

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: GREENFIELD, MASS., GAINS A BANK AND LOSES A MUSEUM ...

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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

### Greenfield, Mass., Gains a Bank and Loses a Museum

**T**he subject of this column two weeks ago was a striking new addition to an important college museum—the wing designed by Venturi and Rauch for the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin, Ohio. What one notices particularly, beyond the exceptional nature of the solution and the collection, is the high level of cultural sensibility and arts expertise that exists in the United States today—not just in the big cities, but right across the country.

This kind of excellent community or college museum is a distinctly American phenomenon. But there is another kind of community museum—one that has no collection of significance, that exists on local and traveling shows, makes modest, sensitive and specialized acquisitions, and focuses on a program of general cultural and educational activities. Frequently it is coupled with the preservation of a fine old building that has outlived an earlier role.

This brand of museum is equally an American phenomenon. There are now thriving art and cultural centers in old courthouses and other public buildings, and churches and historic houses too numerous to count: The Danforth Museum in Framingham, Mass., occupies a recycled school, there is a history museum in the Old Pittsburgh Post Office, and a money museum in the restored San Francisco Mint,

to name a few outstanding successes, all of which had rough sledding to get started.

The subject today is an attempt to establish such a community museum in a small New England town, Greenfield, Mass. It is not a story with a happy ending—yet.

Recently, Greenfield's Franklin Savings Institution moved out of its 1911 building (the kind of dignified, classical structure that says "bank" on Main Streets across America) into a new building farther down the street. Following the move, a Museum Committee was formed to try to buy and convert the old bank building. With an interior two stories high and working security system, it was perfect for the purpose.

I don't suppose I should keep anyone in suspense; they didn't succeed. But this is an instructive case history of the community problems and relationships that are involved, which make these things work or fail. Nor is the possibility of a museum closed for this town.

Quite aside from the museum issue, the iconography of bank architecture in this century, particularly in small cities and towns, is a cultural statement about America worthy of study in itself. The distance between the old and new Franklin Savings Institutions is less than one block

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Greenfield's new bank, left, and the dignified 1911 structure, right.

Chuck Blake

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# Greenfield, Mass., Loses a Museum

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on Main Street. The distance in time is 66 years. The difference in style is from carved marble and granite Beaux Arts classicism to plain brick commercial box. The new building is decent and bland; the old had style and substance.

Directly adjoining the old building is a remodeled bank, the Franklin County Trust Company (no relation) that may be the ugliest building in town. This bank took a perfectly good old building and substituted a harem screen facade in what might be called New England Arabian Nights style. Worse than ugliness, is the street crime common to almost all Main Streets committed by most new or remodeled buildings: the scalelessness, vulgarity and insensitivity that destroys all appropriate street relationships.

I hope fervently that I have not been misinformed—or rather, that I have—but these assorted crimes appear to have been compounded by the fact that Franklin Savings demolished one of the town's oldest and loveliest Greek Revival buildings to accommodate its new bank and drive-in window.

To return to the matter of the museum, Franklin Savings set a price of \$75,000 on its old building, and gave the Museum Committee until the end of January to get the money. The Committee's goal was to raise \$100,000 for purchase, remodeling, and initial operating costs. One of the bank's officers worked actively in the drive.

Several regional groups were involved, including the Arts Council of Franklin County and the Deerfield Valley

Arts Association, which pledged \$21,000 that it had accumulated toward establishing a local museum—an idea it had been nurturing since it was founded in the 1930's. Pledges were sought for \$50,000 with one supporter's assurance that he could raise matching funds.

The campaign was thrown badly off beam by two factors. A professional museum fund-raiser, called in for advice, would not touch the project for less than a \$250,000 campaign. Professional fund-raisers don't like modest projects because they preclude costly methods and produce only modest fees. That dampened everyone's ardor, and the promise of immediate matching funds evaporated. By the January deadline, the money had not been raised.

But the real deterrent has involved a very basic and serious economic issue. One of Greenfield's chief industries, the Millers Falls Company (now absentee-owned by Ingersoll Rand) will either build a new plant in town or relocate where costs are cheaper. This traumatic uncertainty has stalled both the local economy and the pledges to the museum. Clearly, art and business are one.

In fact, the relationship cuts both ways. In a town like this, a museum needs the financial commitment and support of business executives and plant employees. But establishing the museum on Main Street would have enhanced Greenfield's downtown economically, as well as culturally and environmentally, bringing new activity (read life and money) to the business district. Like so many other business districts, Greenfield has indulged in the consistent destruction of its character and quality through the kind of mistaken "modernization" that produces standard commercial squalor.

The Franklin Savings Institution had nibbles for the building while the museum drive was going on. And so, with the breakdown of the fund-raising campaign, the bank has just sold its sound, handsome building to the Country Trust Company, which has acquired a fine structure that could not be duplicated for many times the price. (Greenfield does seem to be overbanked)

One hopes Country Trust entertains no Arabian Nights fantasies. One prays that they have no itch to "modernize." One trusts that they will let it alone.

Greenfield's museum program was reasonable and realistic. And its loss is more than a museum or a landmark conversion. What is really being lost is the kind of revitalization that enriches as well as renews, because it adds to a community's life in a way that feeds back directly into the quality of its environment. They will have to try again.

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