ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE SELL-OFF AT ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S

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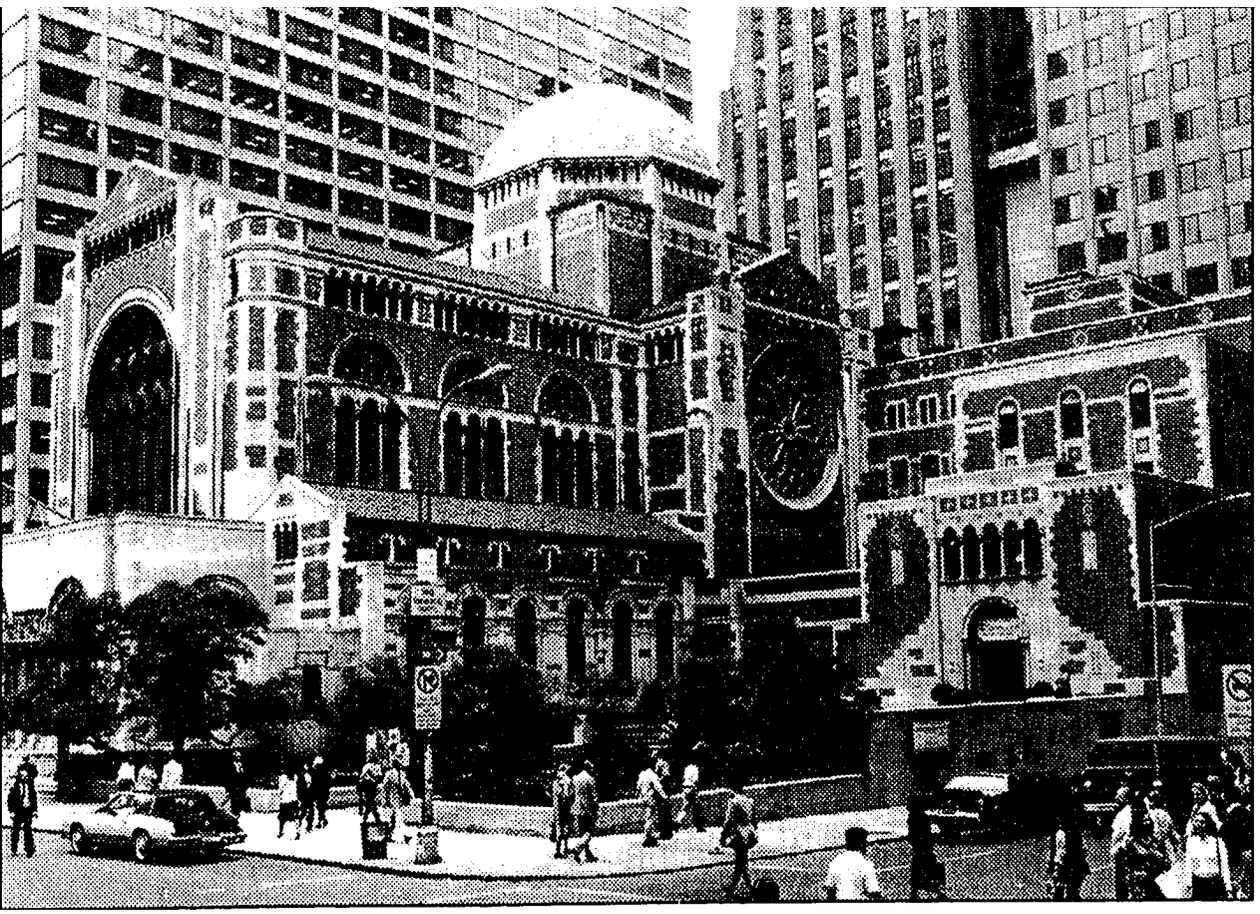
ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



St. Bartholomew's—"Visualize an immense tower filling most of the space.'

The Sell-Off at St. Bartholomew's

If Faust exchanged his soul for immortality, the temptation of St. Bartholomew's is the more pragmatic lure of financial security. The testing of moral fiber against sensory gratification or material gain is as old as Biblical history, and this time the temptor came in appropriate 20th-century form — a "prestigious corporation" offering $100 million for the church's prime Park Avenue property as the site for a new office tower. In these days of shrinking congregations and growing deficits, $100 million is an attractive sum. The trials of conscience that have sent saints into poverty and the desert have delivered St. Bart's into the hands of the real estate brokers.

Or a part of St. Bart's, since the agreement now rests on a compromise; the rector and the vestry believe that they have found a way to keep the church and turn a profit, too. This revelation was apparently arrived at through divine guidance. The announcement was made, "after weeks of prayerful consideration," that the church is not for sale. What is for sale, or lease, instead, is only a portion of the land, which will destroy only part of the building complex. St. Bartholomew's is considering disposing of its community house and garden, or about one-third of the site. At the least, the buyer will get a coveted Park Avenue address and room enough to build a substantial structure.

The forces of darkness are persistent; a second offer evidently followed the first. Not surprisingly, church officials have voted to put the negotiations into the hands of "outside consultants" professionaly adept at flushing the highest bidder. The availability of this choice corner site at 50th Street, virtually the only open space left on an almost solidly corporate Park Avenue in midtown, is sending orgasmic tremors through New York's real estate community.

