

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: NEW YORK CAN LEARN A LOT FROM ST. LOUIS

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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

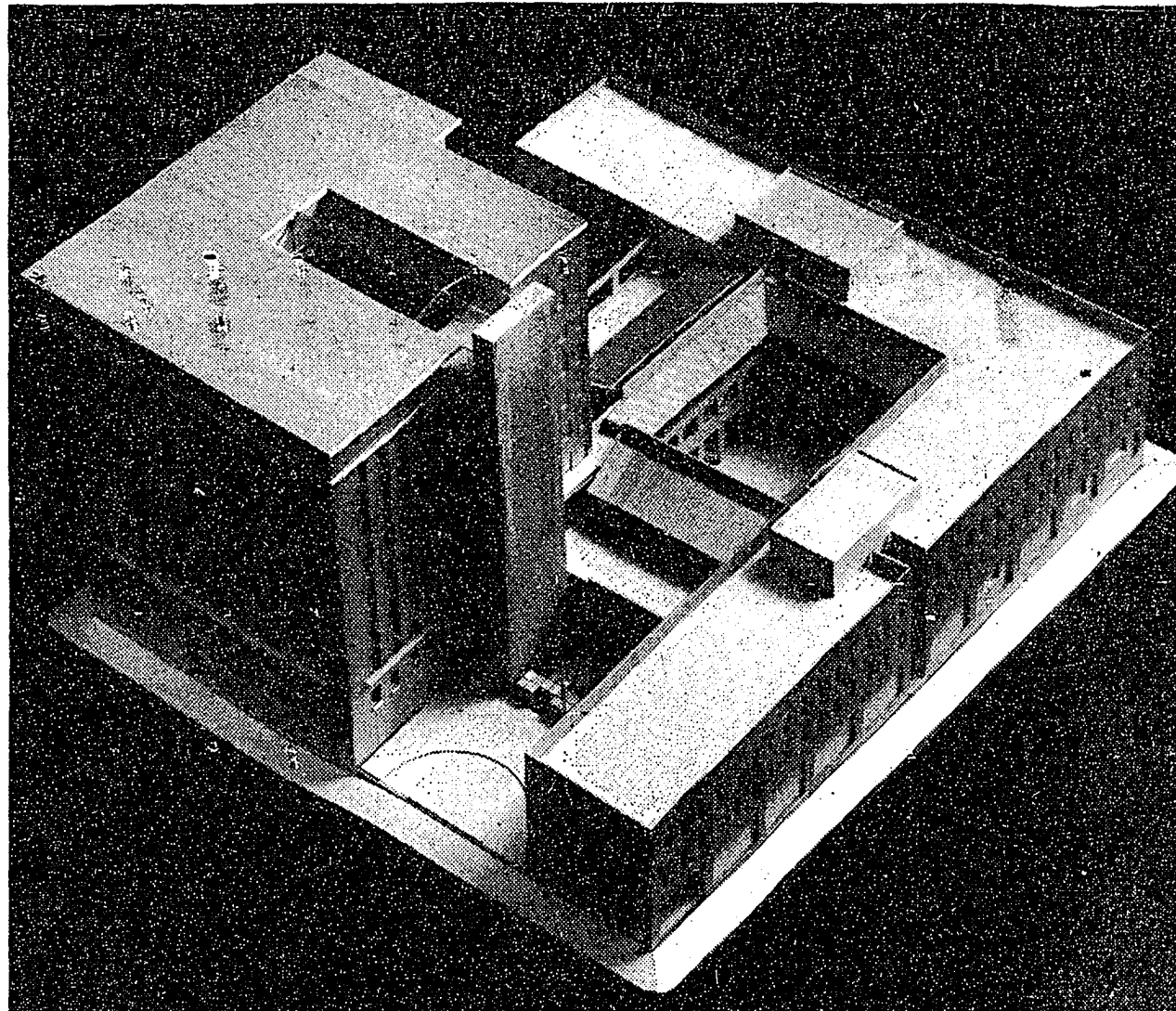
# New York Can Learn a Lot From St. Louis

**W**here there's a will, there's a way. Remember that one? From the age of oversimplification, no doubt. But one might take as example the fate of two historic buildings, in two cities, to see how this nice old-fashioned maxim does, or does not, work today. These two buildings have a lot in common. They are both landmark structures: McKim, Mead and White's Villard Houses of the 1880's on Madison Avenue in New York, of which we wrote recently, and Adler and Sullivan's Wainwright Building of 1890-1 in St. Louis. They have both been, or are being, threatened with destruction or injudicious remodeling. Each is in a prime development area, and therefore vulnerable in terms of land use and return. And each is of top architectural quality and singular importance on the city scene. But their stories have different endings. (Real estate is not destiny.)

