Can a Symbol of Graft Be an Architectural Landmark?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE first impression one gets of the Beame administration on a visit to City Hall is of cordial chaos in a scene straight out of a Marx Brothers movie. Something like the stateroom sequence in "A Night at the Opera," with everyone coming and going in every direction at once, appearing and disappearing out of portholes and steamer trunks. Only here they come from under stairs and out of the basement and through false doors in a steady stream to the Deputy Mayors's offices, and one expects to see Groucho chasing Margaret Dumont around the rotunda any moment.

An accretion of expediency arrangements by preceding administrations has created cheek-to-cheek disorder that is hard on the people who work there and hard on the building itself, a landmark whose delicacy is matched only by its stubborn survival. And so, the impulses behind the Beame team's efforts to do a little administrative housekeeping (neatness counts) and to solve the problem of executive office space are unassailable.

The Mayor has, in fact, put this high on his list of priorities, with the creation of a Manhattan Civic Center Task Force by executive order. Among the aims listed are to restore functional and esthetic serenity to City Hall, befitting its landmark status, and to build a new City Hall annex.

The site for the Annex was preselected—the land where the Tweed Courthouse stands in City Hall Park, behind City Hall—and the Courthouse was to be demolished. With a magic simultaneity, there appeared in Deputy Mayor Cavanagh's office a drawing showing a new building on the Courthouse site prepared by the Municipal Services Administration. Mr. Cavanagh explained to visitors that he really didn't like the style of the building rendered, which was sort of gas station modern, but would prefer something he felt was more suitable, in colonial revival.

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And so the Task Force came into being with its program already set. Chaired by Municipal Services Administrator John T. Carroll, its other members include Mr. Cavanagh, the City Planning Chairman, the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administrator, the Transportation Administrator, the Director of the Bureau of the Budget and the Director of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development.

In a curious step back to square one, the Municipal Services Administration has been given responsibility for the project. This is the agency that used to do much of the city's planning by default and non sequitur because it carries out the city's construction.

During the last administration, however, special development offices were established, as branches of the Mayor's office, to take over localized planning and design, which they have been doing with exceptional skill. The Civic Center area is part of the responsibility of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development.

The second impression one gets at City Hall is that although there is a certain Rip Van Winkle quality about the place, the gentlemen there are quick studies. Awareness of planning changes had obviously been minimal. But in no time at all the resources of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development were called on.

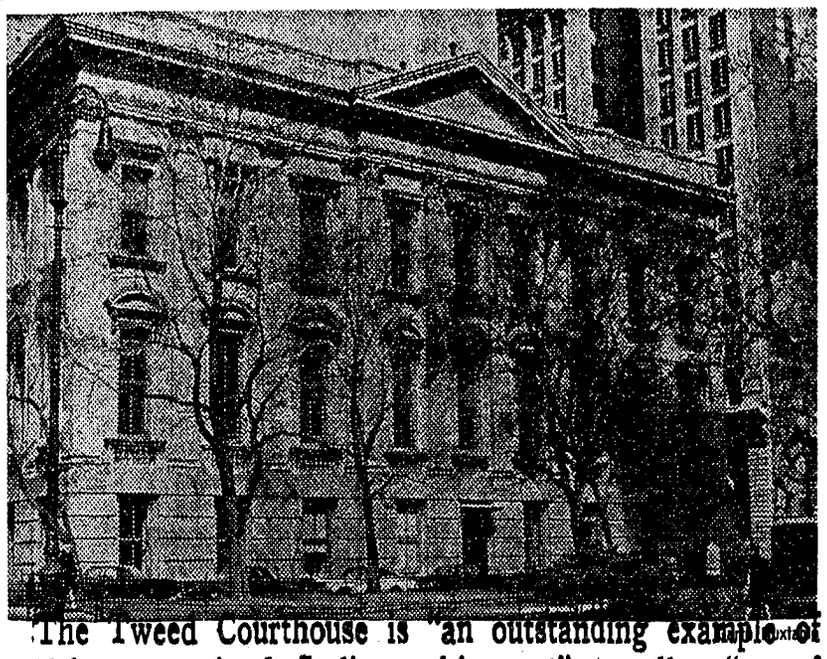
The third impression is that these gentlemen know what they like, or want, and they know how to go about getting it in all the approved, old-school, political ways. Unfortunately, what they want is what everyone thought was all right 15 or 20 years ago.

