

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Good News From the Witch of Salem

I am not one for silver linings or Panglossian optimism; I deal too much in the darker sides of people and cities. I am as aware as anyone that the world, or a good part of it, is teetering on the brink. It may even seem odd at such a time to suggest that a few things are going right. One small thing that is going very right, very quietly, and that will have noticeable long-term effects, is the consciousness that cities have developed about themselves. This self-discovery, brought about by calamitous renewal and the recognition of something called the environment, is barely 10 years old. It has been largely unheralded urban revolution. But it is now generally acknowledged that an active awareness of a city's character, amenity and style, of its cultural and architectural tradition, of its ambience and quality of life, are as essential as the tax base to its prosperity and health.

In some American cities, drained by the automobile, suburbia and social change, this awareness has been linked to survival. Salem, Mass., is such a city. I have written about Salem before, partly because it is a small, encompassable city of 40,000 particularly rich in history and architecture, and partly because it is the quintessential

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example of the older American city that must "renew" itself to keep itself alive.

Salem has had all the problems of the aging physical fabric and the slipping economic base that unite falling metropolises of every size, plus the special concern of how to deal with a substantial national heritage. The difference between this city and others is that Salem is carrying out its renewal successfully and sensitively. It was not done without some disastrous backing and filling and radical changes of signals in the last 10 years, but that is illuminating too. And it still has a long way to go, with at least one key piece of the plan threatened by the balky economy and local politics.

The message beginning to come out of Salem is that it is just those "uneconomic" assets of history and style that must be used as the basis of rebuilding to achieve the kind of quality and interest that attracts the sort of money and activity that add up to the elusive creation of an attractive urban life.

The city's core of handsomely recycled old buildings complemented by excellent new buildings, united in an inviting network of green pedestrian passages, puts its emphasis on the human dimension and the highest standards of urban design. Its economic base is being reestablished on restored streets and in landmark buildings containing an emerging kind of personalized, specialty store with which the ubiquitous, standardized shopping center cannot compete. Salem's results promise to be a stunning rebuke to every community that has ever thought the only way to revitalization lay through imitation of those shopping centers or by mutilation of what was often a unique identity for shoddy-slick, newly-jerrybuilt anonymity.

But it was not always thus. I might as well confess here that I was the original witch of Salem. In 1965, I wrote a passionate indictment of Salem's then-proposed rape by renewal. Traffic and construction were its blind priorities and demolition its hallmark. That first plan was the product of the bulldozer mentality of the previous decade and of early Federal renewal policies which ignored or penalized conservation.

The article brought national notoriety to Salem, and a visit from the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. It also prefaced a drastic change in course.

Preservation, rehabilitation and reuse became top requirements; to date, over \$3-million in public and private funds has gone into redoing old buildings. Developers were invited to submit schemes for preservation-related new construction that they were willing to build; Mondev International of Montreal, collaborating with architect Nelson Aldrich of Boston, won this critical assignment. Robert Kerr was hired as resident planner, and John Barrett, who has headed the Redevelopment Authority through all of its swings, coordinated some outstanding teamwork.

Particularly high marks must go to Nelson Aldrich and his firm and Mondev's subsidiary, the Salem Corporation, for their part in planning and design. Also notable is the

work of the Collins, Dutot Partnership of Philadelphia, who have detailed and landscaped the pedestrian-park framework that sets so much of the style and amenity standards for the whole. And credit must be given to Bob Kerr, a planner-preservationist of persuasive sensitivities, who died last year before he could see the results.

I shall not go into the technicalities of the unconventional devices such as historic and scenic easements that were manipulated as creative financing tools. Or of the intelligent planning that is putting the automobile where it belongs (in a convenient and compatible parking garage and strategic open areas) while providing the servicing of stores through courts and alleys behind streets. These are all ingenious and sensible solutions.

Nor shall I quibble about degree and kind of restoration, or inevitable errors or miscalculations, or the complexities that dictate compromise. The lovely brick and granite buildings of a pedestrianized and restored Front Street have evidently been held for too-high rentals in a sluggish economy, slowing the renewal process. The rebuilt public market facing a beautifully reinterpreted Derby Square with its Bulfinch-style Town Hall of 1816, now successfully reunited with the surrounding brick vernacular buildings (they were to be torn down in the first plan), has simple new market sheds bridging past and present. But it will need subsidies to bring back the produce merchants, and it clearly runs the danger of an artsy-crafty fate.

