

Architecture

It's All in the Mind—And Eye

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I HARDLY know where to begin. Perhaps the best place is where I left off—in New England—where the drive-ins are driving out so much of the American scene and heritage. The quantities of mail that come to this office from the heart, in every sense, of the country, about what is happening to the landmarks and amenities of our cities and towns deserve to be shared. So back to Vermont, for a start.

First, a progress report. Some months ago this column took up the plight of Burlington's Ethan Allen Fire House, threatened with demolition. A number of Burlington citizens believe that the building, designed by Burlington architect A. B. Fisher in the Richardsonian style and completed in 1888, not only adds character to the city, but also forms an essential "holding" element of the park frontage on which it stands. They argue that the familiar landmark can, and should, "play an attractive, useful role in the city's future."

With local and national press support, the Mayor threw his weight behind preservation. He appointed a special group to work on the problem and set up a Historic Sites Committee to consider the general question of the city's patrimony. The new committee applied for and got a Housing and Urban Development Department grant of \$63,200 for the old Fire House and matching funds are now being raised.

The Burlington Ecumenical Action Ministry has become the sponsor and prime tenant of the proposed remodeling with plans for a Youth Services Project and community facilities. To date, about \$43,000 has been contributed. To match the grant and restore the building properly at today's rising costs, \$50,000 is still needed. The battle is not yet won.

But with fund raising, there has been considerable urban consciousness raising in Burlington, as well. There is now an architect on the planning board, a concerned city planner, a change in urban renewal developers and a promising design from a progressive competition for a new landmark, an Episcopal cathedral. A Burlington corres-

pondent, architect William C. Henderson, whose firm, Burlington Associates, won the cathedral competition against distinguished outsiders, writes of a "minor renaissance."

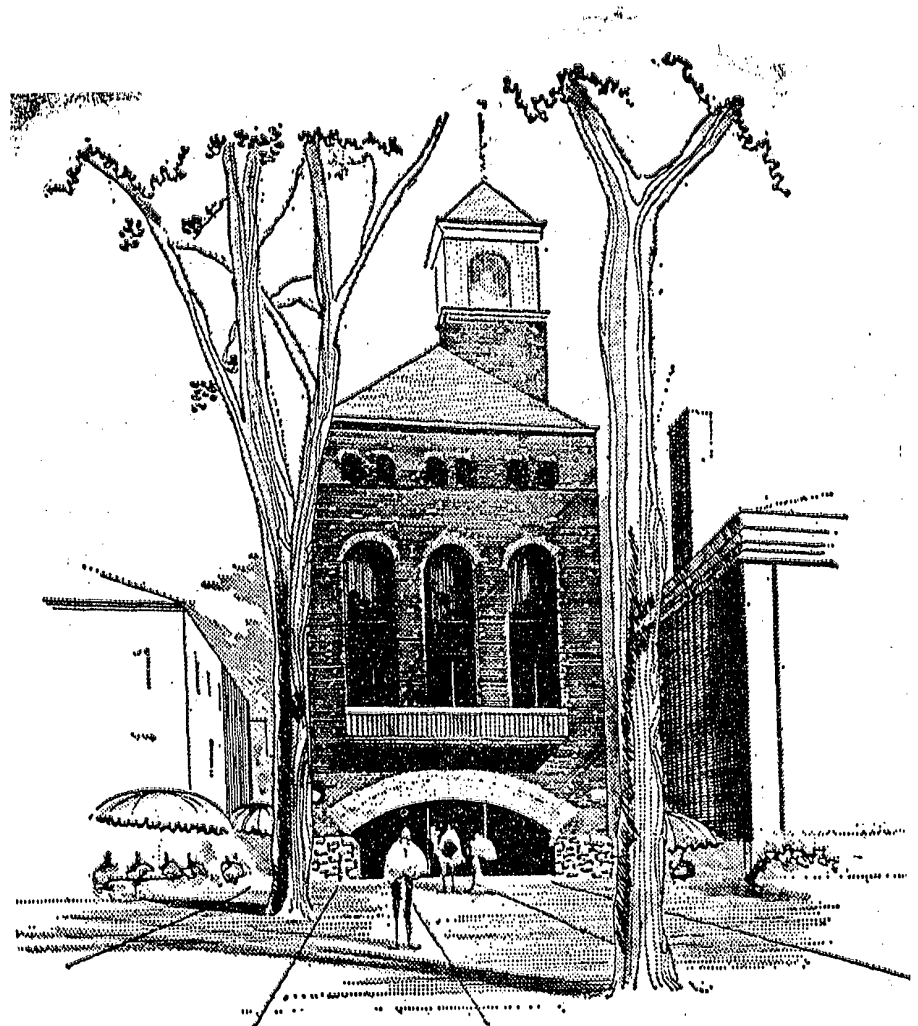
He says, "It's beginning to look as though Burlington may be one town that will solve some of its basic planning problems before it is too late. Equally important, there seems to be a slight stirring of the creative spirit of the people, and in some, even pride in their city. One year ago I would have said it would never happen."

