesale leveling of the four-story structures dating from the Eighteen Twenties to the Eighteen Forties in the area of South, Front and Water Streets will eliminate one of the few sections where early nineteenth-century New York remains substantially intact. (Eighteenth-century New York no longer exists; there is only a pathetic, scattered handful of restored houses, genteel rebukes to a city that has never prized its past.)

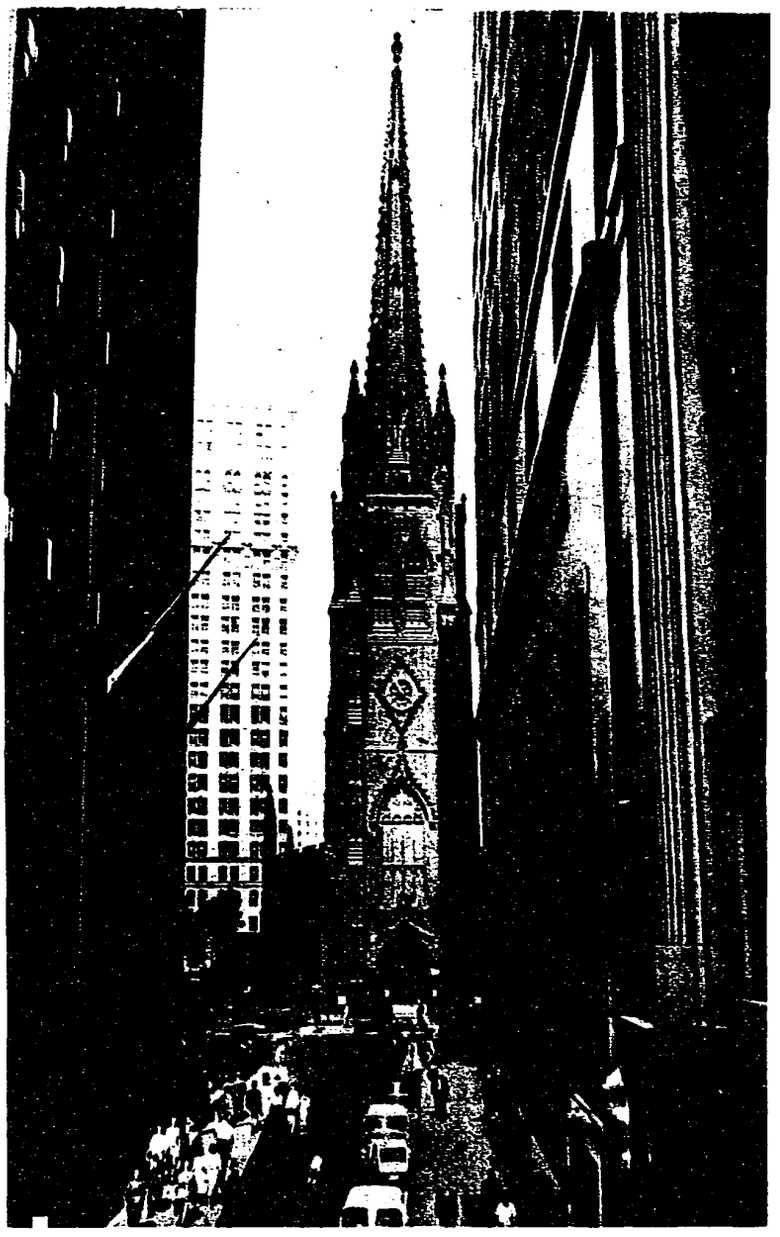
Even grime and decay fail to dis-

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE is a critic and historian in the field of art and architecture.



The present structure, which occupies a valuable commercial site, will be replaced by an office building. Even bad sightlines and poor facilities fail to dim a tradition of musical, social and sentimental values. Ardent preservationists are still hopeful of saving the building.

"SURPLUS" SPACE—A proposal to build bowling alleys into the lofty upper reaches of the Grand Central's main waiting room was turned down as a violation of zoning laws. But this impressive interior space may yet be cut up for permissible commercial purposes. Such monumental public areas have traditionally adorned cities but they are an expensive indulgence—costly to build and deemed wasteful of space that could be revenue-producing.



