Keeping the There There
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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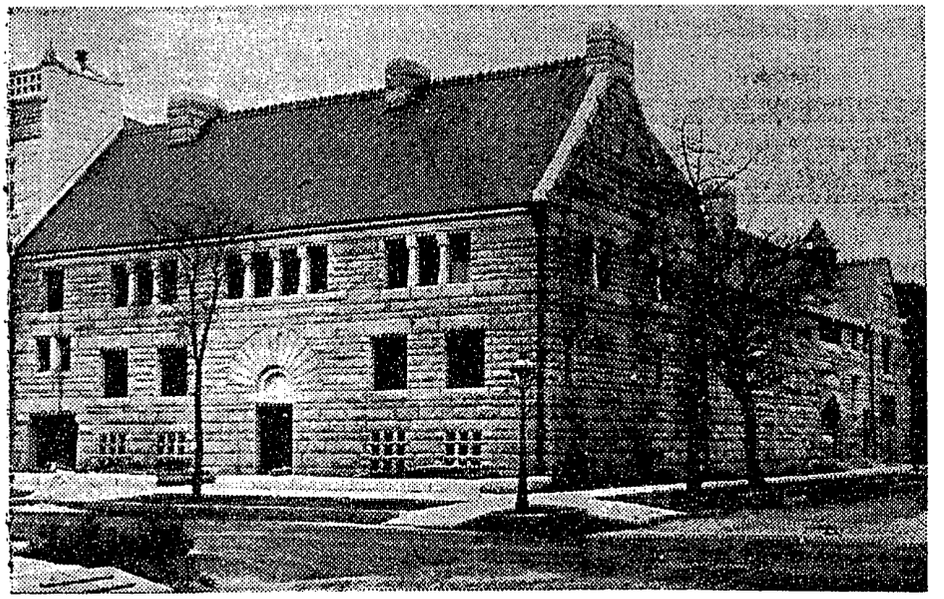

A new life for Henry Hobson Richardson's 1886 Glessner House, Chicago
"Win in Chicago, lose in New London, Conn."

IRONY, I have been told by wise editors, is bad journalistic technique. But ironies abound in life and architecture, and I cannot resist adding these notes to the preservation items of the last few weeks.

Down in Austin, Texas, where one of the country's largest and most important new structures, the Johnson Library, is nearing completion and dedication on May 22, congratulations are as numerous in local club-watering-places on another architectural event — the saving of the old Driskill Hotel. It will be restored and reopened in about a year. Fast cut to Syracuse and the doomed Yates.

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In Chicago, Henry Hobson Richardson's Glessner House is assured of life and usefulness. The Chicago chapter of the American Institute of Architects has leased the famous 1886 mansion for its headquarters. At the same time, Richardson's New London, Conn., railroad station is scheduled to be an urban renewal casualty unless the protests reported here last week have some constructive effect.

The immortal Glessner House, familiar to every art history student, was proving to be considerably less than immortal in 1966. It was on its way to consignment to the dim, gray world of fading lecture slides, along with a lot of other American architectural history. The Chicago School of Architecture Foundation was set up privately to save it. Subsequently, the Glessner House was the first structure designated by the Chicago Commission on Historical and Architectural Landmarks. A $300,000 restoration fund drive has already received pledges for almost half the money.

Ironies abound. Boston's superb, historic Quincy Market complex adjoining Faneuil Hall and the new City Hall will have a continuing, strengthened role as part of the redeveloped Government Center, through a combination of private efforts and $2-million in Federal funds. The rebuilt Government Center also includes the restored Sears Crescent, a handsome, 19th - century commercial brick row.

But Worcester, Mass., can't do it. Goddard's Row of 1823 was only "discovered" to be historic after the local urban renewal plan was started in 1967, and the plan couldn't be amended to include it. Add irony to irony; the block still stands. But it is condemned by the invisible machinery of a non-reversible bureaucracy and the lack of interest of local private investors. Money, however, has been poured into the renewal area, which is almost complete.

There is a program of special preservation grants of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, now in its fourth year, that has given $3.1-million to 52 projects. Funds are also available for additional aspects of preservation through the department's other programs for urban renewal and open space.

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But in Savannah, Ga., Secretary Romney of the Department of Housing and Urban Development has approved the construction of a destructively designed and sited 12-story housing project for the elderly. He overrode the official censure of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which determined that the proposal would have an adverse effect on the character and scale of the Savannah Historic District.

You may also count it a nice irony, if you will, that some of the country's most constructive preservation projects are not the work of little old ladies playing house, but of unsentimental business interests. In Tallahassee, Fla., a 136-year-old mansion called "The Columns" for obvious and handsome architectural reasons has been rescued not by do-gooders, but by the Chamber of Commerce. It will be restored for the Chamber's headquarters, with solid business support for the $177,000 cost. A surprising number of communities are beginning to be concerned, in Gertrude Stein's words, whether there's any there, there, and are looking to the past to find out.

In the same vein, a combination of business interests and town leadership has redone the Pittsfield, Mass., Old Town Hall, a building of distinct New England virtues, to house banking quarters and offices. Costs were divided between HUD preservation grants and the Berkshire County Savings Bank. (That might also be a postscript to our recent good-and-bad bank stories.)

In San Francisco, near the highly successful Ghirardelli Square and Cannery renovations, is Wharfside, still another private upgrading of sound, older commercial building for modern retail and office use. Virtue, when profitable, spreads. In Washington, D. C.'s Georgetown, Canal Square utilizes a similar formula for adapting fine old vernacular construction of both architectural value and historical recall for workable contemporary purposes.

Cut from San Francisco and Washington to Seattle. After an on-again, off-again battle for what seems like decades—long enough, at any rate, to create a feeling of false security because it's still there—Seattle seems determined to get rid of its waterfront Farmer's Market. This just when other cities are starting to turn back their waterfronts to public uses and pleasures! (What greater pleasure than fresh salmon and strawberries with a view of the Sound?)

There is now a gung ho renewal scheme for massive "improvement" of this juicy piece of "underdeveloped" Seattle real estate. The old arguments of obsolete plant and structural and fire hazards that worked so well for the bulldozer and brought 12 per cent returns for a few shrewd and aggressive investors don't convince many people any more. Too many have learned too much from watching the wreckers, and the results.

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You may not be able to call it a force majeure (although I am beginning to wonder), but preservation is a distinctly grass roots movement with growing results at every level. It has led, in the bumbling way of democracy, to national policy.

The National Preservation Act of 1966 set up laws, procedures and safeguards which are just beginning to work; housing and urban renewal legislation, conceived in terms of bulldozer clearance, has been amended and revised. There has been painfully limited, but surprisingly effective Government funding. A law being proposed now will permit transfer of Federally owned surplus properties (read historic buildings) by the General Services Administration for appropriate profit - making uses, presently forbidden. This makes adaptive use economically feasible.

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There is, in this country, a kind of cultural coming-of-age, an increasing sophistication that sees heritage as more than history. The role of the past in the quality of the environment and the quality of life, its links to the problem of human and urban failure, and to the vitality and identity of cities, are increasingly recognized. So is the fact that acres of asphalt and cheap catalogue component boxes induce amentia of place and anomie of spirit with a very real human toll. The past is not so expendable, after all.

For every bulldozer disaster, there is a concerted and frequently successful effort being made somewhere else to keep something of value against considerable procedural and economic odds. The world may be coming to an end in our cities through forces too large to control, but fewer people are willing to help the process along.