Architecture: The Bucolic Bulldozer
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The Bucolic Bulldozer

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE British, given to understatement, call it Outrage. Americans persist in calling it progress. We are just beginning to recognize it for what it is—piracy of our patrimony. Demolition of the past goes beyond the destruction of history and art to the impoverishment of the environment and the loss of those physical factors that nourish the sense of identity and worth of individuals and a nation.

Take New York State. Anyone who wants to can add bulldozer-watching to foliage-watching this fall. If you're in the vicinity of Hudson, N. Y., this weekend, for example, you might warm up by attending the Sept. 15 hearing of the Hudson River Valley Commission. It has been called, with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the New York State Trust and the Historic American Buildings Survey as interested parties, to consider the impending demolition of Hudson's General Worth Hotel.

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This classical building, erected as the Hudson Hotel in 1837, is illustrated in Talbot Hamlin's definitive work on The Greek Revival in America. It is on the National Register, a landmark listing maintained by the Department of the Interior that represents the ultimate attestation of a building's historical or architectural value. It has been abandoned for the past six years and the city of Hudson plans to tear it down.

Hudson is a historic town caught typically in the dilemma of renewal. Laid out in the 18th century with a rare riverfront park, it was built substantially and beautifully in early 19th-century styles. Many of these buildings still stand. Some are beyond salvation, their ruin accelerated by slumlord abuse. A few are kept in the renewal plan. The hotel will go, not for new construction, however, but merely as spot clearance. It is part of a sadly deteriorated 19th-century block that the city wants to raze as a fire hazard, and, curiously enough, Federal funds will pay two-thirds of the demolition cost. Federal funds are also available for preservation.

The State Trust has offered a matching grant to the community to pay for half of the cost of rehabilitation, if the remaining half is raised in any fashion. But Hudson is also typical in its apathy toward the past. It exemplifies the common local lack of interest versus national, or "outside," concern.

In fairness, historic cities are in a dreadful bind. Federal aid for preservation in urban renewal areas has been too little and too late, with legislation enacted only after the national scope of the damage of total bulldozer plans became tragically clear.

But on the other hand, local plans almost universally ignore local assets of place, history and architecture. There is a sublime blindness in local programs and in consultants' reports (big business now) that cannot be excused even in view of the obstacles of money, legal procedure and bureaucratic administration that seem stacked against a sensitive solution. There is a case to be made for at least starting by knowing what should be done. Lack of vision or even simple architectural incomprehension is reinforced by the pressing immediacy of problems of physical deterioration and economic crisis.

The renewal formula, repeated over and over, is the destruction of indigenous character and assets for a rubber-stamp commercial replacement of the most mundane kind of construction with no sense of place, quality or identity at all. The magic word is "new," a magic that wears off quickly and disastrously. And thus we lose the only heritage the country will ever have.

That is the way we lose it officially. Another way is through private development.

While you are in lovely Columbia County you might take a last look at a superbly sited historic mansion with sweeping valley views called The Hill, about four miles south of Hudson. It is a colonnaded beauty begun by Henry Livingston in 1796 and completed in 1801, modeled after a Palladian villa, or, more likely, Philadelphia's Woodlawn, with oval salons and Italianate detail. The authoritative WPA Guide to New York State, after describing Boscobel, which has been well restored and highly publicized, goes on to say, "Even more remarkable is The Hill . . . "

You can see The Hill until November, if the developer who owns the house and land keeps his word about the demolition date. Landmarks have a way of disappearing on development property if not watched. The developer, a Long Island real estate man, William Raganella, Jr., is obviously anxious to get the wrecking over with, although he has an abstract kind of sympathy for the quality and historic value of the house. But it could be quite a headache if it is still up when he takes his development scheme to the local planning board for approval, particularly if the State Trust's application for National Registry listing has come through.

