HERITAGE IN PERIL

Defense of Architectural Landmarks Is Purpose of Museum Display

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE cause of preservation—like politics—often makes strange bedfellows. The problem of America's disappearing architectural landmarks has brought together the National Trust for Historic Preservation (dedicated to the achievements of the past) and the Museum of Modern Art (equally dedicated to the achievements of the future) as co-sponsors, with the Architectural Forum of a provocative exhibition, "Architecture Worth Saving," to be on view at the Museum from Oct. 8 through Dec. 15.

The purpose of the exhibition is to awaken the public conscience to a current cultural crisis: the destruction of our architectural heritage. For it is becoming increasingly clear that the problem must be faced, or there will be no problem—and no landmarks—at all.

The cause, and the crisis, have already engendered some interesting, off-beat alliances. Not too long ago, Democratic leader Carmine De Sapio appeared at City Hall, representing a mixed political group of New York residents in an eloquent plea to save the character of Washington Square. Real estate entrepreneur William Zeckendorf, best known as a promotor of profitable and efficient new construction, recently acquired an old building of dubious practical uses in his dramatic rescue-purchase of Frank Lloyd Wright's domestic masterpiece of 1908, the famous Robie House in Chicago.

However, the joining of forces by the museum and the National Trust is not as strange as it seems, in the light of the museum's crusading history for avant-garde causes. Although the architecture of the eighteenth century enjoys popular sympathy and support, the monuments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are generally looked on as a series of ugly, vulgar mistakes deserving little admiration or respect. In defending this architecture and asking for its protection, the museum is, as usual, ahead of its time. Slow-moving public taste will probably require another generation to appreciate the value of what is being destroyed today. Many of these buildings are not only outstanding contributions to the art of architecture but their unique design and engineering advances are the foundation of the contemporary style that the museum has so effectively championed for so long.

The buildings in the exhibition—chosen from innumerable possibilities throughout the country—offer a pointed indictment of our disinterest and neglect. In the accompanying catalogue (a reprint from the Forum) they are tolled off in dramatic "Time-style" as "destroyed, doomed or delivered." Among those already lost to art and history: Bella Grove, one of the great plantation houses of Louisiana, burned by vagrants in 1952; the St. Louis iron-front buildings, a giant step forward in the development of modern metal construction, dismantled to make way for a memorial; Frank Lloyd Wright's 1904 Larkin Building in Buffalo, a structure of international influence in the development of contemporary design, torn down for a parking lot.

Buildings Coming Down

Facing imminent threat of destruction: The 1886 Allegheny Court House and jail in Pittsburgh, monumental masterpiece of one of America's master architects, Henry Hobson Richardson; the original East Front of the United States Capitol, to be demolished shortly for additional interior space.

By a curious anachronism, at the same time that we are destroying these nineteenth-twentieth century buildings or allowing them to fall into hopeless decay, we are enthusiastically reconstructing eighteenth century buildings that suffered a similar fate at an earlier time. Inspired by the success of Williamsburg, a conscientious, scholarly re-creation of the past, we have rushed to reconstruct old houses, factories, shops, streets, even whole villages, equipping them with real and reproduced furnishings and artifacts, complete to custodians in costumes.

This false-face architecture, with its romantic game of make-believe, is usurping the major part of our energies and enthusiasm while we close our eyes to the tragic losses close at hand. We are the victims of a strange new national fever, "galloping restorationitis."

Errors in Restoration

The danger of this striking new disease is not only the threat that it poses to any architecture after the early Eighteen Hundreds, but its peculiar, muddling effect on our sense of esthetic values. There is now an incredible confusion in the public mind between "original" and "replica," "authentic" and "copy." (We have even invented a remarkably foolish phrase, "authentic copy.") In the reconstructed monument, the visitor mistakes the evocation of the original for the real thing; he gives respectful homage to the second-hand.

Only this strange state of mind can explain the apparent willingness of Congress and the public to sanction the deliberate destruction of the Capitol's one remaining facade from the time of the Early Republic, to be replaced by a "replica," with the implication that no sacrifice is involved.

Reproduction by forgery is a crime, but a reproduction by "reconstruction" is a respectable and scholarly form of fraud (since there is no intention to deceive), devoid of original concept and worth no more than its materials.