The Past Is A Moment Ago
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Architecture

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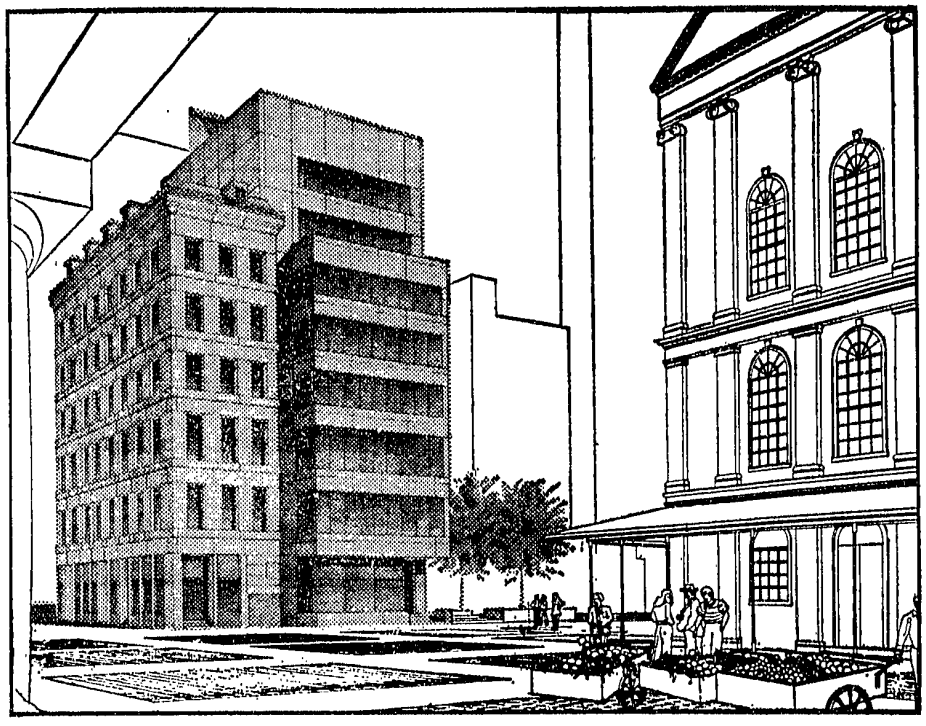

Planned rehabilitation and addition for Boston's Fish Building, left. Right, Faneuil Hall
"The best of the past deserves the best of the present, not make-believe muck"

IN this country it is par for the course to win the battle and lose the war.

There is no longer any question about the force or progress of preservation; in spite of continuing, loudly-mourned losses, the United States is well on its way to saving something resembling a heritage, in tragically incomplete, but genuine triumph. It is a ceaselessly waged battle, with each awful defeat generating a newly knowledgeable and watchful citizens' group. These groups are legion and their results impressive, even measured against the failures.

There is, moreover, a remarkable body of legislation now, from local landmarks laws and sophisticated zoning incentives to the Federal transfer of Government-owned historic properties, as well as broad, national requirements for environmental impact studies, including effects on architectural quality. And, as they say, much, much more.

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The problem, then, is not one of intent or action; it is one of philosophy. It is still not very clear to a lot of people who care a good deal about it that the whole purpose of preservation is to encourage a use of the past that makes it part of the present. A living part. You don't do it with hoopskirts.

And so, when faced with how to refurbish, or add to, or otherwise make an old building serve today's needs, an awful confusion ensues. The so-called "purists" want it all "restored back" or given "replica" extensions and enrichments. This is a form of historical embalming, and it is by far the most popular brand of preservation today, with all kinds of overt and covert corruptions. There is gift-wrapped and candy-coated history. It even spills over into such things as a new development currently planned near Denver, of which we have willfully blocked out details, that will be fake Western Victorian. Someone with his head on backwards thinks this is "appropriate." It gets harder and harder to draw the line.