His plan is to raze it before then. After all, he has an investment in a 60-acre lake, stream and highway frontage ripe for houses, apartments and industrial use, and if landmarks aren't sacred, investments are.

He says that the site is perfect for apartment houses. And irony of ironies, he points out that the nearness of the planned community college at Olana will create the housing market that he anticipates. The preservation of Olana, the home and studio of the Hudson River painter Frederick Church, has sealed the doom of The Hill.

Mr. Raganella is willing to sell the mansion, with five acres of land and no guarantee of what will happen on his acreage around it, for $75,000. It has been advertised in The Times, and a Hudson broker, Peter Drew, is handling it. The period furnishings were auctioned off "very successfully" this summer.

It would be nice, Mr. Raganella says, if the landmark could be saved, as long as it doesn't interfere with his plans. He suggests a country club or restaurant, but he has no intention of sponsoring it or proposing its community use for the new, town-size development, under either his own or the county's responsibility. It is sell or raze, period.

"It's a white elephant as far as I'm concerned," he says. "There are potentials for this place—but I'm not the fellow who's going to save it."

Unless some fellow or some group does, The Hill will be reduced to rubble even before the development scheme is completed or approved. This raises some large questions for the Livingston or Columbia County planning boards or officials—now, not when it is too late—from the optimum development of this large tract of land to the best planning use of its natural, historical and architectural assets. Answers will be in the public interest.

If you still have the heart to follow the bucolic bulldozer trail, you could go north to Burlington, Vt. On the east side of City Hall Park are three buildings, a bank, an old fire station and City Hall. They form a containing wall for the open space of the park; something that urban designers know has the effect of stabilizing that space so that it does not "leak" off into traffic on all sides.

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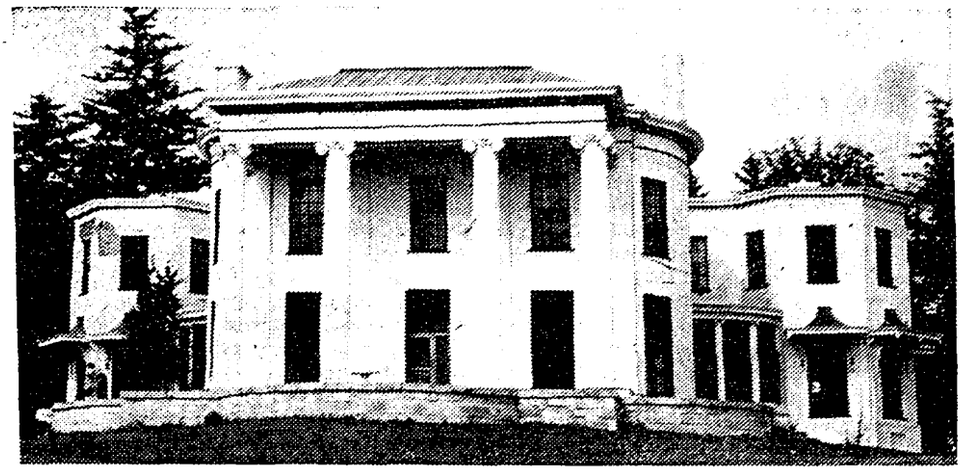
The building with the most character is the Ethan Allen fire station, a severe brick volume of considerable style and strength in the center of the row, that ties the two lesser volumes of the architecturally nondescript bank and City Hall together. In a sense, it saves them. But it is about to be torn down, for a gap-tooth parklet between the buildings.

The reasoning is completely routine. It is cheaper to raze than to save, and apathy toward the building is matched only by bland unawareness of its architectural and urban role. It could be partially remodeled, as a holding operation at minimum expense, until further space is needed. But American cities seem bent on destroying themselves for the chimera of progressive change. If it is not profit, it is pragmatism, and both are the enemies of environmental excellence.



Ted Lambert

The Hill, historic mansion near Hudson, N. Y., doomed by development
"I'm not the fellow who's going to save it"