They Know What They Don't Like
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

They Know What They Don't Like

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE news from New England is not good. The home of American history is bent on destroying its own history with a curious Yankee perverseness. The word this week is that Montpelier's Pavilion Hotel, historically and esthetically a traditional part of the Vermont State Capitol complex and also a National Registered Landmark, is moving inexorably toward demolition unless reason triumphs over orneriness in the Vermont State Legislature.

Orneriness is a great New England trait, but so is a kind of civilized, stubborn, maverick vision, and one can only hope that the latter wins out. (Please, no editorials about gratuitous judgments passed by outsiders; some of us come from New England and prize its virtues.)

The Vermont State Legislature has been battling over the future of the Pavilion for four years, and it has reached the point, according to a local paper, where the mere mention of the building's name is enough to send that body into adjournment. It has stayed in session long enough this time, however, for the House of Representatives to pass a bill, 100 to 40, to demolish the Montpelier landmark, which the Senate will vote on shortly. That would leave a $60,000 (cost of demolition) hole in the ground.

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This action is hard to believe. There is every sound reason to preserve the Pavilion and not a single sound reason for destroying it. What it all comes down to is simple enough: whether the state of Vermont should save a historical landmark with practical re-use value in the new Capitol complex plan (the opinion of in-and out-of-state experts) or destroy it as a "Victorian monstrosity" for a parking lot or new building (the opinion of those who know what they don't like, a group that poses as great a threat to the American heritage as the wrecker's ball.)

The Pavilion's history goes back to 1809. The hotel adjacent to the Statehouse has been part of State affairs for 160 years. The original hotel was built to serve the original Statehouse as part of a package deal by a shrewd investor who gave the land for the Statehouse and built the hotel as a place for the Governor and legislators to stay. There they debated, made deals and refreshed themselves and a long line of notables, from the ubiquitous Lafayette, who slept in almost as many places as Washington, to an impressive line of Presidents. The Pavilion has been known through its years of politics and fashion as Vermont's "third house."

The Statehouse burned in the 1850's and was rebuilt with the original Ammi Young Greek Revival portico, which had escaped the fire. The hotel was rebuilt more grandly on its same foundations in 1875, and tradition continued uninterrupted.

The Pavilion is a handsome, deteriorating, but structurally sound Victorian brick building, a wood-balconied, mansard - roofed example of the taste of the years just after the Civil War known to scholars as High Victorian or Second Empire and to the public as General Grant.

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Except for a few notable structures, such as the old Corcoran Gallery, or Court of Claims, being painstakingly restored in Washington, the style is virtually extinct, thanks to those who know what they don't like. It is as indigenous to New England as the Colonial and Federal that are as revered as the Victorian is despised. For some reason Americans seem determined to erase every trace of this period of their architectural history and replace it with mock-colonial—see Woodstock, Vermont's new inn for sheer architectural sham and the destruction of the town's historical elliptical green. This attitude can be summed up as ignorant, arrogant and fatally damaging to American art, history and environment — three areas in which there is absolutely no question of the Pavilion's credentials.

The building stands not only as a traditional part of the Statehouse group, but also as an essential buffer between the government structures and the central business district of Montpelier. For once, in the problem-fraught field of preservation, the plans for its reuse are practical economically, structurally, mechanically and functionally.

