ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A DRAMATIC EXAMPLE OF ARCHITECTURAL RECYCLING
ADA LOUISE HUXTABLEGarth Huxtable
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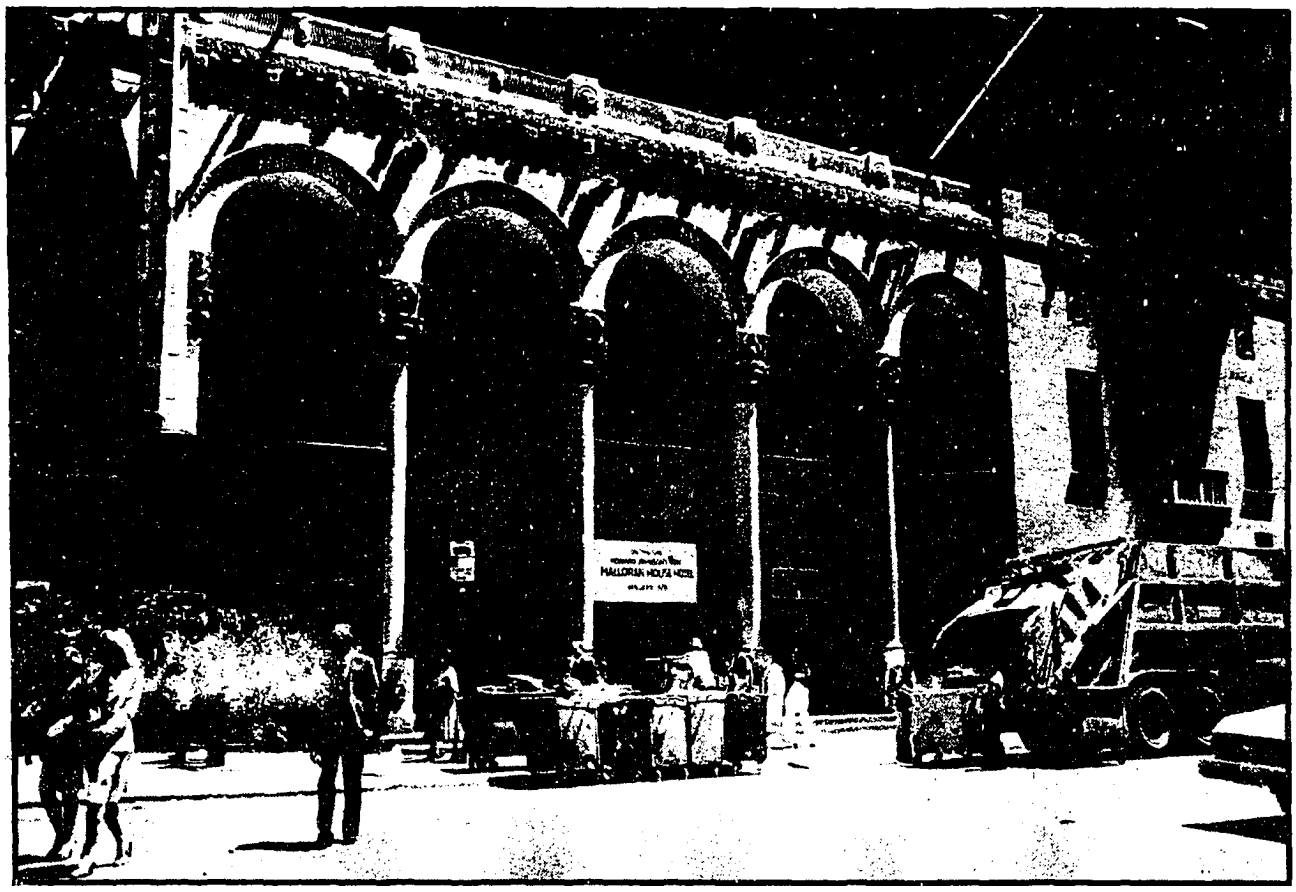
A Dramatic Example of Architectural Recycling



Garth Huxtable

A sponsor usually associated with plastic uniformity is restoring the Shelton Hotel.

They are carrying 400 tons of rubbish out of the Shelton Hotel on Lexington Avenue between 48th and 49th Streets, and the sign on the dusty colonnaded entrance announces that the new Halloran House Hotel is coming, courtesy of Howard Johnson. What the sign does not say is that this is one of the most dramatic examples of the recycling of a major building in any city today, and that the remodeling and rehabilitation of this landmark New York skyscraper is being sponsored by a national chain that has dealt almost undeviatingly in new construction of plastic uniformity. Call it a born-again hotel.

Nor is there any mention of the fact that when Arthur Loomis Harmon designed and built the Shelton in 1924, its unconventional set-back tower was one of the first large structures to conform to New York's new zoning law, and its appearance on the skyline was hailed as a major architectural event. It was awarded the medal of the American Institute of Architects and appeared in paintings by Georgia O' Keeffe. The striking, set-back forms were immortalized by Hugh Ferriss in romantic dark charcoal with softly shooting beams of light behind. "This building," Ferriss wrote, "evokes that undefinable sense of satisfaction which man ever finds on the slope of the pyramid or the mountainside."

