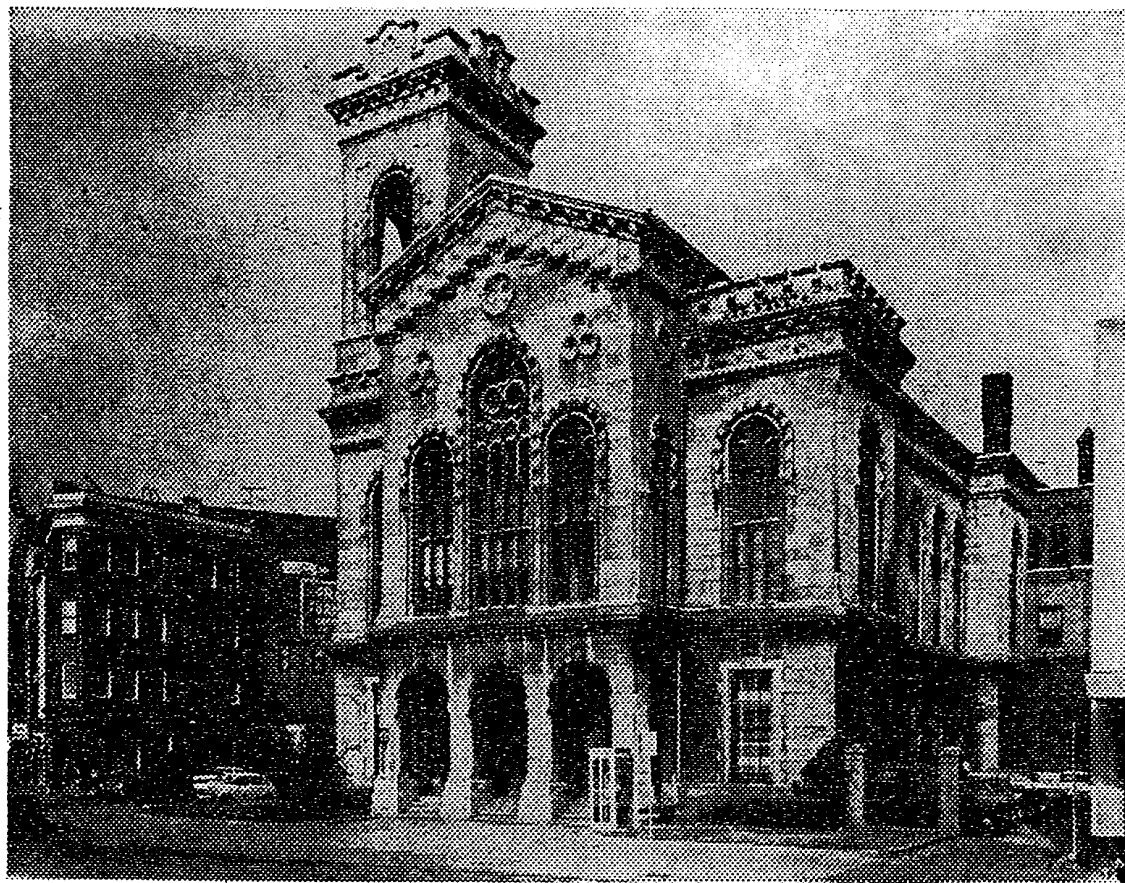


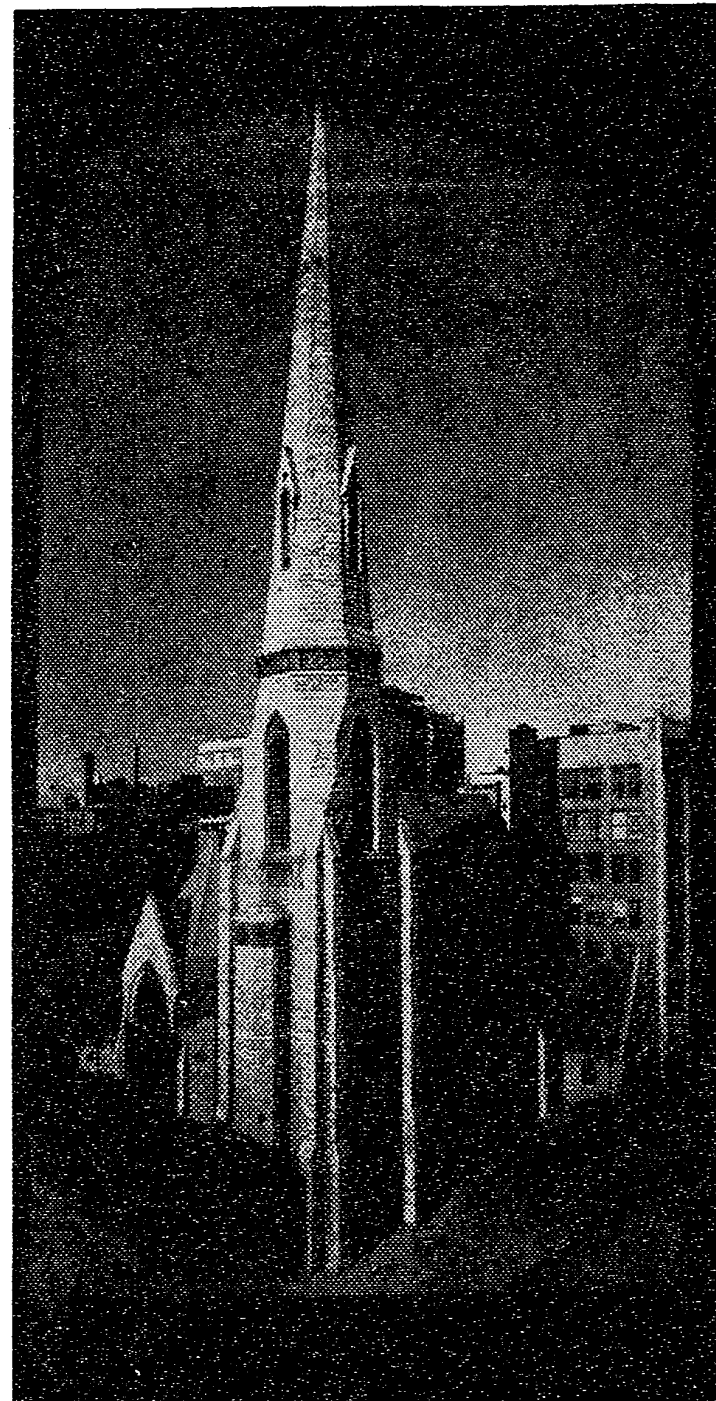
UGLY CITIES AND HOW THEY GROW

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 15, 1964; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. X24



ARCHITECTURE WORTH SAVING—Third Onondaga County Courthouse, above, St. Paul's Church, right, listed as Syracuse landmarks by N. Y. State Council on the Arts.



UGLY CITIES AND HOW THEY GROW

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE crisis of our cities can be stated in very simple terms: they are becoming increasingly hideous. Underneath the ugliness and often causing it are many real ills brought on by overwhelming social and economic changes and population pressures since the war. The cities are sick, and urban renewal is government-applied first aid.

One suspects that the doctor's cures may be killing the patient. Visit almost any city in the United States and its most striking aspect is a bulldozed wasteland in its heart. Out of the wasteland, more often than not, rises another dreary wasteland of new construction.

The story is the same for private redevelopment. Only one sure fact emerges—the new is replacing the old indiscriminately, as a kind of sanitary cure-all, often without satisfactory rationale or results. All too frequently, good is replaced by bad.

These remarks could apply to almost any American city, since most share the same ills and cures, but they are prompted by a visit to Syracuse, N. Y., a community of approximately 216,000 afflicted with all of the symptoms of a city this size, at this particular time.

There is one important difference. A significant pilot

report on the architecture of Syracuse and the surrounding county from the 18th century to circa 1910 has been prepared by the New York State Council on the Arts. Its purpose is to promote preservation and use of the city and county's best buildings and their incorporation into the redevelopment taking place.

Architectural Assets

"Architecture Worth Saving in Onondaga County" is a remarkably competent survey of buildings of architectural value and historical importance. A trend-setting study, it gives official recognition to architecture of quality as an art and as a necessity within the framework of urban growth and change.

In spite of a general effect of spotty disorder, Syracuse is rich in good architecture of all periods. In addition to a range from great Greek Revival to high style High Victorian it has the most magnificent "modernistic" fruitcake that this observer has ever seen, in the Niagara Mohawk Power Building of the nineteen thirties. What is happening to all of it, however, is so typical, and so deplorable, that Syracuse can stand as a case history.

Clinton Square, the former downtown center from which business has now moved southward, is a well-scaled public space surrounded by

