Functionalism Triumphs: Solid Granite Courthouse Vanishing In Trend to Businesslike Buildings

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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The closing of the doors of the stately Hudson County Courthouse earlier this year echoed across the country. When the judges left their marble-colonnaded courtrooms for functional modern quarters in a new building next door, they made a move that is being made, in one form or another, in almost every American city. They left behind offices of solid oak and mahogany and moved into quarters lined with flexwood.

An Appraisal

If county officials had deliberately placed the two buildings in their side-by-side position as an object lesson in the decline and fall of American public architecture, they could not have provided a better example. Never has the deterioration of style and standards been so clearly and devastatingly illustrated.

Regarded as Obsolete

By the pragmatic measurement of population growth and space needs, the old courthouse is obsolete. No one wants a circa 1910, solid Maine granite building with bronze lanterns and crestings and a four-story interior rotunda of pearl gray marble, opening through all floors to a central dome, embellished by murals and surrounded by polished Italian green marble Ionic columns.

Its style was "Modern Renaissance," or Beaux Arts, after the name of the school in France where this country's best architects studied at the beginning of the century. Its designer was Hugh Roberts. The buildings that the French-trained American architects came back to create, the critic and historian Fiske Kimball has pointed out, "had no equal anywhere at the time, not even in France itself."

Offered the courthouse for one dollar as a substitute for the dingy Victorian structure which has the singular historical asset of having housed the Hague administration, Jersey City Mayor Thomas Whelan replied that the city is in the process of "liquidating its unnecessary real estate holdings" and "has no need for a ceremonial city hall."

"Waste Space"

There is no nonsense about ceremony in the new Hudson County Administration and Courthouse Building that now stands next to the old one. It has been characterized as "strictly functional from top to bottom and from inside out." As the architects of the new building have observed, the rotunda of the old building is "waste space."

Instead of a soaring central well, in which the entire space of the building is caught and celebrated, there is a low-ceilinged, businesslike lobby with flat granite panel walls, fluorescent lighting and a terrazzo floor. Instead of four figures of Fame in the dome's pendentives by the celebrated turn-of-the-century painter, Edwin Blashfield, and murals of New Jersey history by Howard Pyle, Frank D. Millet and Charles Y. Turner, there is a free-form squiggle in the terrazzo floor. Plastic plants and recorded music take care of esthetic and spiritual requirements.

Above ground level, walls are penitentiary-style structural glazed tile. In the old building, there are marble railings and wainscoting for every floor and corridor. The new walls are plaster. The new courtrooms are finished with paper-thin wood applied like wallpaper. There is vestigial marble trim.

On the outside of the new building, a stolid attachment of Indiana limestone makes a mock-formal entrance to a Catalogue Commercial structure with a middling green, stock glass curtain wall. It is ornamented with a handy paste-on figure of Justice.

Exterior extruded aluminum mullion sections holding the glass panels have unsightly connections; glass and window sash come together sloppily and abruptly; joints are casual inside and out. The side port-cochere that now faces a weedy field surrounding the old courthouse, with the obvious purpose of serving future parking on its site, rests on lumpily welded and painted steel beams. The noted architect Mies van der Rohe once said of building, "God is in the details."

The materials and details of the old courthouse, according to contemporary accounts, were selected for "grace, dignity and vigor." It was meant to convey "a feeling of strength and durability." Descriptions of the new building focus on the splendors of its heating, cooling and elevator systems.

Built in two stages, from 1954 to 1957 and from 1963 to 1966, the new building cost $14-million. Its architects are Comparetto and Kenny of Jersey City. The old courthouse, one-third the size, was built for $3-million. Its replacement price would be untouchable. An additional $3-million, estimated by the architects of the new building as the cost of necessary mechanical renovation, would bring the old structure to $6-million.

Today, its classical splendor looms as some surrealist vision in the peculiarly formless mélange of shabby, semi-suburban bungalows, ordinary commercial construction, chaotic signs and esthetic squalor that is the Jersey City environment. Its gray grandeur stands aloof on a grassy rise. Children slide down the dry slope on corrugated cardboard.

It was in 1910 that Pennsylvania Station was completed. The story is repeated over and over. The landmark invites the wreckers and its replacement reduces the public image to the lowest possible common denominator. Architecture has ceased to be a noble art.