

Architecture

Non-Fables for Our Time

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE day the Lincoln Memorial collapsed there was no more smog than usual over Washington, although traffic had been heavy through the open trenches of the new freeway link cut through the grounds around the monument.

The new road, which also ran just 2,000 feet from the Washington Monument and looped above and below ground at the edge of the Tidal Basin and the Jefferson Memorial, had been built to satisfy a Congressional subcommittee that had held funds for the Washington subway as a kind of ransom in exchange for the highway. Little progress had been made on the subway, and with the added automobile traffic air pollution had been taking its toll.

According to a restoration consultant, Kenneth Eisenberg, the Lincoln Memorial had been dissolving "like a giant Alka-Seltzer tablet" for some time even before the road went through.

It was being eaten away by the ozone and nitric acid that are the by-products of automobile exhaust and both marble and mortar joints were disintegrating. A chemical spray had been tried to halt the damage, but with the added fumes of 90,000 to 100,000 cars a day, conservationists had finally given up. The Lincoln Memorial was a romantic ruin to the Automotive Age.

Few had objected to the destruction of four and a half acres of shaded park and the loss of Japanese cherry trees for the road, because few people used the park and parkland was becoming uneconomic and inconvenient, due to rising land prices. Most just drove by in cars.

It was not surprising, therefore, that neither the Department of Transportation nor the Department of the Interior had requested the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to review the freeway plans, although this was required under law by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The work had just gone ahead.

Subsequently, the Tidal Basin got a little smaller,

with the movement of the sea wall due to construction, but that was scarcely noticeable from a moving car on the highway.

Shortly after the Lincoln Memorial collapsed, the Jefferson Memorial developed a noticeable tilt, as it weakened and settled. It was less than the Tower of Pisa but enough to make it look like a hat at a rakish angle. There was no protest. The younger generation said that history and monuments were irrelevant, but that they were sorry about the trees and grass.

Moral: A country gets the monuments it deserves.

A far-out fable? Nothing is fiction except the ultimate collapse of the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials—a bit of dramatic fable-telling license. The road is real, proposed and backed by Congress, and it will probably go through as described. The restoration consultant is real, and so is his comment about the present damage to the Lincoln Memorial, and the chemical spray has been used. The road will be a total environmental disaster.

Second non-fable. In Chicago, a fine bronze plaque at the base of a huge new dumbbell-shaped, 250-story office tower—finally the biggest building in the world—was unveiled by Mayor Daley, who paid tribute to Chicago as the birthplace of the modern skyscraper. Unfortunately, there weren't any early skyscrapers left.

"This plaque," he said, "represents the celebrated Chicago School of architecture that arose after the Great Fire—those buildings that made it possible for the rest of the world to build proud and high. It memorializes the masterpieces that are standard in the books and courses of art history, the structures that helped make this city great and famous and gave it a distinctive style."

In low relief on the plaque were the demolished Chicago landmarks of Louis Sullivan and his colleagues, including the Garrick Theater, the Stock Exchange, the Reliance Building, the Monadnock Building, the Rookery and the Carson, Pirie Scott store.

The new building with the plaque was on the site of the old Stock Exchange. The Exchange had never been given landmark status because in Chicago, the Landmarks Commission can only recommend designation to the City Council, which must then act on it. The City Council had rejected the recommendation twice.

Just before the demolition of the Stock Exchange, public outcry had resulted in Mayor Daley's holding up the demolition permit long enough for a preservation feasibility study. This was a politically popular move that had the virtue of inaction.

