Doomsday Notes on a Rotten Game
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IF this Cassandra column induces impatience or ennui with its weekly catastrophe count of diminishing landmarks, we suggest that you turn the pages for the latest discussion of nudity in the theater or this week's starlet's pronouncement that she wouldn't do it if she didn't feel it artistically, a subject that apparently never invokes impatience or ennui. That is the advantage of having architecture and environment lumped with arts and leisure. We offer entertainment and doomsday in the same section.

Here are the latest doomsday notices. In New York State a series of landmarks have been destroyed by fire in a few short months. It seems worth observing that the finger of God, or whatever force is at work, has unerringly struck down just those historic buildings that were being actively promoted for preservation at the same time that they stood in the path of expressways, urban renewal, private development plans or other "improvements."

Bannerman's Castle on the Hudson burned last month. In Troy, both the Greek Revival Eddy House and the cast-iron-fronted Warren Building were badly damaged by fire. In Albany the Quackenbush House, a rarity in the 18th-century Dutch style that had been converted into a tavern and stood in the path of a highway, suddenly burst into flames. All were properties that the Hudson River Valley Commission wished to see retained or restored in the interest of keeping the valley's esthetic and historical assets.

In August, the carriage house and barn at Springside, the Matthew Vassar estate in Poughkeepsie, burned in the early morning hours in a fire that the city fire chief, quoted in the Poughkeepsie Journal, labeled "definitely" arson. (Matthew Vassar made his money in the brewery business in the 19th century and contributed substantially to the college that took his name.)

Springside has been the subject of an intensive preservation campaign by the New York State Historic Trust, the Hudson River Valley Commission, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and a clutch of concerned historians led by Professor Thomas J. McCormick of Vassar College.

Robert Niles

Fire at Springside, Poughkeepsie, proposed national historic site
The fickle finger of fate picks landmarks

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The 45-acre estate with its cottage, gatehouse, carriage house and barn, built in the mid-19th century, is the only existing, authenticated, major work of this country's finest and most famous landscape architect, Andrew Jackson Downing. Downing was the man who virtually molded American environmental taste in the 19th century. The style that he set for the romantic, picturesque American scene, both in his prestige commissions and best-selling books, has been immortalized in the paintings of the Hudson River School. He died, with a kind of tragic appropriateness, in a Hudson River boat fire in 1852.

Landscape is perishable, but the outlines of topography and plan at Springside are clear enough to be restorable. The buildings, also by Downing, increased the site's historical and esthetic value. They are (and were) a particular American Victorian confection of board and batten siding, pointed and truncated gables and jigsaw-frosting trim known as Gothic Revival or Hudson River Bracketed.

Buildings in Downing landscapes were usually designed by his architect-partner, Alexander Jackson Davis. Downing's "cottages" have disappeared with his gardens and Davis's are becoming increasing rarities as prime examples are ruthlessly demolished. (Bridgeport's priceless and magnificent Harral-Wheeler House, a Davis Gothic Revival masterpiece with complete interiors and furnishings, was sacrificed to aggressive municipal knownothingness a few years ago —a national loss.) With their High Picturesque settings, these buildings are an irreplaceable and outstandingly lovely chapter in American horticultural and architectural history.

Shortly before the fire, Springside had been declared eligible for the National Register by the Department of the Interior. This means that the owners could get national landmark certification at any time they chose to apply. What they chose to do, some time before, was to put the property up for sale, applying to the Dutchess County Planning Board to have the acreage rezoned to permit house, apartment and commercial development, a request that was denied. It was this action that had alerted preservationists. The ensuing controversy brought public attention, a stream of visitors, authorized and unauthorized, and then the fire.

It must be understood that owners of historic sites have their problems, such as taxes and deterioration, coupled with the natural desire to turn the land into a profitable investment. Historic preservation is an expensive, nonprofit thing. Preservation on this scale is usually beyond the means of the owners, and requires collaborative action at local, state and national levels.

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In this case, the owners have expressed willingness to save the cottage. It must also be understood, however, that rezoning would lead to the complete destruction of the Downing landscape, and once zoning is changed and property sold, the new owner is not held to any plan, but may do anything he pleases.

The carriage house and barn that burned were beauties, but they were in very poor condition, and the high cost of their restoration was a major stumbling block to preservation. While they are a substantial loss, they were also a substantial problem. The better maintained cottage that remains is a vintage Downing building. The solution could, and should, be to restore that structure and the plantings for a unique state or national park. The Downing landscape, one of the most enchanting art forms this country ever originated, is worth the same attention as that given the sequoias. There is more to conservation than forest preserves.

There are a number of reasons why historic sites are especially vulnerable to fire. First—old, vacant property is notoriously prone to vandalism. There is a sick segment of society that likes to see old buildings burn. It is made easy by the buildings' deserted state and the lack of proper guard, even for landmark structures. It is extremely difficult to protect an estate such as Springside from this kind of attack. Windows break immediately in empty buildings, as if from some inaudible sonic boom. Poorly locked doors invite the most brutal kind of damage. Vandalism is a rotten game, widely played. And so is arson.

Then there are old buildings that burn mysteriously, and in the burning remove the only obstacle to a profitable deal for the site. Usually the deal has been held up by the agitation of preservationists. And there are deserted and unprofitable buildings that owners would like quietly to say good riddance to, but who are deterred by outside interest in their historical or architectural value. Such buildings sometimes are insured and sometimes they burn. A good fire, whatever the cause, makes all argument academic.

It doesn't take a fire buff or a preservation buff to recognize what's going on. But it will take a lot more recognition of the rapid rate of attrition through these "accidents" to save the country's remaining landmarks. And that includes recognition of still another kind of vandalism practiced in the name of renewal and progress by public agencies as well as by private developers. We have nothing to lose but our heritage.