

## The Execution of a Courthouse

*New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Feb 17, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times  
pg. 38

# The Execution of a Courthouse

Consumer culture dealt one more body blow to the environment last week when a two-year battle to save the old White Plains Courthouse ended in failure. But to interpret this failure as just the loss of another landmark is to miss the more important picture. This is one more dispiriting, unnecessary rerun of the old, discredited brand of bulldozer urban renewal and the substitution of that new commercial and cultural icon, the shopping center, for anything in the American past that stands in its way.

The White Plains shopping center will be a large, regional development, and the courthouse unfortunately held the key spot in an apparently immutable plan. It stands where an Abraham & Straus store has been pre-ordained, which will, in turn, trigger a J. C. Penney, as part of a commercial complex in the usual standard containers, served by an appropriate amount of asphalt.

There is no question about White Plains's need for the estimated \$100 million in gross sales and \$3 million in real estate and sales taxes. But does it need this too-familiar sterile planning? Does anyone need the bulldozer mentality anymore?

Did White Plains look at Boston, where preservationists saved and rehabilitated the old Sears Crescent building for new uses in the civic center redevelopment plan? That paid off so well that it led to the phenomenally successful commercial recycling of the Faneuil Hall

Market last year, a landmark now thronged with shoppers spending money. Did it look at Salem, Mass., where clean sweep renewal of the central business district was reversed for a sensitive integration of old and new and vastly increased shopping amenity? Demolition of a building on the National Register of Historic Places is not quite the "step forward" that White Plains officials call it.

It is a step indicative of the state of mind that prefers boxes to buildings, of the attitude that let the landmark deteriorate, while its bronzes were stripped and stolen, as the controversy raged. Such destruction by neglect does the job so well that a belatedly summoned National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation—shown a plan that was wrong to begin with, an abused landmark, and a genuine municipal need—could find "no feasible alternative to demolition."

What was lacking here were the vision and will to consider anything but the standard solution. But the lesson is economic as well as environmental. The sameness and dullness of shopping centers everywhere mean that their allure is in their newness, and when a newer one comes along, a fickle public on wheels flocks to it. Identical shopping centers are already cannibalizing each other on Long Island; can Westchester be far behind? To raze a building of exceptional quality and to have lost a sense of place will not help one bit.

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