

## Architecture

# A Funny Roll Of the Dice

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT may be cold comfort to Grand Rapids, but Boston is keeping its Old City Hall. Since the two Victorian buildings were almost interchangeable for period and style, and both have been replaced by new structures, it seems like a funny roll of the dice—Boston won, Grand Rapids lost. The irony, of course, is that Boston is so much richer architecturally. Maybe that's why.

Grand Rapids has a parking lot where the Old City Hall stood. The area is almost completely "renewed" and an Alexander Calder stabile is its main cultural feature. The characteristic, cosmic, Calder comment on the Grand Rapids environmental scene at the time of the dedication has been widely quoted as "garraagh." That could be rendered freely as people get the cities they want and deserve.

Boston's Old City Hall is currently being gutted and converted to modern office use. The preservation feasibility study concluded "that only by making the building a revenue-producing property could its exterior be preserved as a unique link to Victorian Boston." The General Services Administration in Washington, hung up on transferral of the Old St. Louis Post Office (same style and period) to the city of St. Louis might take note. Legal technicalities unearthed by some great government minds are being interpreted to prohibit commercial uses. Stretch the legal elastic the other way, gentlemen, or get a new and better law.

The Old Boston City Hall, designed by Gridley Bryant and Arthur Gilman, opened in 1865. It is a nice thought that it was inspired by the Louvre, particularly since it developed a pungent odor of politics over the next hundred years that did much to

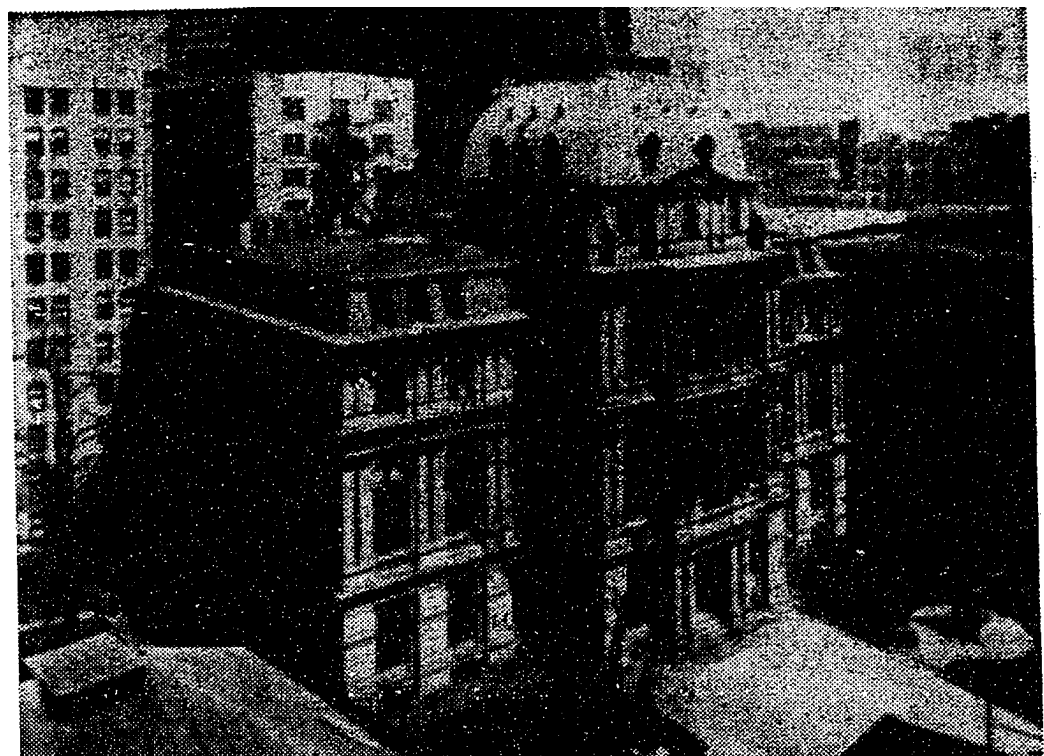
obliterate any original French perfume. Still, French Second Empire it was, and is called, courtesy of the mansarded central pavilion colonnaded in Concord granite—an across-the-seas elegance in which something was both lost and gained in the translation.

Back to Grand Rapids. The battle was lost but the war is still being fought. After all, you can't pick any more formidable opponents than bankers and City Hall. (Somehow, they recur through this piece.) But the struggle created a considerably strengthened band of conservationists. In Grand Rapids, they don't just wring their hands. They get out the paint.

