ARCHITECTURE VIEW: SALVAGING ORNAMENTS FROM NEW YORK'S PAST

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Salvaging Ornaments From New York's Past

On the familiar theory that half a loaf is better than none, the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects is showing bits and pieces of buildings. "New York's Stepchildren" is a small exhibition of photographs of architectural ornament on about two dozen city-owned structures—some of which are abandoned, and some of which are headed for sale or demolition.

What these buildings share is "redundancy," to use the British term for the superfluous or obsolete work of architecture. In this case, they are mostly late 19th and early 20th-century fire and police stations, schools and libraries (unfortunately, no dates or designers are given)—the architectural flotsam and jetsam on the waves of the city's official administrative and cultural life. All are rich in stone reliefs, statuary, or eccentric decorative details, and the idea is that when these buildings go, the ornamental work should be preserved by some orderly municipal process.

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The show's wistful title is quite accurate; in fact, the subtitle is "An Exhibition of Unloved Works of Art on Public Buildings Looking for New Homes." One might say unloved public buildings. For these are all buildings that nobody wants, least of all the city. This salon des réfusés has been organized by the New York City Art Commission and modestly mounted at the A.I.A. headquarters (20 West 40th Street, through December 31), under a grant from the New York Community Trust. The photographs are by Candia Ogle and Gabriel Seymour. The selection grows out of an earlier New York City public buildings survey carried out by Columbia University, under the direction of Victor Caliandro, for the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

But this is no exercise in arcane taste or nostalgia. When the revised City Charter goes into effect this January, the City Art Commission acquires new powers and duties in respect to these buildings and ones like them.

The Art Commission is the 78-year-old, 10-member group that operates out of a City Hall garret and passes on the design and art work of all new buildings constructed by the city, or put up on city-owned land. It constitutes a review board for the art and architecture of New York's parks and public structures. But until now it has only dealt with new projects. (If its record is one of diplomacy rather than daring, it is essential to remember that the Commission only reviews the work submitted to it; it cannot dictate artists or performance. Official New York art and architecture may seem the apotheosis of the humdrum, but the Commission has quietly elevated atrocities to acceptability—an accomplishment of sorts over the years.)

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After the first of this year, the Commission must, in addition, review the fine and decorative art embellishment of all city-owned buildings scheduled for change or extinction and arrange for the salvation of deserving examples. According to the new Charter, "the Commission shall maintain and make available for inspection a register of works of art which have been preserved." It is also supposed to set up something called a "lapidarium," in which the salvaged municipal art can be kept for recycling in city construction or renovation. A sort of home for old stones.

The exhibition, therefore, is meant both to inform the public that this new preservation power exists, and to alert architects to the possibilities for reusing this kind of art and ornament.

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The first question, I suppose, is when such ornament or sculpture can be properly defined as a work of art—something the Commission members must decide. The answer is that everything is relative, a reply that is really not meant as a dodge. Carving that was quite ordinary in its day is now both a rarity and a curiosity, improved by history and scarcity; the corbeled masks and beaded mouldings and foliated cornices that are reduced to rubble today are an irreplaceable and barely reproducible craft. There are surprising gargoyles, startled owls, phlegmatic Indians and innocent young faces, cartouches, columns, shields and friezes, executed with skill and even wit.

These bits and pieces tend to look very good indeed at time of relentlessly minimalist architecture. (Minimalist architecture was with us before the avant-garde discovered minimalist painting and sculpture; it was brought into being by a peculiar combination of conscious esthetics and escalating costs. Architectural minimalism, however, is more dismal than succinct; its impact is from the sheer scale of its visual ennui. By the block or the mile, it can be pretty impressively awful stuff.)

Some of the stone ornament in this show is very expert and beautiful carving; some of it is fairly pedestrian workman's vernacular. But with the present state of art, craft, taste and technology, it is all a vanishing species, a kind of essential urban enrichment that is sorely missed when it is gone. There is really no argument about the standard it represents.

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But a still larger question is raised by some of the examples shown, in which the "expendable" or "obsolete" buildings are better than the ornament. The whole adds up to far more than the sum of its parts. That is distinctly true for such buildings in the show as the abandoned Old Police Headquarters on Centre Street, a richly ornate classical fruitcake of 1909, and two neat but not gaudy Beaux Arts fire stations—a splendid small French château at White and Lafayette Streets and Engine 14, at 14 East 18th Street.

The ornament here is intrinsic, inseparable from the total design. Its removal becomes architectural tokenism, or genteel Philistinism. Nice try, but irrelevant to the real architectural and urban values involved. In such cases it would seem more important to be able to keep the building.

And yet, *in extremis*, when the building is in a dangerous or desolate part of the city and obviously on its way to ruin, there is no other course than to send those drip moldings, shell lunettes and French Gothic dormers to the lapidarium. It is an odd and sad way to keep the past, but these are odd times. The gesture must often suffice for the reality; a pious and ironic respect for the art object replaces the act of art itself. And what a wonderful dig that lapidarium will make for some future Schliemann or Carter.