

Architecture

Lively Original U.S. Dead Copy

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

SAN FRANCISCO has finally demolished what may have been the world's most romanitic modern ruin—Bernard Maybeck's crumbling chicken wire, lath and plaster Palace of Fine Arts, a beloved, elegant bit of Corinthian-classic pastry erected for the Panama Pacific Exposition of 1915. A replica in steel and concrete will replace it.

"Let the thing fall down in peace," said Maybeck, before he died in 1957. But its admirers had other ideas. Why not raze the disintegrating old landmark and build a new one just like it?

Alas, we can think of many reasons why not. They have to do with the value of a lively original versus a dead copy; the integrity of a work of art as expressive of its time; the folly of second-hand substitutes for first-rate inventions; the esthetics and ethics of duplication measured against the creative act.

Small Consolation

We can think of only one reason to justify rebuilding the lovely, evanescent structure. It can stand as a \$7.7 million monument to the preservation movement gone wrong in the United States.

It symbolizes a current attitude toward the architecture of the past so fallacious, so insidious and so dangerous that those of us who have helped nurture the preservation movement in this country can do little more than weep.

Theoretically, this is the moment of triumph. The preservation ball is beginning to roll after a long, uphill fight. New York City has just passed its landmarks law. Last week, the Federal Government named Brooklyn Heights a registered National Historic Landmark equal to Boston's Beacon Hill; two months ago it stepped in to cite the Old Merchant's House as it teetered on the brink of financial disaster. Concern for the national architectural heritage is flowering in the public consciousness and action has started in many communities.

The tragedy is that it seems to be starting off briskly in the wrong direction. The only

triumph right now is the unarcheological fake, or reconstruction. This is a newly-built scholarly copy of an old building that does nothing to save anything from the bulldozer.

For every Brooklyn Heights, which preserves a historic continuity of real buildings of the real past, there are numerous projects that will put up brand new "aged" imitations mixed with a few dislocated victims of thruways or urban renewal for spuriously quaint little groups of instant history in instant isolation. Across the country the genuine heritage of the 19th century is still being razed to be replaced by elaborately rebuilt synthetic 18th-century stage sets more pleasing to 20th-century taste.

This disease, which we have previously called galloping restorationitis, evades the sticky problem of saving the real thing by letting it be bulldozed, and putting up a copy at a more convenient time or place. This way, the real estate man can have his cake, and the preservationists can eat it. What they are eating, of course, is crow. The result is a lot of sham history and sham art. And it is receiving massive infusions of some of the country's best philanthropic money.

The unwitting source of the infection has been the suave, scholarly and phenomenally successful restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. To point this out, as we have learned painfully, is equated with trampling the American flag.

Warped History

Nevertheless, Williamsburg is an extraordinary conscientious and expensive exercise in historical play-acting in which real and imitation, museum treasures and modern copies are carelessly confused in everyone's mind. Partly because it is so well done, the end effect has been to devalue authenticity and denigrate the genuine heritage of less picturesque periods to which an era and a people qualified victory of the gave real life. This, alone, is history. The rest is wishful thinking, or in plainer words,

corruption of preservation's legitimate aims.

Today, a majority of the country's projected preservation proposals are heavily dependent on copies and costumed atmosphere. Ambitious plans like that for Old Sacramento start with restoration of existing buildings and then tip the balance to the deliberate manufacture of "authentically reconstructed" landmarks and synthetic style.

In New York, the job of preservation has barely begun and it is already being subverted. The city's most ambitious scheme, the touted Fraunces Tavern project, will save a few 18th-century houses in the path of the Water Street widening by rebuilding them on the Fraunces Tavern block. When these genuine old structures have been thoroughly reconstituted they will be scarcely distinguishable from Fraunces Tavern, which is not an 18th-century building at all.

This "landmark" was built in 1907 virtually from scratch. It gives schoolchildren a fair idea of what a Georgian building looked like and it gives local businessmen

a fair lunch. But it is not old, it is not authentic, and under no circumstances is this kind of thing preservation.

To fill out the "historic" block, another all-new "reconstruction" is planned. The old Dutch State House, a building that no longer exists, will be erected on a site where it never stood. This expensive and pointless reproduction is inexcusable while the real monuments of the past are demolished daily, desperate for action and money. It is pathetic self-delusion; escapist play-acting; fiddling while Rome burns.

Preservation, according to the National Trust for Historical Preservation which has listed official definitions and priorities, is the retention and repair of genuine old buildings that still stand.