Two doughty downtown Victorian structures have been refurbished. Vandalism by "modernization" was stopped at the corner of Monroe and Ottawa, where rich Victorian moldings and Queen Anne chimneys and gables were to be covered over with faceless metal siding—a favorite kind of destructive "remodeling" that is believed to up commercial values. The owner permitted the preservationists to pay off the contractor and contribute all expenses of maintaining the building in its original state.

Then, for lagniappe, someone put up \$500 to paint the trim of the old building that the Grand Rapids Youth Ministry has been using for dropouts. It blossomed from downtown nondescript to High Victorian baroque. Unfortunately, the church that owns the building apparently plans to demolish it for a parking lot. A parking lot can pay back the cost of demolition within a year, it is said. A correspondent who shall be nameless calls this an interesting commentary not only on downtown economics, but on downtown Christianity. He adds, "It's just one damn fight after another."

In New London, Conn., they are fighting, but not very hard, to save one of H. H. Richardson's famous railroad stations. I quote another correspondent. "The city of New London has entered into an agreement with the Penn Central to purchase



Old Boston City Hall. Boston wins, Grand Rapids loses  
*For the past, there is often no tomorrow*

the H. H. Richardson building, for the purpose of demolishing it under their redevelopment program." Now I quote Henry-Russell Hitchcock, dean of architectural scholar-critics. He calls this last (1885) of the distinguished line of New England stations designed by one of America's greatest architects "the best of its type he had built." If he is right, New London is wrong. Garraagh.

In Richmond, Va., the First and Merchants National Bank will put up an office tower on Main Street, demolishing a group of outstanding 19th-century cast-iron fronted commercial buildings. The architects of the new structure are Welton Beckett and Associates, producers of instant-modern-image - architecture pre-packaged in New York and California.

The bank's revitalization of downtown is desirable, but local preservationists are viewing with alarm. Research and Restoration, Inc. points out that the bank's building decisions will determine the character and future of an enclave of irreplaceable architectural, historical and urban value. And a well-known visiting architect took a good look, too. He wrote the Mayor. He scored the planned architectural approach as "a blunt statement carried out with a great disregard for the existing fabric of the city" and "an unnecessary act of violence." The Architecture Department of the University of Virginia has come up with a sensitive

alternate scheme. Is anyone listening in City Hall or the bankers offices or out there in California?

In Madison, Wisconsin, the Gates of Heaven Preservation Fund is trying to save Wisconsin's first synagogue, one of the oldest remaining in the country. The 1863 building has had a remarkably checkered career. It has been a temple, a church several times, headquarters for the Women's Christian Temperance Union, an undertaking parlor, a tearoom, a wartime repository of government records, a dental and a veterinarian's office. No wonder there's some confusion about its style. It has been placed under the umbrella of "Moorish" influence and called a "Victorian interpretation of the Spanish missions of the American southwest."

Designed by an immigrant German architect, August Kutzbock, who also built Wisconsin's second state capitol, it is actually a version of the fashionable mid-19th century German style called Rundbogenstil, equally fashionable here in a type called Lombard Romanesque. Its gables and parapets are of local sandstone and remote Italianate recall. Lots of luck, Gates of Heaven.

And how about right here in New York? Well, there's Joe Papp's Public Theatre, the old Astor Library on Lafayette Street, a superb, nervy adventure in successful restoration and conversion of a fine old landmark for which the city, adminis-

tratively and publicly, should be grateful. But neither sector can pony up that \$2.6-million required to underwrite, not a sentimental gamble, but a precedent-setting fait accompli of proven value to the city in terms of art, history and neighborhood revitalization through the kind of creative force that makes New York, New York.

And at 29 East 4th Street, the Old Merchant's House may not get through the winter. This gem of a house museum, the Tredwell mansion that has survived intact and unchanged, but woefully deteriorated, from its days of Greek Revival glory in the 1830's to the death of the last Tredwell lady in 1933, can no longer keep the weather out. Its fine plaster ceilings could disappear with one good storm.

The desperate efforts of the Historic Landmark Society, which owns it, the Decorators' Club, which maintains it, and the New York University Architect, Joseph Roberto, who supervised the rescue of the cornice, have not been enough. The need is for \$40,000 for immediate structural work.

Have you heard about the New York communications gap? All those rich people, foundations and corporations sitting around in committee meetings wondering how to give their money away while the best things in the city are going under for the last time. Anyone for some nice civic - spirited Christmas gifts? Season's Greetings, one and all.