The Villard Houses, as described earlier, are the subject of a development scheme that would gut part of the structure, leave the rest with a dubious future, and attach a new hotel and office tower to the body of the building. It is hard to believe that if there were a will to do the job right there would not be a way. What would be required is an appreciative reuse of the landmark rather than its exploitation, something that takes a little more talent and ingenuity than a bottom-line solution. No one says it is an easy job, but skillful architects, lawyers and financiers are legion in New York; there is obviously no will to seek anything better. Somebody has to care enough to make the right thing happen.

Somebody did care in St. Louis. You might say there was a consortium of concern for the Wainwright Building. It consisted of citizens and press, cooperative owners, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the State of Missouri. The Wainwright Building is now on its way to becoming the new State Office Building. It will use the Adler and Sullivan landmark with a specially designed addition next to it—a solution not without parallel to the Villard Houses-hotel project, but arrived at in St. Louis through a national competition rather than a speculative formula.

But most important, it was arrived at through conviction. Everyone involved believed in the necessity of keeping and restoring the landmark building as a live and functioning part of the city. As these things go, this doesn't just happen; it means finding a way to reverse normal events. It had to be made to happen because a number of people, including Gov. Christopher S. Bond of Missouri, were strongly convinced that it should. (If this is becoming redundant, it is meant to.) The story of the Wainwright Building is as instructive about the state of mind



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The redevelopment plan for downtown St. Louis emphasizes the landmark Wainwright Building.

that led to an optimum solution as for the actual decisions and procedures that brought it about.

The story begins in a perfectly routine, predictable fashion. It is a too-familiar refrain: an old building of landmark quality in a downtown area in the process of redevelopment has become both functionally and economically obsolete. Conventional real estate wisdom says tear it down and build something new that will yield a greater return. Most such tales end there, with demolition. But the Wainwright saga didn't.

In sum, the owners worked with the preservationists to an encouraging degree, although it was perfectly clear that they had no intention of becoming philanthropists. Rather than sell for commercial development of the site or raze for parking, however, they let the National Trust for Historic Preservation take an option on the building while the search proceeded for an appropriate purchaser. This was a historic step for the National Trust; it became an activist in the extremely difficult area of commercial preservation with its relentless economic pressures.

The buyer that the Trust found was the State of Missouri, which had been considering the consolidation of its offices. To get enough space, the rest of the block around the Wainwright Building would have to be cleared and a new building added. To get the best possible design, a national competition was held last year, with the proviso (ah, politics!) that out-of-state entrants have

collaborating Missouri firms. (There are worse ways of making architectural marriages.) The winning team was Hastings and Chivetta of St. Louis with Mitchell-Giurgola of Philadelphia and New York. The Mitchell-Giurgola firm is known for its consistently stylish, sympathetic and sound work.

The winning scheme calls for L-shaped, low-rise structures with courts of varying character on three "quadrants" of the block, a traditional type of St. Louis block division. The fourth quadrant is the Wainwright Building, which will have its handsome exterior carefully restored. Local comment on the design has been contentious. If anything, the proposal is believed to be excessively modest, or bland, even if it is eminently buildable. That, of course, is no small consideration in these times of climbing construction costs. The runners-up are far more dramatic, and they are preferred quite articulately by a number of St. Louis critics.

What the winning proposal emphasizes—in spite of the prospect of overly dumb-and-ordinary facades unless you are mad for the genre—is a human environment. Not grandeur, just something scaled to people. It is possible that these facades will possess some pleasing refinements even if monumentality is conspicuously absent. The courts, alternating with the low structures, not only leave



the architectural emphasis on the taller Wainwright; they are also people-oriented in a way that downtown St. Louis emphatically is not. Redeveloped St. Louis is a desert of parking garages serving an immense stadium, not to be ameliorated by a proposed mall. One could weep for the beautiful, restored old Courthouse, for the lost cast-iron waterfront, for the soullessness of it all.

Whatever the winning design may lack in drama, it at least promises in pedestrian sensitivity. At any rate, one hopes so. From this distance, renderings and model photos are not too communicative, although the plans are attractive. Perhaps those open spaces could be a bit softer and greener; today's designers seem to have a thing for stone over trees and grass. (Trees, incidentally, are meant to be in the ground, not in pots and tubs; architects act as if the stork brought them in concrete planters.) But the scale of the design is right, and the results will be effective if it is developed with any intimacy and warmth. There is already the suggestion of considerable finesse.

In any event, it is perfectly marvelous to be arguing about the comparative merits of thoughtful schemes, rather than holding a wake. Or deploring the aggressive inappropriateness of a project such as that for the Villard Houses. There will be no demolition in St. Louis. The scheme is conscientious and concerned. Everything is relative. In New York we would be counting St. Louis's blessings.