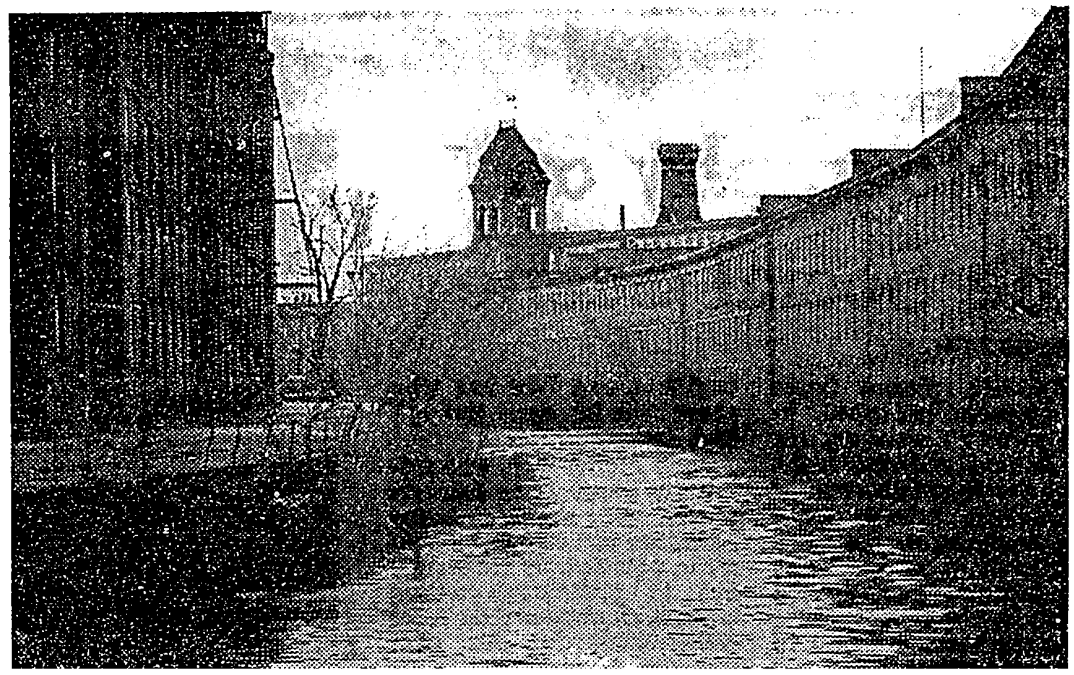
Lessons In Urbicide
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Dec 22, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D33

Architecture

Lessons In Urbicide

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



Randolph Langenbach for Smithsonian Institution

An industrial monument: Amoskeag mills, Manchester, New Hampshire
Blind mutilation in the name of urban renewal

THIS article is being written too late. (Sit in this chair and count the notifications of crisis received daily in a volume of mail too great to answer and please do not ask why. We cannot even keep a finger in the dike.) But it is not being written without purpose. The story of the destruction of the Amoskeag mill complex that has formed the heart of Manchester, N. H., for over a hundred years has a terrible pertinence for the numberless cities committing blind mutilation in the name of urban renewal.

At this moment, demolition is under way of one of the most remarkable manifestations of our urban and industrial culture. The historic, but still functioning, planned mill community of Manchester, faced with adjusting to changing economics, is being indiscriminately bulldozed for a researched, consultant-approved, and officially adopted urban renewal scheme consisting almost totally of parking lots that mocks the quality of vision and design now being ruthlessly effaced.

The Amoskeag plan, conceived and started in the 1830's by the Amoskeag Company's 19-year-old engineer, Ezekial Straw (later governor of New Hampshire), united factories, waterways, public buildings and public commons, housing and commerce in an integrated design. The famous mill town's simple, handsome, vernacular red brick buildings, constructed for the textile industry from 1838 to 1915, stretched for more than a mile along the Merrimac River, flanking canals and mill-yards. The excellence of the complex has made it an acknowledged monument of American industrial history and urban design.

"Monuments don't pay," says Manchester's urban renewal director, Cary P. Davis, quoted in Time, as he handed them over to the bulldozer. Still, the tragedy of Manchester has not gone unremarked. Both Time and The Architectural Forum, representing the professional press, have added their voices to the usual ones of the historians. Maybe that is a good sign. By slow drops and trickles in the pool of public information and opinion, a force that exerts considerable political leverage, an awareness of our losses might hopefully develop before the country is stripped bare of its urban art and history.