The point is that the rebuilding is all being done well,

with a strong and yet delicate balance between centuries. What the visitor experiences now in the 40-acre central business district is still a tentative mix. There is a lot that is seedy, and one neither wants nor hopes for a total prettying up. Salem never promised anyone a Williamsburg, thank heavens, and the restoration of a fine, abused historic fabric has been a rational tool of contemporary reuse.

There are no design bows, or pratfalls to the past, just proper relationships and details. A new office building called One Salem Green, for example, by Campbell, Aldrich and Nulty, is sleekly modern and still a perfectly calculated foil for surrounding 18th- and 19th-century structures, including the restored Lyceum Building (site of Tom Thumb's wedding and now a fine French restaurant). The new offices are the focus of a small City Hall Plaza, a pocket park where before there were only the shabby backs of buildings behind a main traffic street.

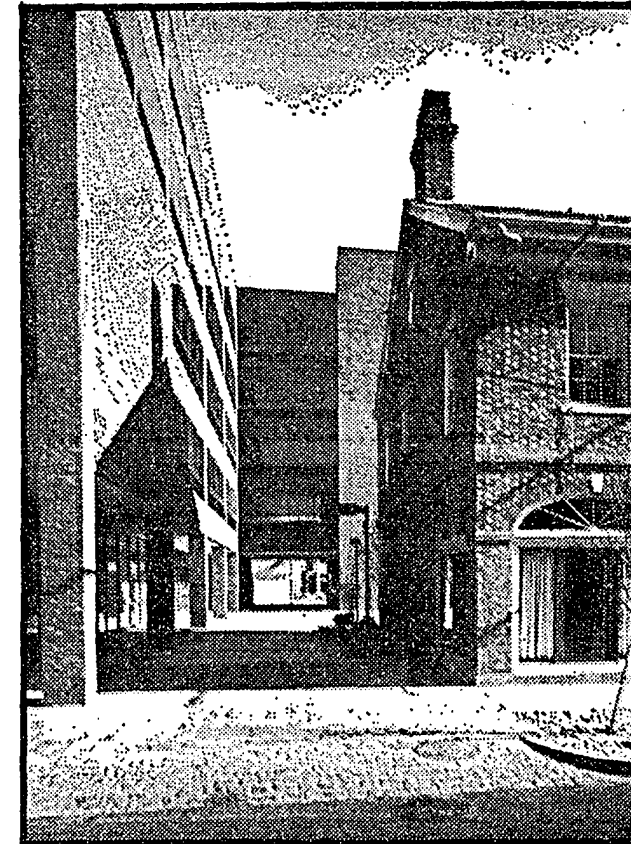
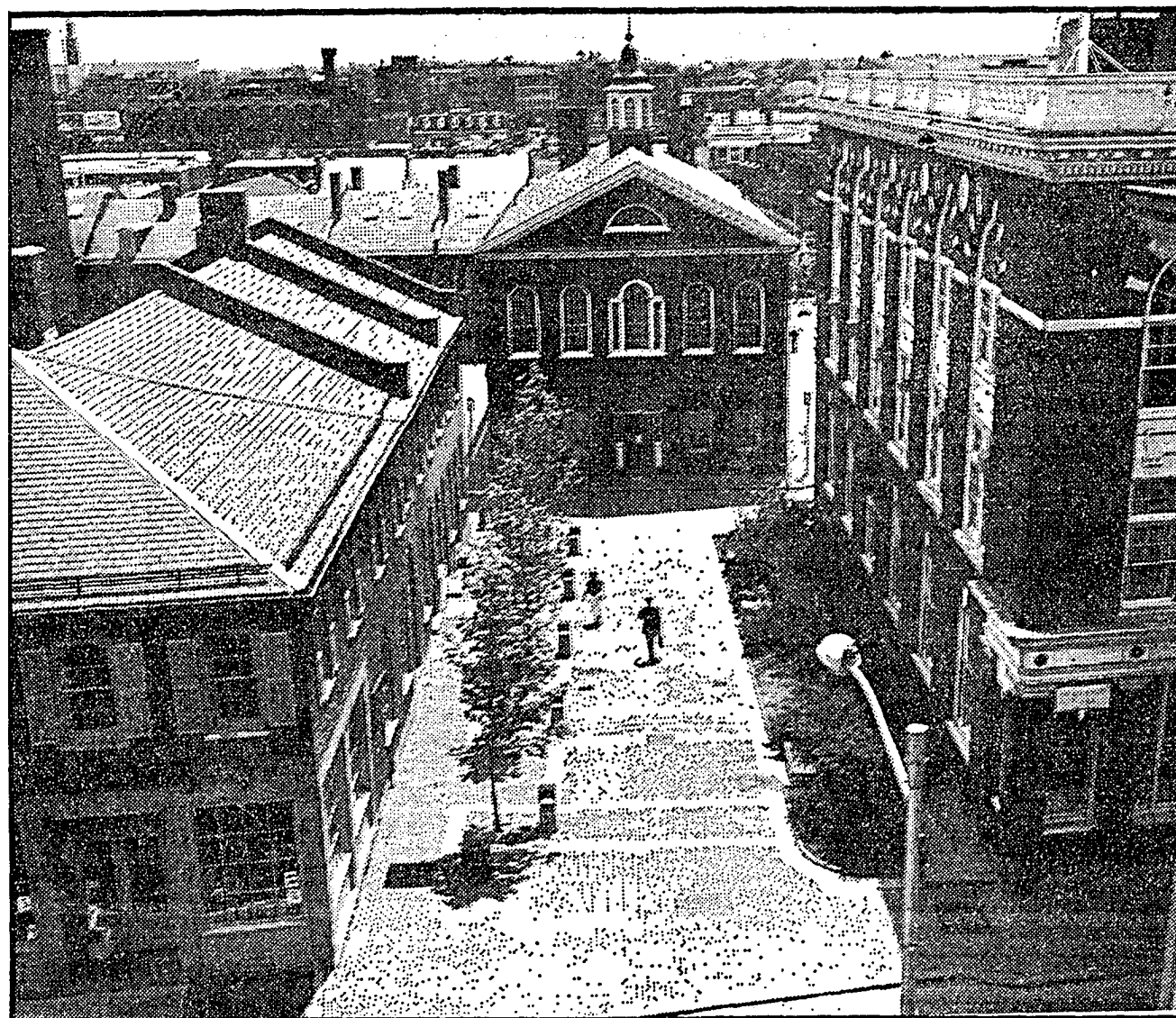
The central parking garage, also by Campbell, Aldrich and Nulty, is one of the few genuinely attractive, non-jarring structures of this type ever to be dropped in the middle of a historic commercial district. There are handsome brick and patterned concrete pavements, sharpened vistas, and trees and seats everywhere.

