ARCHITECTURE: THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS: MODIFICATION POSSIBLE YES A BRAVO
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pg. X13

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LAST week was a curious one for architecture in New York. The Times Tower made two simultaneous, if startlingly contradictory, public appearances in print. Demolition began on Pennsylvania Station. The City Planning Commission met to consider ways to preserve the city's landmarks. And an architectural historian who has made the world, if not New York, conscious of the heritage of the past, was honored by a leading modern architect in the city's best new building.

The Times Tower's double bill was half nostalgia, half reality. Its first appearance was as a full-page illustration, wearing its familiar, 1904, pseudo-Florentine face, in a handsome and authoritative new book called "New York Landmarks." At the same time, it showed up in the news with a sleekly up-to-date facade, as a "modern showcase" for the Allied Chemical Corporation; a revised version of a remodeling plan announced last Spring.

On Times Square, the building is already enmeshed in the intricate metal scaffolding that heralds change, for the remodeling has begun. In the book, it is a kind of architectural pressed flower, a subject of sentimental contemplation. And the strange contradiction involved is probably as indicative as anything of the confusion surrounding the question of preservation in New York.

The Times Tower offers a perfect case in point. It is a landmark in terms of the city's history and growth and by virtue of its odd, easily identifiable silhouette. But it is not a great work of architecture, by any criteria. Should it be inviolate? Or is change justified, and if so, what kind?

Modification

The point that we made on this page in an article objecting to the first proposal for conversion in May was that the new design was worse than the old one. The destruction of even a fair landmark for a completely routine and banal commercial substitute seemed depressingly revealing of the state of our current cultural values. The replacement was without the awkward, but genuine historical qualities of the original, and equally without any kind of contemporary distinction. Balancing the two, the vote was old building, yes; new building, no.

In the intervening six months it is obvious that a sincere effort has been made to improve the scheme. The new facade, as it has been restudied, recalls the old one — no virtue in itself — but whatever the device, some sensitivity and interest have been added where there were none. The revision shows thought; it is design, not bland desecration.

Ironically, both new and old skins are phony wraparounds on the same structural steel frame, barely expressing its pattern or strength. But since the original was embarrassingly inept, the vote might now be called a tie.

Possible Yes

It is even possible to vote new building, yes; based on the fact that we are not losing a masterpiece, and the new, although still no masterpiece, has the promise of reclamation for Times Square. This is achieved not through newness alone, but through potential design quality, for even the new can be squalid. It just takes a little time to get shabby.

We would have preferred to vote for rehabilitation. But we do not consider this an inviolate building, particularly now that the alternative is a much improved design. Adaptation and re-use are the lifestream of architecture, and how far conversion should go is a matter of the individual structure and all of the surrounding circumstances. But the scales should be tipped a bit on the side of the old buildings, since most of the strikes are against them, and once gone, they are irreplaceable.

Penn Station is a tragic example. Nothing short of legal protection could have stopped its destruction, in spite of the fact that every qualified critic confirms its architectural merit and the beauty and solidity of its materials. Even saved by law, it would have remained an extremely dingy and problematic white elephant for want of funds, imagination and civic spirit. And it is not dead buildings that we need, but a living tradition.

The City Planning Commission meeting to consider protective legislation recommended by the Landmarks Commission, held as a kind of prelude to the Penn Station demolition, ended in another postponement. In the lumbering slow-motion process that seems to be a Parkinsonian accompaniment to any critically needed action, it went back to the Corporation Counsel for further study. New York has the Bard Act, which makes it possible for the city to enact such legislation, but it has studiously avoided using it thus far.

A Bravo

As fitting footnote to the week's activities, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the distinguished architectural historian and critic who has done more than any other single scholar to bring the Victorian Age back into focus, was honored in New York on his 60th birthday. Wearing a carefully cultivated and bearded Victorian Revival look, he was feted by Philip Johnson in the austerely un-Victorian Seagram Building, of which Mr. Johnson is co-architect with Mies van der Rohe.

Mr. Johnson is now the champion of a skyrocketing trend toward a kind of contemporary *Kunstgeschicte* nostalgia (he himself, is an impeccable scholar) that has opened the doors of modern architecture once more to traditional sources. This enlarged horizon, he explained, is a debt of the profession to history and to Professor Hitchcock. And so, while the old buildings disappear, the architects of the new ones turn their faces to the past. That was the week that was—a mixed one for the cause of preservation.