

St. Louis Parking Lot?

Adler and Sullivan's Garrick Theater was leveled for a parking garage some years ago in Chicago; their Wainwright Building was scheduled to be torn down for a parking lot in St. Louis this spring. That is the classic route to oblivion for America's landmark buildings. The way to blacktop is paved with this country's architectural heritage.

But it may not happen in St. Louis, thanks to action taken by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This action is almost as historic as the building itself. For the first time, the Trust has taken an option to purchase a landmark property that is a major urban structure. In an act of courage, conviction and some risk, the Trust has unequivocally embraced the dilemma of how to save a large commercial building in the inner city pressured by obsolescence, new development and downtown land values.

The hoped-for answer is to find an investor who will take on the necessary renovation through restoration and installation of new mechanical services that will give this important structure competitive economic life. The 1892 Wainwright is an uncommonly handsome and seminal skyscraper with the common problem of its genre: It no longer pays its way. Ten stories of steel frame clothed in granite, sandstone and intricate terracotta demonstrate the earliest and highest fusion of the new structure and style.

The purchase-option buys time through July. With the present owners' concern and cooperation, the search for a solution for this registered National Historic Landmark is on. Such successfully revitalized buildings as Boston's Old City Hall, with its new prestige offices at high rentals, prove that it can be done. The alternative is the negative immortality of a marker that tells only what of art and history has been destroyed.