The Editorial Notebook

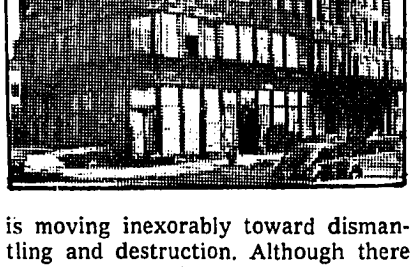
The Case of the Stolen Landmarks

Any normal New York cynic will tell you that whatever isn't nailed down (or together) in this city gets stolen, and that includes buildings. Some buildings even get stolen twice. That is what happened to the landmark structure by James Bogardus that stood at the corner of Washington and Murray Streets from 1849 to the 1960's, when the Washington Market was leveled for antiseptic urban renewal.

The Bogardus Building, which had a facade made of prefabricated cast-iron panels—a revolutionary kind of construction in the 1840's that led to the later skyscraper frame—was dismantled and the panels were saved for some dream of future re-assembly. Pending resurrection, they were "stored" in a vacant downtown lot. Some interested observers of the process made off with most of them. Clearly, the thieves were less interested in history and art than in the high price of scrap iron.

On the theory that a third of a landmark is better than none, the Landmarks Commission then moved the remaining 59 panels to a city-owned structure and locked them up. Now someone has stolen the building again. It isn't easy to steal panels weighing about a ton and a half each. You have to like scrap iron a lot.

But New York has no monopoly on this particular kind of landmark lunacy. The city of Buffalo has just celebrated "Buffalo Preservation Week" while Louis Sullivan's Prudential Building of 1894, listed on the National Register of Historic Places,



is moving inexorably toward dismantling and destruction. Although there is a local committee working to save the building, the only action to date has been an inquiry from the owner about the procedures required for wrecking a listed landmark.

As a commercial property, a building like this comes under the provisions of the 1976 Tax Reform Act, which gives the same advantages of accelerated depreciation for remodeling a landmark as for new construction. The irony, once again, is that the parts seem to be worth more than the whole: Removed from the building, Sullivan's superb terracotta ornament can fetch a pretty fancy price. The wrecking job is its own reward. It follows then that a building is worth more dead than alive.

This kind of esthetic efficiency could simplify life and history. Why should it be necessary to keep an awkward old building around at all; once the Elgin marbles were in the British Museum, was there any real reason to save the Parthenon? We might have to revise our ideas about landmarks.

By tradition and simple definition, a landmark has meant something that marks the land; it creates a distinct character, style and sense of place by being where it is. It puts the stamp of architectural quality or associative history on a particular location, giving it special environmental and cultural values. The point is that when you remove the building, you lose those values. "You can't take it with you" goes for landmarks as well as life.

But even preservationists endorse some kind of pragmatic, piecemeal salvation, that dismantles and moves buildings—as the Landmarks Commission did in New York. This leads to saving architectural samples instead of cities. Witness the rest of the Bogardus Building story. Before the building was stolen for the second time, there was a plan afoot to cast reproductions of its missing panels, to erect a "landmark" that would be one-third old and two-thirds new, and to put this architectural hybrid in the South Street Seaport, where the original never was. The result, as too commonly demonstrated elsewhere, would be a kind of Disney historicism or scholarly sideshow.

Pious gestures are an empty substitute for preservation. No one needs architectural keepsakes. Better the scrapheap than sanctimonious games. Scrap was probably the best end for the Bogardus Building after so many ludicrous indignities. But the Prudential Building deserves a better fate.

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