Culture Is As Culture Does
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AFTER 50 years of life and 20 years of death, the the great Adler and Sullivan Auditorium Theater in Chicago is back in business again. Orchestra Hall, also in Chicago, has been beautifully spruced up for its 68th birthday. In St. Louis, a 1925 movie palace has been successfully and sumptuously transformed into Powell Symphony Hall, complete with handsome bar from New York's demolished Metropolitan Opera House.

In New York, a few years ago, Carnegie Hall was rescued from the developers and refurbished. A lot of musicians would still rather play there than in the new, acoustically and esthetically controversial Philharmonic Hall that almost sealed its doom. In Brooklyn, the Academy of Music is being quietly restored to its original turn-of-the-century elegance.

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Sentimentalism? Hardly. This is no more than a practical coming of cultural age, a belated recognition that fine old buildings frequently offer the most for the money in an assortment of values, including cost, and above all, that new cultural centers do not a culture make. It indicates the dawning of certain sensibilities, perspectives and standards without which arts programs are mockeries of everything the arts stand for.

The last decade has seen city after city rush pell mell into the promotion of great gobs of cultural real estate. It has seen a few good new theaters and a lot of bad ones, temples to bourgeois muses with all the panache of suburban shopping centers. The practice has been to treat the arts in chamber of commerce, rather than in creative terms. That is just as tragic as it sounds.

The trend toward preservation is significant not only because it is saving and restoring, with all too rare knowledge and spirit, some superior buildings that are testimonials to the creative achievements of other times, but also because it is bucking the conventional wisdom of the conventional power structure that provides the backing for conventional cultural centers to do it.

That wisdom, as it comes true-blue from the hearts and minds of real estate dealers and investment bankers, is that you don't keep old buildings; they are obsolete. Anything new is better than anything old and anything big is better than anything small and if a few cultural values are lost along the way it is not too large a price to pay. In addition, the new, big buildings must be all in one place so they will show. They'll not only serve the arts, they'll improve the surrounding property values. Build now, and fill them later.

At the same time, tear down the past, rip out cultural roots, erase tradition; rub out the architectural evidence that the arts flowered earlier in our cities and enriched them, and that this enrichment *is* culture. Substitute a safe and sanitary status symbol for the loss. Put up the shiny mediocrities of the present and demolish the shabby masterpieces of the past. This is the ironic other side of the "cultural explosion" coin. In drama, and in life, irony and tragedy go hand in hand.

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Chicago's Auditorium is such a masterpiece. With its glowing, golden ambiance, its soaring arches and superstage from which whispers can be heard in the peanut gallery, it became a legend in its own time. One of the great 19th-century works of Louis Sullivan and Dankmar Adler and an anchor-point of modern architectural history, it has been an acknowledged model of acoustical and esthetic excellence. (Interestingly, it is a hard theater to "mike" today, and many modern performers, untrained in balance and projection, and reliant on technical mixing of sound, find it hard to function in a near-perfect house.)

Until October, 1967, the last performance at the Auditorium was of "Hellzapoppin'" in 1941, and the last use of the great stage was for U.S.O. bowling alleys during the war. Closed after that, it settled into decay for the next 20 years. Falling plaster filled the hall and the golden ceiling was partly ruined by broken roof drains.

Last fall the Auditorium reopened, not quite in its old glory, but close to it. The splendors of the house were traced in the eight-candlepower glory of carbon filament light bulbs of the same kind used in 1889 when the theater, and electricity, were new. Their gentle brilliance picked out restored arches, balcony curves, frescoed lunettes, stenciled traceries and plaster friezes in warm gilt and umber.

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The story of the Auditorium's death and resurrection is another of life's little cultural ironies.

In 1904 the Chicago Symphony moved to the new, smaller Orchestra Hall. In 1929 the Chicago Opera pulled out for Samuel Insull's opera house on Wacker Drive. A 4,237-seat house, minus symphony and opera, was hard to fill, then and now. But the Auditorium was never meant to be profitable; that was why Adler and Sullivan encased it in a hotel and office structure to carry it commercially, and this did work for a while. Then only the Auditorium's formidable granite walls kept it from being torn down.

In 1957 the building was acquired and the commercial parts used by Roosevelt University. In 1960 the university created the Auditorium Theater Council, a legal act that made it possible to turn the theater over to a private group for restoration and operation. The Council was headed by Mrs. John V. Spachner, whose life-long dream it has been to bring the Auditorium back to life.

It took seven years, against all kinds of odds, to do the job. It had to be done on a hard cash, pay-as-you-go basis, because the Council, in order to protect the university, its trustees and council members from liabilities due to loans, contracts or theater operation is prohibited legally from spending anything except money actually in hand. This is a continuing impediment.