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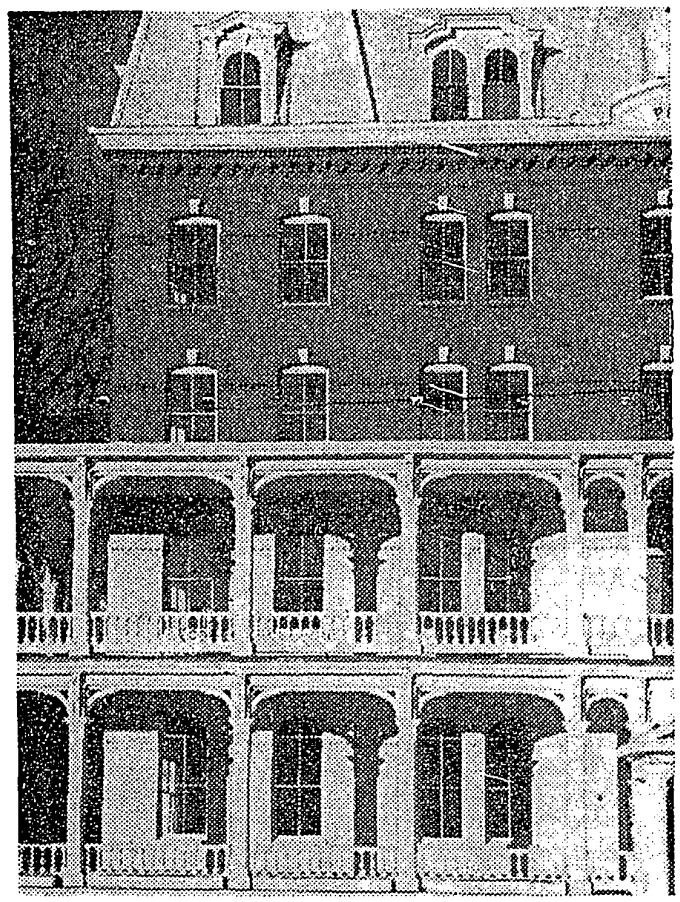
Unlike Manchester, N. H., which is currently destroying a 19th-century planned mill community of national importance in the country's urban and industrial history, Montpelier is not faced with a commercially unviable landmark complicated by the crippling limitations of urban renewal and pressing economic crisis. Manchester has lacked resources and imagination; Montpelier has both.

From its beginning, the State's master plan for the Capitol complex, undertaken four years ago by the architectural firm of Robert Burley, has recommended the retention and conversion of the Pavilion into State offices. This is part of an unusually sound and sensitive scheme that takes into careful account the environmental and historical assets of the Capitol area. The Statehouse would be extended to its rear. The Pavilion's exterior would be restored and its hotel interiors replaced with a strong, ingenious system of concrete flooring tied to the brick walls to create 60,000 square feet of flexible, fireproof, air-conditioned office space and headquarters for the Historical Society.

A $20,000 feasibility study was ordered by the legislature to check the practicality of the plans. Conducted by out-of-state, independent engineers and cost estimators, it established the structural soundness of the Pavilion and its adaptability to new functions.



Montpelier's Pavilion—the end of the line?

It proved further that restoration and utilization of the building would mean a substantial saving for the State of over a half million dollars compared to the cost of a new building. The figures are $3,345,000 for the total project cost of a new structure as opposed to $2,811,000 for saving the old one. The 60,000 square feet of space represent roughly what the city is renting now in 27 scattered locations around Montpelier, with offices increasingly hard to find.

The excellent Capitol complex plan has been held up in its entirety for the years that the legislature has been wrangling over whether the Pavilion should stay or go. During the controversy, Governor Philip Hoff (Democrat, on the side of the Pavilion) went out and Governor Deane Davis (Republican, on the fence) came in.

Representative Edward J. Conlin, chairman of the House Institutions Committee, and Senator Olin D. Gay are leading the opposition with determined, if inexplicable rigidity. They stand against their own official plan, the recommendations of their architects, the results of the feasibility study, the testimony of experts, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, the National Park Service's Registry of Historic Buildings, the Vermont Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Vermont Historical Society and the Vermont Board of Historic Sites. Their constituency consists of those who know what they don't like.

Mr. Burley, who is obviously as bad a politician as he is a good architect and man of principle—he has been urging four legislative sessions to back preservation at the cost of seeing his whole job stalled—points out that the situation is the exact opposite of the customary preservation problem.

"Usually you hope that the state will acquire and protect an architecturally or historically important property; in this case, the state already owns it. Usually you have to raise funds to preserve a building; in this case a cost saving is offered. In a state such as Vermont, which depends largely on tourism and the preservation of certain traditional values for its economic well-being, you wonder why the question should even be debated."

Yes, we wonder.