Actually, there should be no confusion at all. It is a matter of seeing history whole, or real. What we admire so much in a specific historic structure or artifact is a moment in time past, crystallized as style. We see it appreciatively from time present, which has an equally crystallized style. Whether it is a hat or a doorknob, or the way we talk or think or build or paint or love or shape the world around us, any age has its inescapable style. As for history, it's now. You can't go back except as voyeur. As someone said, the past is a moment ago.

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And so it is really very simple. To thine own self be true, as Shakespeare put it with tremendous style, and to your own time, as well. The best of the past deserves the best of the present, not some make-believe muck. The creativity that produced the historic structure operates equally today. Suppressing today and stage-setting yesterday is false to both, and nothing meaningful happens behind ropes.

We are not saying that there should not be museums, or that some buildings should not be preserved as such; there are occasions when art and style are so superior that their inviolate protection is a cultural mandate from past to present. But not every building, not every street, and not every interior is of that caliber. And to keep that which has real value for the esthetic, cultural and historic enrichment of our cities as functioning parts of the environment, is an equally important mandate.

A case in point is the superb renovation of Boston's Old City Hall. A remarkable development group, the Old City Hall Landmark Corporation headed by Roger S. Webb, has put that massive gray granite, Second Empire pile of the 1870's back into the mainstream of Boston's downtown life — exactly where it belongs. This has been done by making it commercially viable today, and that was achieved by refurbishing the exterior and gutting the interior for new services and offices.

The interiors had little claim to fame except for their undeniable authenticity. They were real, all right, but they were singularly poor in material and detail compared to better examples of the day, and much more redolent of cuspidor culture than of classical elegance. To keep that building alive, it had to compete in the new office market growing around it. Judgment had to be exercised. It was a matter of balancing values—in this case the greater worth of the notable exterior, urbanistically —and making the necessary compromises to guarantee the building's continued life and use.

The new office interiors and public spaces—the work of Ken MacLean, the Old City Hall Landmark Corporation's member architect—are simple, handsome and sensitively detailed. The thing to stress, in such a conversion, is that the job is very, very well done. The ground-floor restaurant, stripped to brick walls and vaulted ceiling and enriched with warm natural woods and pleasant lighting, is one of the few new restaurant interiors in the country today not hopelessly and insultingly hoked up. It has been designed by Leslie Larson. (One learns that the food is always hoked up in hoked-up restaurants, as well; this one is basic French, with pleasure, and without hyperbole.)

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But the purists are still crying fie, when they should be shouting bravo, instead. They've missed the message somewhere along the line. These interiors convey, with taste and telling esthetic contrasts between the 19th and 20th centuries, that this building is immortal. What is genuinely old accepts and recognizes what is genuinely and necessarily new. And the spectrum of century-spanning culture is successfully enlarged.

Now that the financial success of the Old City Hall restoration is assured, the Old City Hall Landmark Corporation is about to embark on other projects—with the same exemplary philosophy. It is starting the renovation of the 1852 Fish Building next to Faneuil Hall.

The Fish Building is an example of Boston's very fine 19th century commercial granite slab construction that gives a special character to the old market district. The historic building will be added onto, utilizing the space where another building of no stylistic value was demolished. The new addition will not be a "replica." The granite module and the material of the old structure will be maintained and new and old directly related in scale. But instead of repeating period sash, there will be contemporary glass strip windows, a respectful stylistic updating so that the addition is of its own time. It is an appropriate solution.

The same group hopes to begin a much bigger and very important undertaking —the renovation of the adjacent Faneuil Hall Market buildings of the 1820's, also known as Quincy Market, one of the finest Greek Revival complexes in the country.

Here the problem is even more delicate. The line between what should be removed or restored is being hotly debated. But the preservation philosophy throughout will be constructive and contemporary with new offices and shops and new uses where advisable. In a city that has its history, the way its ladies have their hats, that sense of time as both past and present is a splendid thing.

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