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Fund-raising ran into trouble immediately when it was announced that the new McCormack Place convention hall would include a 5,000-seat theater. It was built, it turned out to be an acoustical dud, and the whole thing subsequently burned down. But the biggest blow came in 1962, with the feasibility study of the Council's architectural consultants, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. For a fee of $50,000 they told the group that it would cost $4¼-million to restore the building, and that it was structurally unsound.

Another Chicago architect and Auditorium buff, Harry Weese, who has also refurbished Orchestra Hall, was certain that the building was solid. He wrote to the Council, offering to help without charge, and his answer was his appointment as head of the building committee. The final answer, with theater and engineering consultants George Izenour and Fred N. Severud, using valuable information in the S.O.M. study and historical research by Crombie Taylor, is a sound, functioning house for just over $2-million. It raises a healthy skepticism about other it-can't-be-done preservation studies.

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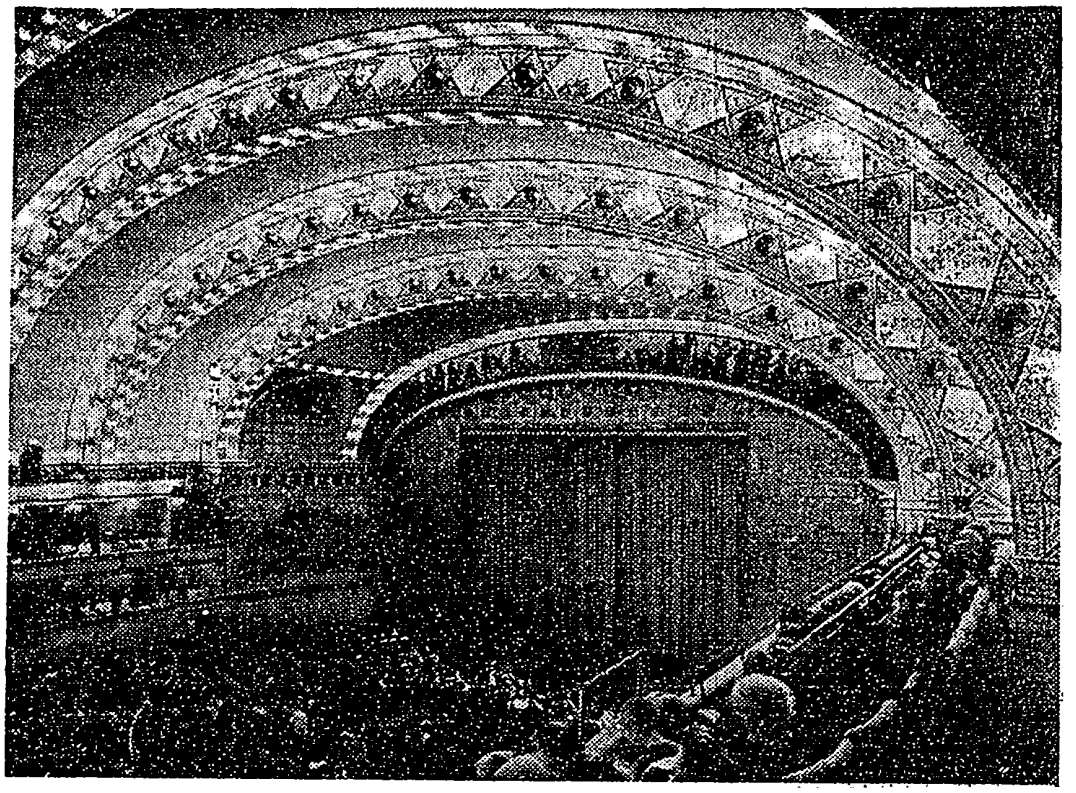
Pay as you go has left some gaps. Originally, almost every inch of flat wall was covered with Sullivan's characteristic laced, gold stencil ornament, and the luster of the house is considerably dimmer without it. Mechanical features are incomplete. But the work will go on.

In New York, the same kind of thing is being achieved without fanfare at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. A quasi-public institution, it is being restored over a ten-year period by a team of young architects, MacFadyen and Knowles, with city money, under Parks Department aegis.

We have never had greater technical means or expertise to make our landmarks bloom. The question is no longer whether we can bring old theaters back to new brilliance, but whether we can fill them when they're done. As with the new centers, that will be the acid cultural test.



Richard Nickel

Restored Auditorium Theater in Chicago, Adler and Sullivan, architects, 1889
It raises skepticism about it-can't-be-done preservation