Take the matter of the Tweed Courthouse. Its demolition, never announced publicly, was an early, almost instant administrative decision. It was simply the ultimate extension of the conventional wisdom that the building is nothing but a shoddy piece of graft.

In recent years, there have been notable changes in attitude. There are scholars in the fields of art, history and culture who see the Tweed Courthouse, with the blinders of distaste removed, both as a legitimate New York landmark on every level from architectural to political history, and as a handsome period building as well. It is, they point out, an outstanding example of the 19th-century Anglo-Italian style, extremely rare in New York—a genre introduced by Barry's Reform Club in London. Its basic esthetic is unaffected by Tweed's celebrated gravy train.

Traditionally, guides and commentaries have vied in its denunciation. Built as the County Courthouse in 1861-72, and used later as the City Court, its "Corinthian architecture of Massachusetts white marble" is described in King's Guide of 1893 as a "basis of the $10-million peculations of Tweed and his associates." The later WPA Guide ups the peculations to $12 million and calls it "one of the gigantic steals in the city's history."

All true. And the remarkable thing is that it is still a substantial and stylish building, its impressive interiors defaced with layers of mud-colored mu-



The Tweed Courthouse is "an outstanding example of 19th-century Anglo-Italian architecture" as well as "one of the gigantic steals in the city's history" (WPA Guide).

nicipal paint. Its marble, carved wood, massive construction and profligate space could not be bought today for any rational figure. Sic transit the building art. Old Tweed would have the last laugh, in perfect, and appropriately cynical, New York style.

In spite of its obvious qualifications, the Courthouse is not a designated landmark. It has been so universally repudiated for its unsavory associations that it is probably too hot a political potato for the Landmarks Commission to handle.

Ironically, public building recycling no longer represents some fantasy of the future; these reused structures are the resounding preservation successes of the present.

There are the examples of the Old Boston City Hall; historic Federal Building transfers across the country; the Old State, War and Navy Building, now the Executive Office Building, and the Old Court of Claims, now the Renwick Gallery, in Washington; and the Public Theater in the Old Astor Library and the Public Library in the Jefferson Market Courthouse, in New York—just to scratch the national list. They were all scheduled to be demolished. And they all surpass any possible replacements in style and character, with no loss in serviceability.

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It was therefore suggested to the administration that the Tweed Courthouse should not be torn down without a feasibility study of the possibilities of remodeling it for the Executive Office Annex. And so, Deputy Mayor Cavanagh, a kind, agreeable and reasonable man, whose face crumples in sad disbelief when the Courthouse is praised (he displays a letter stigmatizing it as a symbol of corruption on which grounds heaven help a few Roman arches and Renaissance palazzi) ordered the study.

It was made for the Task Force by the Municipal Services Administration and to nobody's surprise it called for demolition. It called for it "in any event." In any event apparently meant in spite of the fact that the study found that it would be cheaper to restore and remodel the old building than to construct a new one (with a few caveats about reduced life span and maintenance costs) and that the space available would reasonably equal the space required. Parks Administrator Edwin Weisl Jr., was the lone Task Force dissenter.

It is a report (unreleased, but relentlessly bootlegged) remarkable for its lack of preservation expertise, total absence of design visualization and failure to acknowledge any qualities except those of the most pragmatic structural immediacy. It really goes back to square one.

That old chestnut "waste space" keeps rearing its head, with the triumphant observation that a new building could have the same square footage and be one-third the size of the old one. The esthetic rationale is that anything on that site should be smaller than City Hall—an argument with no validity at all, since everything turns on relationships, not measurements. The same goes for that other old chestnut, "matching style."

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Two out-of-town experts have already come, been cordially received, and delivered unwanted advice. Roger Webb, of Architectural Heritage, Inc., which turned the similar Old Boston City Hall into prime new offices, found the conversion both practical and reasonable. Hugh Newell Jacobsen, restorer of the Renwick, said he would stake his reputation on the building's soundness and the desirability of remodeling and reuse, meeting all building code and operational requirements.

But the specter that keeps rising is not Boss Tweed; it is the "colonial revival" replacement the administration wants and the esthetic and urban damage it will do to City Hall. Honest graft is to be preferred to pseudo-historical hypocrisy. Next to that Early Howard Johnson vision, the Tweed Courthouse looks like a rose.