When Mondev starts the new shopping block on the central commercial spine, Essex Street, the lynch pin of the plan will fall into place and everyone will breathe a lot easier. Local politics would appear to be as much of a

delaying factor as any economic uncertainties. Financing has been obtained, and HUD has already committed an "urgent need" grant of \$1,470,000 under the Community Development Act to complete the pedestrian network by turning Essex Street into a landscaped mall. This promising commercial project, another by Campbell, Aldrich and Nulty, would create a functional and delightful East India Square at its heart.

Also at that heart are the Peabody Museum and the Essex Institute, two of the country's most distinguished institutions, forming a wonderfully rich blend of commercial and cultural activities. The exterior of the Peabody's new wing is a bit bleak and brutal, something that might have been ameliorated by more design finesse, but its urban intentions of street scale and placement are impeccable. The Peabody alone is worth anyone's Bicentennial visit, as one of the world's most enchanting and absorbing collections of Americana and Orientalia, mined from the exotic maritime history of early New England and the China trade in which Salem started.

To those who treasure the ship captains' homes with their delicate McIntyre doorways on Chestnut Street, the spacious Common with its elegant bandstand, the Bulfinch Custom House on the harbor, the rewarding streets of old bowlerized but real architectural history, the news out of Salem is good. And for all who consider the culture and continuity of cities surpassingly relevant, the Salem plan signifies a country come of age.



Laurence Lowry

Left, restored and redesigned Derby Square, with its Bulfinch-style Town Hall of 1816; above, an example of the integration of new construction and preservation.