

Architecture

Good Buildings Are Hard to Get

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

OUR preservation correspondents are always with us. They make cogent, passionate cases more often than not with letters. And they range from Harvard professors to the man, or woman, in the street.

What they write is usually a litany of damage to the natural environment. They flood this office with crises. They apologize to all that we have no magic formula for help, or even the time, energy or manpower to deal with multiple emergencies. Herewith, a sampling of what comes in.

Curiously, the barbarians are not just in City Hall, on campuses, as well. The lightenment one hardly expects in politicians' offices and the vicissitudes of urban renewal and preservation in Kingston or Newburgh, New York, for example, are long and awful to be recounted here. The tragedy of the deliberately sacked city has been done. The view exposed would be primarily of a large and hideous new building which would then dominate and disrupt existing felicities. Gentlemen, look

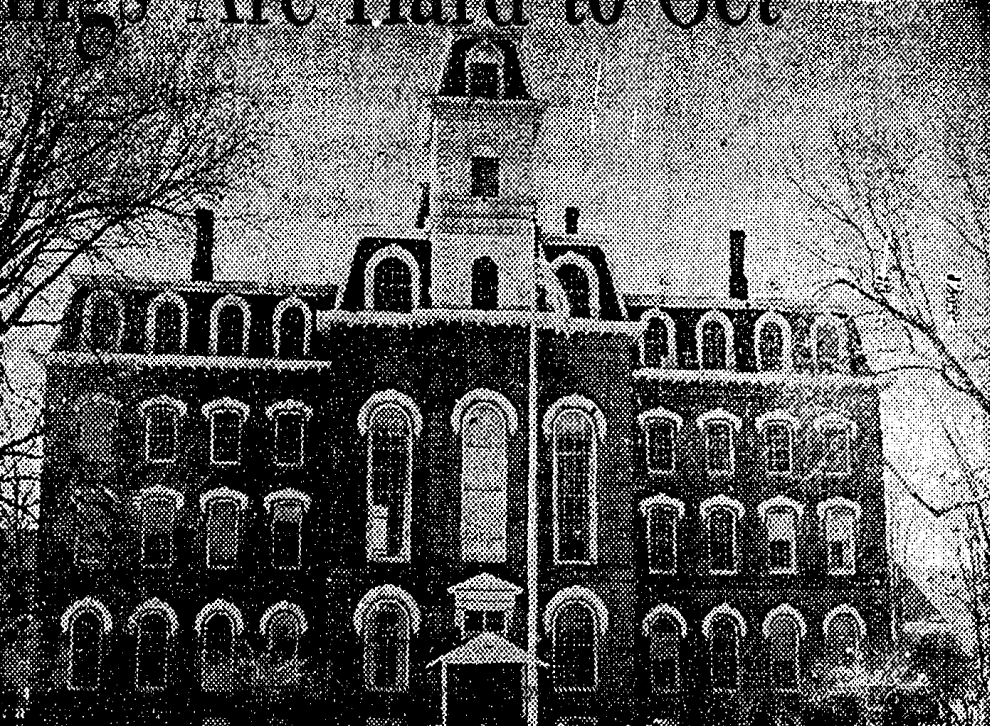
But one does expect lightenment in academia. It is made up of educated people. Still, with the best intentions and unmotivated by the "economic progress" of the Chamber of Commerce, they make equal mistakes. There seems to be an epidemic of environmental myopia at our schools.

On two of the college campuses we visited this spring, Colgate and Williams, there were almost identical preservation problems, and we were well apprised of them by correspondents before we ever got there. Similar examples arrived in the mail from Vermont College, Harvard and Yale, to cite a few.

In almost every case, there is an old building on campus that some want to demolish and some want to save. Usually the administration wants to demolish. With the exception of Vermont College, there is an evident inability of the proponents or opponents to evaluate the architectural and environmental factors with any accurate knowledge or insight.

At Colgate, a small, handsome, typically Richardsonian building is condemned by those who would be rid of it because it is not in the "style" as the rest of the Quadrangle. It doesn't "match." It is therefore inappropriate and ugly. It is not to be replaced, just minimized. Vision comes in shorter than that.

What few seem to recognize is that the building is the key to the scale of the Quadrangle; remove it, and that scale would be gone. It not only adds the appropriate historical counterpoint but is far from unsympathetic to the style. There is a lot of red brick and it has produced some wonderful and some so-so new buildings. Not surprisingly, Hunt Hall will be replaced



College Hall at Vermont College, scheduled for preservation

Victoriana of the kind most trustees have been taught to love to hate

by a dormitory, by a highly regarded firm, with the mandate, according to a Harvard publication, that it is "to be built with brick to harmonize with the character of the existing buildings in the Yard." We tremble. The "harmony fallacy" is a universal invitation to design disaster.

At Vermont College, a division of Norwich University in Montpelier, they look at old buildings differently. The provost, Eber A. Spencer, Jr., writes of century-old College Hall. They do not want to bulldoze or replace it; they want to rehabilitate it. "We believe it displays a style and means in architecture so exemplary that it should house fine arts and music for the whole community." They are finding it an uphill financial fight.

College Hall is pure Victoriana of the kind most people, including administrators and trustees, have been taught to love to hate. Towered, mansarded brick with round-arched windows and heavy cornices. A very fine structure, and they see it clear at Montpelier. All good luck and many foundation grants to Vermont College, for 20-20 environmental vision.

Leaving academia and returning to New York, another upbeat note, but not without its ironies. Joseph Roberto, the busy New York University architect who has been holding together, these many years, the Old Merchant's House on East Fourth Street, calls and writes to tell us of a temporary community preservation victory.

A 1907 Carrère and Hastings public library, the Epiphany Branch at 228 East 23d Street, has been given a last-minute reprieve just as demolition contracts were to be let by the city. A replacement, of no greater area, was to be built. The reprieve was spear-

headed by the local community planning board when the library seemed to be a terminal case.

"The next step is to save the building," says Norman Mintz, who led the community fight, as quoted in the Gramercy Herald, which publicized it. Mintz and Roberto will study the structure. "We won't move until the community lets us know what it wants," said Deputy Mayor Edward Morrison as he ordered the Public Works contracts killed.

The irony is that a few years ago the firm of Lundquist and Stonehill was rejected for the library job by the Department of Public Works because the architects recommended keeping and adapting the old structure rather than destroying it. We still have that correspondence in our files. "We observed that the existing building was distinguished and substantial," they wrote in 1971, "and thought that consideration should be given to renovation and expansion." The wheels of bureaucracy grind inexorably and for all the wrong reasons. They were told that the "die was cast" and that the decision to put up a new building was final. The Department is now eating Carrère and Hastings crow.

Our favorite environmental comment comes from a lady correspondent who had a Tuscan father and an English mother, and has been married to an American and watching New York architecture for most of 50 years. She has seen the old buildings go down, and the new buildings go up. Observing a typical apartment house rising on York Avenue recently she asked a workman, in Italian, "How do you build them so fast?"

"Senza rispetto," he replied, "without respect." There is nothing more to add.