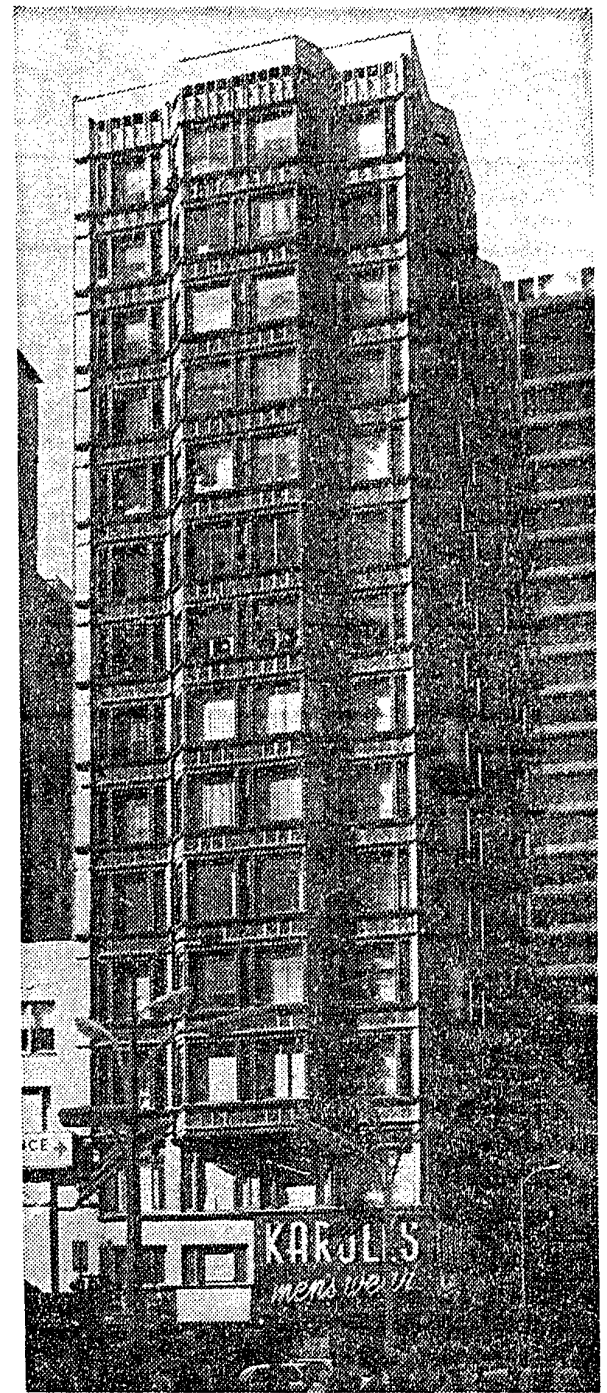
Because everybody knew, of course, that a feasibility study would find that preservation was unfeasible, since there was a great deal of money to be made by tearing down the old buildings and putting up new ones as land prices rose. Obviously, preservation was uneconomic, in terms of the real estate laws of life. As a result of this unquestioned process, most American cities in the 1970's were on their way to having more lawyers than Schliemann's Troy.

When the feasibility study saying that preservation was unfeasible was completed, the city issued the demolition permit.

Curiously, both the study and the city ignored the fact that the City Council's Committee on Cultural and Economic Development was holding a zoning amendment proposal that could have made preservation feasible.

It would have given financial compensation to owners and created a land bank for the city from the transfer and sale of the valuable unused air rights over landmark buildings, and saved the buildings. The amendment was a well-studied piece of legislation backed in part by a national grant with some precedent in other cities. It was ignored, making it quite clear that the Committee had chosen economic over cultural development.

And so first the Stock Exchange, and then the other early Chicago skyscrapers were demolished, but very carefully. The ornamentation



Chicago's Reliance Building, 1895
Will it follow the old Stock Exchange?

was removed intact, because it was quite valuable, and museums and collectors wished to purchase it. When Chicago's Art Institute and collections as far as Japan and Australia had acquired mint examples, there was still enough left to create architecture departments in a significant number of university museums.

When everything was gone, Mayor Daley created Chicago Landmarks Day in memoriam.

Moral: A City gets the landmarks it deserves.

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This tale is fictional in

two aspects only—the new 250-story tower and the loss of all the major buildings of the Chicago School. That may be more prescience than exaggeration, however, because the process is now well under way.

The Stock Exchange story is true, and the feasibility study and proposed zoning are fact. The building is under the wrecker's ball as this is written. The city is choosing not to solve a problem for which it has the tools at hand. That would be leadership, which is never popular, except as rhetoric.

Final moral: We get the cities we deserve.