CONTRAST—Somber stone and a handsome nineteenth-century Gothic spire make a dramatic foil for twentieth-century skyscrapers. Trinity Church, at the head of Wall Street, offers a striking demonstration of how a fine old building may enhance new ones and enrich a city by suggesting other times and tastes. The visual variety of the best of the old and the new provides surprise, delight and a sense of history and style—as Europeans know.

In a city that impatiently tends to obliterate the past, there are many older buildings having artistic or social values that should be preserved.

guise completely the classic style, just proportions, intimate scale and warm russet hue of these small agreeable buildings. Here one observes that rarest of all urban phenomena, the serenity of related rows of street facades of similar size and style. A sixteen-acre World Trade Center, a widened Water Street and a completely rebuilt section south of Brooklyn Bridge will transform the area.

BECAUSE New Yorkers prefer new to old and statistics to sentiment, few will miss the shabby buildings that are still eloquent reminders of sailing and shipbuilding, of schooners and spices, of a fascinating, vital chapter of New York's early commercial life. Only the cats will care—those natural connoisseurs of sunny streets and old architecture, dozing on empty fish crates piled in front of the elegant keystone arches of genuine, but derelict, Georgian buildings.

Obviously, in a great metropolis there is much that cannot be saved, or that is not worth saving. Rows of substandard tenements, more reeking than redolent of the past, and lacking any distinction of design, deserve no charity. Early office buildings—even architectural masterpieces—that are no longer economical in today's high-rent, high-tax commercial districts are inevitable casualties, and will continue to be so unless economic adjustments are made to assure their preservation. (Louis Sullivan's Garrick Theatre building in Chicago, for example, which received a stay of execution from the courts a year ago because of its esthetic importance to the community, has finally been torn down to make way for a garage. The owners proved economic hardship.) Whenever land values rise to such an extent that older structures lose money, the inexorable laws of investment dictate their replacement. These are the inescapable facts of urban economic life.

NEVERTHELESS, the arguments for preservation grow stronger and stronger, and on more than sentimental grounds. The statistics of urban growth are awesome—70 per cent of a mushrooming American populace now lives in spreading metropolises that devour more than a million acres of rural land a year. We cannot hope to put up enough new buildings swiftly enough to meet our needs. It is the conviction of professional planners, echoed by President Kennedy in his recent statements on urban affairs, that the rehabilitation of worthy old structures will help substantially to solve the problem. Speed is essential, and the buildings are already there. Combined with new construction, they can do much to relieve the pressure for space.

At the same time, their preservation would keep alive those values without which a city becomes a sterile and unattractive place: a sense of history, the retention of local personality and color, the presence of familiar landmarks, and the pleasure of esthetic variety and richness in the architectural scene.

This judicious mixture of old and new is the troubled community's lifeline. The best of both combine to give a city contrast, character and continuity. It is particularly strange that Americans, who spend millions yearly to visit London, Paris and Rome, fail to recognize *(Continued on Page 50)*

SAVED—The Dakota apartments, on Central Park West, were threatened with demolition, but tenants bought the property to preserve it.

To Keep the Best of New York

(Continued from Page 45)

that a large part of the vitality and attraction of Old World cities lies in the rich juxtaposition of past and present, and that the lesson applies at home.

In Rome, classic antiquities are fully protected by law. Without such legal restrictions, the antique wall of Septimius Severus, a splendid foil to the glass and concrete of the city's post-war railroad station, might have been bulldozed by a "realistic" developer, with appropriate regrets. Almost every sizable European town offers a handsome counterpoint of forms, from medieval to modern.

Our range is much narrower, spanning barely two centuries, but we need not reduce it to complete monotony. We can use a little leavening in the dull pudding of New York's growing commercial uniformity. Professional planners are beginning to view "clean-sweep" redevelopment and the unhampered commercial destruction of historic buildings with alarm.

EACH day more is rooted out in the name of "improvements" than just blight. The distinctive quality and appearance of a community, built up over many years of cultural development and architectural change, are being eliminated in innumerable cities. Local flavor is being sacrificed to "look-alike" efficiency. Landmarks disappear, leaving parking lots behind. The result is an increasingly bland, homogenized America.

Only a few historic areas in American cities, like Boston's Beacon Hill and New Orleans' Vieux Carré, have legal protection, although preservation laws are now being proposed by many cities and states. New York, significantly, has none.

