Art

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Good News And Bad News From Buffalo

BUFFALO

Any city that produced two presidents has some claim to fame. In the case of Buffalo, they were Grover Cleveland and Millard Fillmore, which gives the city a bit of an image problem. Neither had much style. Since last winter's monumental snows, Buffalo's image has suffered further, but this is a city that deserves more than its reputation as the Arctic outpost of New York State. It has one of Frederick Law Olmsted's finest park systems, buildings of national stature by America's three greatest architects, Henry Hobson Richardson, Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and broad streets of attractive, substantial houses of the decades from the 1880's to World War I—probably the time when this country produced more good homes than at any period of its history.

It also has some of the country's best endangered landmarks. The Richardson and Sullivan buildings have very uncertain futures.

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A first-time visitor finds a surprisingly handsome city in many ways. It was even handsomer before the elm disease killed off the arching trees over those stately boulevards—a process that Buffalonians started themselves when they axed the trees for the widening of Delaware Avenue in 1924. Nor is this city without a representative sampling of the blight of aborted urban renewal and stagnant neighborhoods, as well as the usual parking lots and commercial strip development common to other places.

But enough of Buffalo was designed by Olmsted to give it a green and spacious serenity and the kind of character that comes from the conscious imposition of large concepts of scale and clarity on a city's random growth. The Buffalo plan unites at least four of the linked elements of Olmsted's municipal park system: the large rurual area, as in Delaware Park, the streets built as parkways, designed for both circulation and linear green space, leading to parklike circles, focal open spaces like Niagara Square, and the specialized green areas such as South Park and the Parade. This is the planned landscape framework that makes the city such a pleasant place today. (So much for the currently fashionable non-plan school of chaos and ad hocism.)

There is also more good architecture in Buffalo—major buildings at the top of their stylistic form—than anyone seems ready to recognize or acknowledge. Generations of self-deprecation, a Buffalo specialty, have devalued these structures, if their value has been perceived at all. No one ever told me, for example, that one of the country's largest and finest Style Moderne public buildings is in Buffalo. The Buffalo City Hall, designed by John J. Wade and completed in 1932, is a spectacular 32-story tower with flanking, 14-story wings carried out in a kind of Art Deco classicism of exceptional quality. An impressive three-story entrance colonnade and a sculptured frieze of the cultural and economic life of Buffalo are topped by the pyramided tower.

Nor is it common knowledge that one of the best examples of D. H. Burnham and Co.'s solid, academic functionalism is also here—the full-block Ellicott Square office building designed by Charles B. Atwood for the Burnham firm before 1895. This is as finely massed and detailed a structure of the period as you would want to see.

Also within the downtown area are an excellent County Courthouse and a substantial Post Office of 1894-1901 by

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James Knox Taylor, very similar in its rusticated stone facade and interior skylit court to the Old Post Office on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington that is now being rehabilitated for government offices. At the time that the Historic American Buildings Survey recorded the Buffalo Post Office, about a decade ago, it was assumed that the building would be demolished for a parking lot. Fortunately, it still stands.

Which brings us to the current threat to Louis Sullivan's Prudential Building. This internationally famous landmark, the last major work of the Adler and Sullivan collaboration and one of the finest of their "skyscrapers," was built as the Guaranty Building in 1894-95. Threatened with demolition last April, it now has a stay of execution thanks to action by the city and a citizens' committee formed to study ways to save it.

The owner of the Prudential, the United Founders Life Insurance Company of Oklahoma City, is absorbing losses while it looks for a preservation-minded buyer. A dedicated historian, John Randall, is acting as building manager. The structure is in a prime, downtown commercial location, next to a splended Upjohn church.

This is so obviously the kind of building that has been successfully recycled, financially and esthetically, in more cities than can be counted, that one wonders what is wrong in Buffalo. The magic, missing combination appears to be an interested entrepreneur and a willing bank. Perhaps, as with Boston's triumphant Quincy Market restoration, outsiders will have to do the job.

Within sight of the Prudential Building is the new Marine Midland Bank tower by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, straddling Main Street, a consummate example of 20th-century corporate art, inside and out. The man responsible for the building and its dramatic collections, Seymour Knox, is also the patron of the Albright-Knox Museum's cool and elegant new wing by Gordon Bunshaft that lives so well with its Beaux Arts predecessor (the addition is now a surprising 15 years old).

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I came to Buffalo to see the Albright-Knox, and it was well worth the trip. But I also came to see the Prudential Building, because I grew up believing that it was one of this country's most important works of architecture. Its present shabby state belies its place in the history of American skyscraper design and in the Sullivan oeuvre. Still, it stunned me when I finally faced it. No photograph had prepared me for the tactile and architectonic quality of the superb ornament by George Elmslie that covers the building's entire surface like dark red terra-cotta lace; it is intricately alive. The subtle and studied relationship of ornament to structure through surface and scale is almost unparalleled.

H. H. Richardson's powerfully grand old State Hospital is not faring much better. Rumors of its demise circulate regularly. Even Buffalo's famous Frank Lloyd Wright houses have suffered a mixed fate. The Darwin Martin complex of 1903-4, among the greatest of the early Prairie Houses, has been badly mutilated. The large and small houses on the site are now split apart by a banal brick apartment block, where they were once connected by a pergola and greenhouse.

The smaller of the two, the Barton house, has blossomed in sympathetic hands; it is a warm and inviting house of impeccable artistry in which every detail delights. The larger Martin house is going through love-hate traumas. Some owners have made well-meant but horribly damaging changes, including destroying what was left of wisteria mosaics while closing one side of a double fireplace, skewing spatial relationships and adding fluorescent cove lighting to a plaster ceiling stripped of its wood trim. Some of this destruction could be reversed today. But the present owner, the State University at Buffalo, is obviously ambivalent; an earlier president lived there and cherished it, the current president will have nothing to do with it.

The question one asks, perhaps futilely, is why these historic architectural treasures should be less eligible for esthetic and philanthropic concern than museums and office buildings? Once the initial investment is made, landmarks often pay their way. They afford incalculable environmental enrichment. Buffalo has been fortunate in its enlightened and enthusiastic patronage. But Americans clearly lack awareness and comprehension of some of their greatest cultural contributions. Architecture is a city's most important and vulnerable art, and this, tragically, is little understood. ■