fine vintage buildings. The Syracuse Savings Bank of 1876 by Joseph Lyman Silsbee, who later trained Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago, is a Victorian Gothic masterpiece. Flanking it is a splendid Second Empire structure, the Gridley Building of 1867, and the third Onondaga County Courthouse of 1856 a landmark of high quality by Horatio White. Opposite is a competent Classic Revival post office of 1928. Each is a top example of its style.

Between them are more recent structures, dull beyond credulity, but still not destructive of the complex. The old buildings relate perfectly in size and scale to the square; they offer rich stylistic variety to the city. The rub, of course, is that most of them are obsolete.

This is the tragedy and the problem of urban "progress." The Savings Bank exists by grace of a previous owner who prized it. The courthouse, which has had "temporary" government uses for 50 years, faces demolition with the removal of the adjoining Police Headquarters to a new building in Syracuse's chief urban renewal area, where a combined civic and cultural center will rise.

This renewal scheme and its buildings are not being evaluated here. That would take another article. Its ambitious concentration of cultural services may be ques-

tionable planning and an unrealistic burden for a small city, but it promises at least one structure of special interest—a striking museum by I. M. Pei.

There are no plans for preservation of the outstanding older structures on Clinton Square. Syracuse is wearing those peculiar renewal blinders that make it fail to see the possibility of the present conversion of a historic structure for a concert hall for example, rather than marking a nebulous future "x" in the new cultural center.

Urban Nightmare

The city wears blinders in many ways. It fails to appreciate the superb cut granite mass and steeple of St. Paul's Church. It ignores the numbing object lesson of the contrast between its strong, rusticated, 19th-century Richardsonian City Hall and the flat, pusillanimous, 20th-century State office building next to it that wins some kind of booby prize for to-

tally undistinguished design.

In cities like Syracuse, new and old coexist as bellicose, resentful strangers. There is a curious, Martian mixture of almost surrealist strangeness; Queen Anne gingerbread next to cantilevered steel. The old waits grotesquely for the new to sweep it to destruction, and the all-important lesson of urban design is still unlearned. You don't wish the old city away; you work with its assets, allying them to the best new building for strengthening relationships for both.

At present, most urban renewal seems doomed to sterility. As long as its architects reject the past and fail to deal in continuity, what they produce will make a nightmare mix. Values will be lost instead of added. The Council's architectural study is the first sign of the civilized maturity that can save cities like Syracuse from self-destruction.