WITHOUT laws through which buildings or neighborhoods of permanent value to the city are acknowledged and protected, preservation is left at the mercy of competitive economics. Who is going to pay the bill for saving the old buildings? If there were an easy answer, there would be no preservation problem. But there are ways that have been tested and tried, and others that are being proposed.

Of 336 member organizations of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, some have managed to save as many as fifty-seven buildings. The costs are often met by converting structures to contemporary uses that pay their own way. Thus the Telephone Company has rehabilitated a number of venerable buildings for use as

(Continued on Page 52)

(Continued from Page 50)

local offices. Some landmarks have been returned to commercial uses, accommodating restaurants or shops. The purchase of fine buildings by clubs or non-profit organizations saves them by removing them from the area of commercial competition.

In any case, it must be recognized that the ultimate aim is not merely to squeeze the last drop of profit from a property. When the community good is at stake, there must be a balance between economic and other factors. (On the basis of maximum economic return as the only criterion, Central Park represents a staggering loss: so many lucrative skyscrapers could be built there. For once, other values prevailed.)

Private industry can play a role in preserving and rehabilitating a community, but more important is governmental and civic leadership. Federal funds are now available for urban renewal on a matching basis of two-thirds to one-third of city or state funds. In cities like Philadelphia, legislation has made it possible for part of these funds to be applied to the preservation and renovation of worth-while old buildings within areas condemned for new construction.

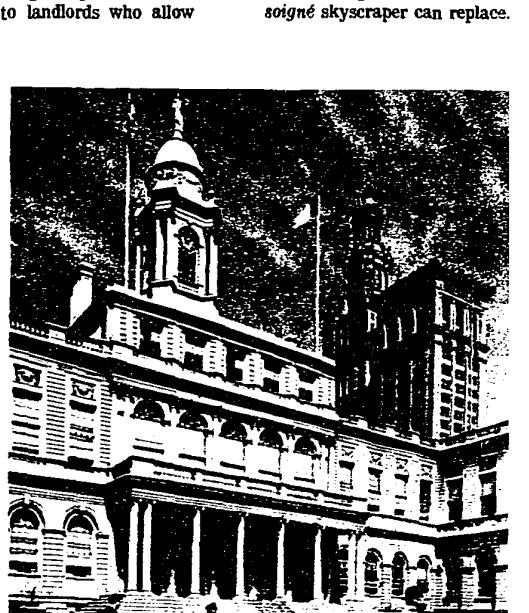
IN Chicago, over $100 million has been budgeted for city and Federal offices. With wisdom, some of this money might go toward the rehabilitation and re-use of the early skyscrapers of the world-famous "Chicago School." These are now being destroyed, to international consternation.

Necessary economic assistance could also be given through changes in our tax regulations. Current practice discourages preservation and promotes the creation of slums by offering the prize of lower taxes to landlords who allow their buildings to deteriorate. Owners who improve their property are penalized—they must pay higher taxes. In the case of large buildings of landmark quality in high-cost commercial districts, tax relief on the basis of a structure's importance would be a strong incentive to its preservation.

Further economic benefit could be provided by carefully rezoning historic residential areas to prevent their being put to undesirable commercial uses. The real estate values of Boston's Beacon Hill, so controlled, remained stable when other areas declined during recent recession periods. When neither tax relief nor public funds are available, outright philanthropy, of the type that rebuilt Williamsburg, might not be amiss.

ABOVE all, proper standards for preservation must be established. "George Washington slept here" is often the only criterion, and it is not good enough. Architectural quality and the esthetic and social importance of a structure or a neighborhood in the total urban picture are generally ignored or too little understood. The City Planning Commission, which has no architect or architectural historian member (a situation not rectified by the recent appointment of a Citizens' Advisory Committee which also lacks anyone in these pertinent fields), is not professionally equipped to pass on the problem, no matter how well it handles other matters. Ultimately, preservation is a city planning job.

In New York X's are on the windows and the writing is on the wall. Every blow of the wrecker's hammer is a solid blow to the city's past. With the falling walls will go a lot of the city's character, color and historic heritage—values that no *soigné* skyscraper can replace.



TREASURE—City Hall, called New York's most important Early Republic building, recently refurbished, is now safe.