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What it evoked in Edward J. Halloran, of Halloran Properties, approximately 50 years later, was a sense of terrible waste. The Shelton had fallen on hard times. The building was empty except for about a dozen hold-out tenants under rent control, and it was in deep financial trouble. "I got tired of walking by it every day and seeing it sit there," he says. "It's a good building." He admired its quality, and he knew that with the costs of new construction at a record high, remodeling offered an unbeatable dollar value.

The consortium that put together the project consists of Mr. Halloran, the Dollar Savings Bank and Norman Groh, operating as a franchisee of Howard Johnson. Ten years ago, buildings like this were torn down routinely. Now they are valued not only for their style and substance but for the attractive fact that a quality hotel can be produced for $30,000 a room in an old building instead of $100,000 a room in a new one.

The Shelton was originally built as a men's residence hotel, with 1,200 small rooms and clublike facilities, including a swimming pool, bowling alley, gymnasium, billiard room, squash courts, library and lounge. The architect, Arthur Harmon, described the details of the public interiors as "early Italian Renaissance," with some wood-paneled rooms "more characteristically English." Actually, the style was rather indeterminate, ranging from simple traditional with fine marble and ironwork, to early Schrafft's.

The exterior is marked by excellent brickwork and carved limestone and terra cotta, and the ornament was called, by the architect, "North Italian Romanesque or Early Christian," which gave him quite a lot of rope. It also permitted the handsome entrance colonnade and a band of gargoyles at cornice level. One of the building's most curious features is its battered walls—this means that they slope inward as they rise, to avoid an optical illusion that worried the early skyscraper builders, that the structure would seem to be toppling over.

But what Harmon emphasized was his deliberate avoidance of "any pronounced architectural style," preferring to stress the forms of the building, since "the masses of such modern buildings have no architectural precedents." It was this massing that was most admired by his contemporaries. Lewis Mumford, writing in the 1920's, praised the stripped and simplified surfaces of the new tall buildings with their emphasis on mass and function; however, he preferred the more original ornamental details of Ralph Walker and Ely Jacques Kahn to Harmon's vaguely Italianate recall.

In 1924, "Architecture" magazine called the Shelton "a fine achievement" and "intensely modern in its main elements." The building profoundly influenced many that followed in the next decade. But architectural memory is short. By the 1960's, the Shelton's day had passed. It was interesting only to young architectural historians recording early modern monuments and to real estate investors seeking to assemble land for new construction.

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In a series of normally tortuous New York real estate deals in the late 1960's and early 70's, the Shelton was acquired by Goldman and DiLorenzo and its leasehold transferred to Tishman, Arlen Realty and Stanley Stahl, who assembled the rest of the block with the intention of demolishing everything and building a massive new structure for a corporate client

The difficulty of relocating rent-controlled tenants slowed the process until the potential client left the city, just about the time the office market collapsed. In a subsequent series of maneuvers, Tishman was left temporarily holding the bag, Goldman and DiLorenzo got the building back and couldn't meet the mortgage payments to the Dollar Savings Bank, and the bank took over. The Shelton was for sale for a number of years.

Preservationists worried and so did the Dollar Savings Bank. Some studies for residential conversion were made by the architectural firm of Stephen B. Jacobs and Associates, which has a reputation for recycling old buildings. Finally, Mr. Halloran's consortium bloomed, with Jacobs as the architect for the conversion. The deal was immensely sweetened by New York's newly passed tax abatement for hotel development. But one of the most heartening factors is that this is a first recycling of a fine old building for the Howard Johnson chain, and a first break with the familiar Hojo image.

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The architects are respectfully restoring the exterior and gutting and remodeling the interior; the hotel's 1,200 small rooms will be replaced by 650 larger ones. The outside walls of brick, stone and terra cotta will be cleaned and patched. Roofs, parapets, balconies and the entrance arcade will be carefully renewed.

Inside, the original ironwork, tile and mosaics and period fixtures failed to survive remodelings, dropped ceilings and multiple coats of paint. In their place, alas, will be public rooms in what might be called Pub Pastiche, a popular commercial mode to be provided, not by the architects of the restoration, but by the designers of the Inn Keepers Supply Company of Memphis, Tenn. If you have wondered how junk design spreads like junk food from sea to shining sea, this is one answer. Inn Keepers Supply Company is evidently one of the largest purveyors of kitsch to hotels and restaurants across the country, and there are others like them.

In a word, the Shelton will be hopelessly hoked up. According to preliminary sketches, there will be ersatz Tiffany lamps, fake Victorian fixtures, synthetic stained glass, lots of ornate machine paneling, framed beer signs, sandblasted mirrors, cribbed Art Nouveau motifs, and cute names and type ad nauseum. You've seen it all—everywhere—before. None of this fabricated falseness and spurious recall has anything to do with the "traditional" design or the specifically New York ambience the owners say they want, or with the Shelton or the 1920's. To paraphrase that old ad, why be half right? This is stunning conversion and conservation, and too good an architectural act to spoil. ■

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