Restoration, given second priority by the Trust, is the more extensive work of putting a deteriorated landmark back in condition.

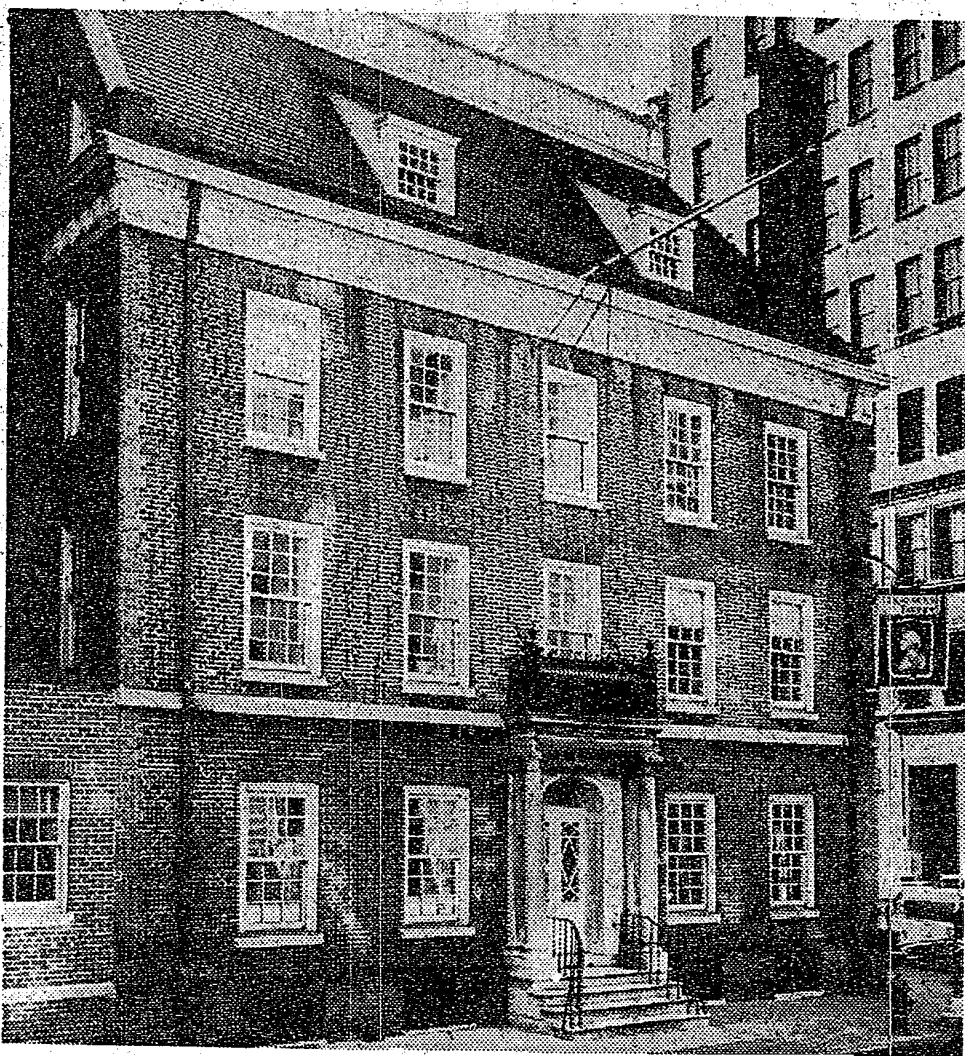
Reconstruction, at the bottom of the Trust list, is the erection of a modern copy of a no longer existing structure

on the basis of educational value. It is justified only when all else fails.

Preservation is the job of finding ways to keep those original buildings that provide the city's character and continuity, and of incorporating them into its living mainstream. This is not easy. It is much simpler to move a few historical castoffs into quarantine, putting the curious little "enclave" or cultural red herring, off limits to the speculative developer while he gets destructive carte blanche in the rest of the city.

A rebuilt Dutch State House would be a costly farce. Official endorsement of the plan indicates all too clearly that we are also endorsing the preservation movement's most warped and misdirected aims.

This city is about to settle for artificial nostalgia and cultural conscience balm rather than a living heritage. There is no cause for optimism in New York. There is only the chilling certainty that we are heading in the wrong direction.



Fraunces Tavern

"... it is not old, it is not authentic, and it is not preservation!"