It is significant in this context that the term industrial archeology, a phrase employed by historians, is beginning to break into more popular usage.

Industrial archeology is the study of the buildings, plans and structural and social complexes developed by the forces of commerce and industry that have conspicuously shaped this country in the 19th- and 20th-centuries. Manchester is, or was, a prime example. The term covers a large, important and varied body of building that makes special technological, functional and esthetic contributions to the American environment. But its monuments are largely ignored. We have a way of sweeping under the rug art and history that do not conform to accepted, preconceived notions of cultural achievement. We tear down these genuine and often strikingly handsome monuments while we build meaningless reproductions of the domestic and official 18th-century. There is a game, for example, that could be called "Who's got the real Independence Hall?" played cross-country.

*

Industrial archeology is concerned with a great deal of the American scene—significant, strong, tradition-shattering structures and plans that tell more about American civilization than many of the conventional touchstones.

Randolph Langenbach, a Harvard graduate who has spent several years documenting the Amoskeag-Manchester story for the Smithsonian archives and on his own, writes that Manchester's "role in the growth of American society is really more important and symbolic than the role of Williamsburg. Although much venerated, Williamsburg was more English than American in style, and its significance did not last through the greatest period of America's industrial and social growth, as did Manchester's." This was written in an article for the Harvard Alumni Bulletin. (Harvard grads, community leaders all, supporters of culture, read and remember.) But in the preservation script as it is written today, Williamsburg and its imitators get all the lines. And all the money. They are rebuilt and refurnished to expensive, improbable perfection, while the wrecker's ball swings freely in the country's Manchesters.

This cannot be blamed on lack of information. John Coolidge's book on the utopian 19th-century planning of Lowell, Mass., "Mill and Mansion," has become a classic in the field. The Lowell buildings no longer exist. William Pierson's studies of New England mill towns are standard literature. Between this competent scholarship and the politically appointed agencies that run urban renewal there is an unconscionable communications gap that could most kindly be called ignorance. The results of ignorance are urbicide.

Mr. Langenbach is now documenting Manchester's self-destruction. Ninety of the buildings will go for parking lots and access to still-functioning factories. The canals will be filled in for sewers. What is being destroyed for some of the most limited and discredited aims of urban renewal, he points out, is the "unity and impact of one of the most powerful urban scenes anywhere in the world."

How did it happen? The same way that the heart and soul is being cut out of uncounted American cities to be replaced by faceless clichés. First, an outside research firm is called in to analyze the community's problems and make recommendations. The extremely respected, internationally known firm of Arthur D. Little, Inc. produced such a consultant survey for Manchester in 1961. While making numerous economic suggestions, the report offered the information that "even with extensive improvements and upgrading, the millyard will never be an asset from the esthetic point of view."

Well. The blind telling the blind what to do. Say that to any architectural historian or urban designer worthy of the name and watch the fireworks. The real catastrophe, however, is that it is exactly this kind of seriously inadequate, damaging nonsense that is being sold successfully to municipalities countrywide. The researchers, the planners and the surveys themselves are close to identical, ignoring any indigenous character for formulas of repetitive, profitable sterility.

The conclusions thus offered and received as gospel are much like the grotesque solutions of incompletely programed computers. They are wretchedly wrong. No one has remembered to put in the factor of environmental design sensitivity based on recognition of its characteristics through knowledge of its forms and appreciation of its history. On those well-known research and planning teams collecting fat fees for a depressingly standard product ground out in town after town, there is rarely a contributor of this essential expertise. The tragically faulty recommendations that result from this basic omission are then translated into action by renewal agencies, most of whom are urbanistic amateurs. Surgery is carried on by plumbers.

What is being produced is a kind of urban Pablum. We are making a dull porridge of parking lots and cheap commercialism, to replace the forms and evidence of American civilization. We have forgotten, to quote Mr. Langenbach again, that "economics is a social science." We wonder why the economic formulas produce inhuman cities.

This is the certain way to the blight of the future. In Manchester, nobody really cares. And that is the most tragic indictment of all.