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The church sees no loss of spiritual values in its decision. Temptation comes complete with convenient, if confused, rationalizations. Bricks and mortar are called secondary to human needs; it is said that cash will serve society better than beauty. And solvency has a beauty of its own. That the beauty of the St. Bartholomew block contributes to the spiritual welfare of the city and all of its people is not part of the reckoning. The quality of the church's art and architecture are well-known, but the serenity and public availability of its sun-filled and flowering garden in the congested commercial heart of the city are a particular gift of grace to New York. Only in a culture where commercial values have vanquished spiritual values would such a church and its setting not be considered a legacy beyond price from the past to the present.

Equally disturbing is the church's odd illusion that it is engaged in an act of preservation. "We have agreed that we will accept no offer, however big, that would harm in any way our magnificent church building . . . " says the official statement. To which the only possible response is amen. The harm that will be done to the landmark church by this decision will be irreparable. Perhaps it is time for church officials to take a walk outside and use their eyes instead of their calculators.

The architecture of St. Bartholomew's consists of a church building and a community house that form an integrated, L-shaped whole. Functionally, the structures are separate, but visually, all the parts are unified. The church was built to the design of Bertrand Grosvenor Goodhue in 1918, incorporating a 1903 porch by McKim, Mead and White from an earlier building. The community house was added in the 1920's by Goodhue's firm, after his death. The familiar, flat dome of the Byzantine-inspired complex was completed in 1930. Handmade salmon-colored brick and Indiana limestone were used throughout, enriched by skilled carving, rare marbles and fine details; the church contains numerous works of art. With all the exterior elements meticulously matched in scale and style, the complex is meant to look like one building, and it does.

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This two-part construction wraps around the garden, embracing and sheltering it with an architecture of agreeable human dimensions, against the backdrop of skyscrapers beyond. The planting acts not only as a frame and setting for the church, but buffers it from the street and the impact of the larger buildings. The destruction of the garden, which protects and enhances the church at the same time that it opens the corner to the street, is a loss all too easy to understand and deplore. However, it would do more than remove rare open space of great beauty and amenity; it would destroy an essential part of the architectural composition, leaving the truncated church like a jewel without a setting.

The quality and relationships of the buildings and landscaping have been recognized and respected by the architects of neighboring structures. Both the Art Deco General Electric Building, designed by Cross and Cross in 1931, and the otherwise standard new commercial offices by the Rudin interests, designed by the Eggers Group, demonstrate the considerable care taken to find a sympathetic match to the color of St. Bartholomew's brick. Fortunately, their location behind the complex on the Lexington Avenue side also makes them background buildings. The entire block works extremely well as one of the city's better examples of urban design.

To understand what the changes will be like, it is necessary to look at the church complex from the street. First, imagine one arm of the garden enclosure lopped off. Next, mentally wipe out the garden. Then try to see the church minus the planting to the south that frames the building and insulates it against the march of encroaching blockbusters.

Next, visualize an immense tower filling most of the space now occupied by the community house and the garden. Give or take the questionable amenity of a windswept and sterile plaza or arcade with some token planting at its base — features that permit a builder to add more height — the bulk of this tower will overwhelm the church beside it; at worst, it will wall up the corner. Consider the truly destructive scale and jarring impact of this construction. Think really big; the kind of building that can, and will, be put up under the present zoning, combining the permitted avenue size and bonuses and the church's air rights, is monstrous. Why else would anyone offer that kind of money?

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But a bargain is a bargain, and this brutally disfiguring transformation comes along with the cash. Has anyone really thought about it in these terms, prayerfully or otherwise? Is this irreversible selloff of art and urbanity something the church should knowingly sanction? Or is this kind of destruction just too difficult for the non-visual, non-specialist in urban design to "see" or understand, before it actually takes place?

The problem of visualization is serious and pervasive, with enormous consequences for the city. No one, for example, visualized the true size of the behemoths permitted under the 1961 zoning. The effect they are having on sun, light and scale in midtown, or how their encroachment is destroying residential views and values uptown, is only becoming apparent.

At the South Street Seaport, to cite another case, the city is about to sacrifice the last of the genuine character of a fragile historical survival to economic development masquerading as a way to save the past. No one can, or will, make the changes clear. City officials, in their pursuit of prosperity, don't even want to know about them. The threats to the integrity, and even to the survival, of the city's art and history today are far more subtle, and just as devastating, as the bulldozer ever was.

Is no one willing or able to visualize the disastrous nature of the tradeoff at St. Bartholomew's, or the sophisticated obliteration of the Seaport for a commercial marketing formula? Out of innocence or ignorance, we continue to make the kind of bargains for preservation that turn out not to be preservation at all.

The Atlantic City quotation attributed to Charles Funnell ("Atlantic City — Analyzing an Urban Phenomenon," Sept. 21) is from "Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness" by Lee Eisenberg. Mr. Funnell's book, which was an important source for the research project on Atlantic City by the University of Pennsylvania students is "By the Beautiful Sea." ■