What is happening is notable. A growing number of people in Burlington seem to realize that these matters are all related, and that the objective is over-all urban quality. That this is being recognized and understood for the first time on a city-wide basis is attested to by the related action on both planning and preservation fronts. Onward and upward, Burlington!

Because it's backward and downward in Greenfield, Mass. The bankers are at it again. This time they've been busy remodeling the Franklin County Trust Company.

This bank had a really nice piece of architectural history going for it—a small, neat, classical building next to a good, rather rare, Gothic one, about as fine a cultural juxtaposition in terms of this country's historic tastes and styles as could be found anywhere, with the added values of architectural quality, appropriateness of scale and fortuitous streetscape.

Well, something dreadful has happened to tastes and you can't stop progress or bankers. They've "improved" their buildings. A nondescript third structure has been incorporated with the Gothic structure by destroying the Gothic building for a "modern front" for the two. Oh modernity, what crimes are committed in thy name! There's nothing like wiping the history and character off the face of a building and substituting a blank. And here it is literally a blank, with a kind of false arcade encroaching on it. It aggressively shoulders the neighboring classical remnant, oblivious of scale, style, streetscape or simple sensibility.



Proposed Fire House restoration, Burlington, Vt., by Colin Lindberg, architect
A discernable trend toward urban consciousness raising

Urbanism totally misunderstood. Did we call it Bankers' Mental Block? As a Pittsfield correspondent writes, "So much for architectural heritage."

In Pittsburgh, to move on to Pennsylvania, the old Northside Post Office of 1894-97 has been rescued and restored by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation. There was a smashing opening-day party for its new role as the Museum of the People of Allegheny County. This large, classical, gray granite structure of symmetrical solemnity and conspicuous space, in what historian James Van Trump describes as the "trim, spare, Italian Renaissance of the 16th century," is also what is commonly described as a white elephant. Saving it was one of those things that "couldn't be done."

Professor Van Trump calls the building "one of the most beguiling aspects of the Eclectic period of architecture before 1940." He is further quoted as saying that "the essential purity of its style and form command the eye jaded by modern austerities and banalities." It beguiles by a rotunda with a 90-foot-high coffered ceiling. It commands with balconies,

wood carving and plaster decoration. These blandishments were to be demolished for the austerities and banalities of urban renewal.

Significantly, one of the clinching preservation arguments was the recognition by the landmark's champions of its potential urban role—the possibility of creating a cultural mall simply by keeping the building. This was a perception of true urbanity, in every sense of the word. Again, the larger city picture.

In Cincinnati, perception comes slower. A memorial service has been held for Wesley Chapel, one of Cincinnati's oldest public buildings. It was the largest meeting hall west of the Alleghenies on its completion in 1831 and was redolent with historic events. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but it is rubble now. According to the mourners' eulogy, delivered by Cincinnati preservationists on the site, the owners, Proctor and Gamble, did the building in "in the middle of the night." A Cincinnati Enquirer photograph shows the wrecking ball continuing to swing in daylight against a jagged Greek Revival shell. Soap opera?

By now the famous "Amer-

ican Gothic" house of Grant Wood's familiar painting of that name may also be rubble. Located in Eldon, Iowa, southeast of Ottumwa, in Wapello County along the Des Moines River, the small, symbolic structure's terse, Carpenter Gothic austerity has become as much a part of American art history as the grim-faced pair that Wood immortalized in front of it. The painting is in the Chicago Art Institute, and according to an anonymous newspaper clipping received here, the house stood empty and vandalized in tall grass last summer. I have no idea, at this writing, if anyone cares, or if it still exists, except in the mind's eye of almost every American.

It's all in the mind and eye, anyway. The holding of environmental standards, the perception of urban values, the understanding of the relationships of past and present, the sense of place, color and style, the meaning of amenity, the sources of vitality, the coordination of all this into community and quality of life—these are the intellectual and visual referents of civilization. It's something worth worrying about.