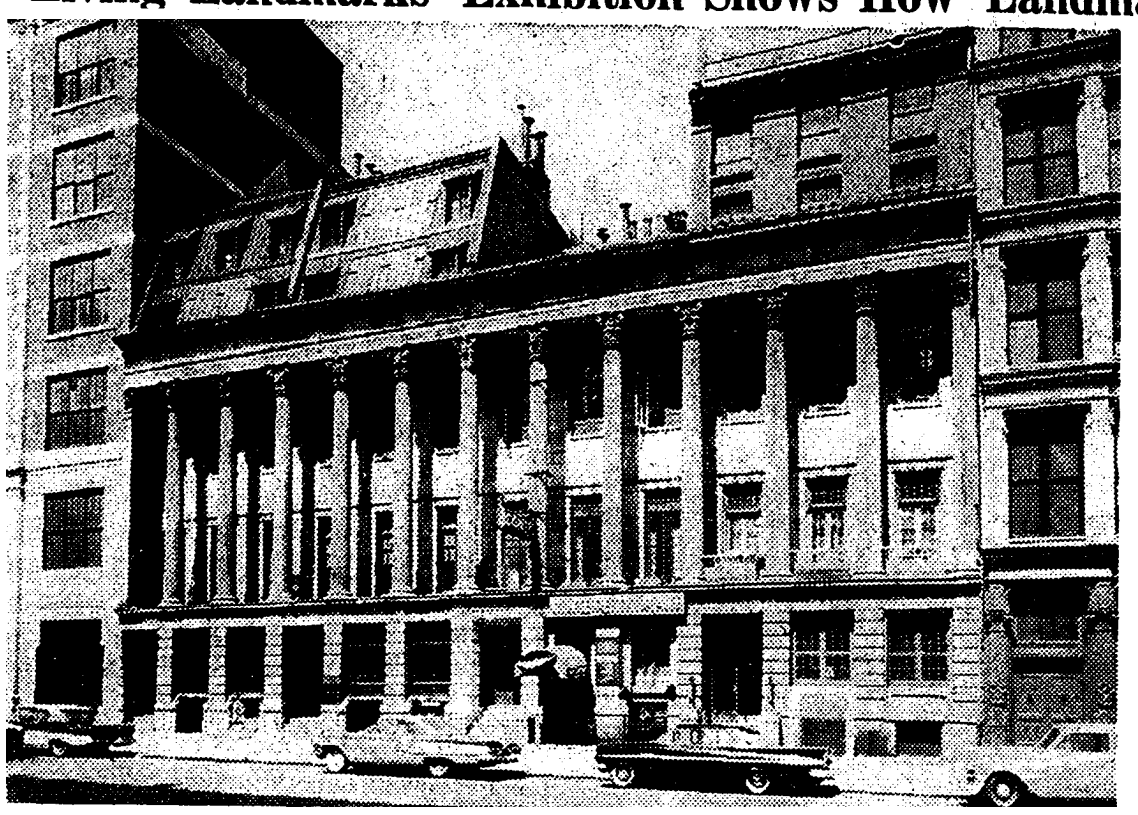
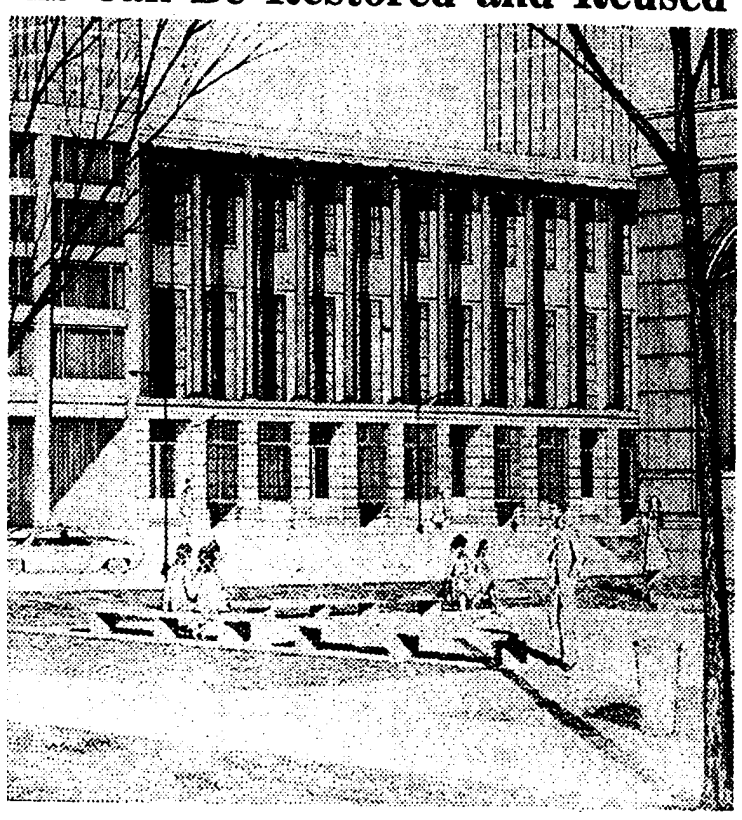
'Living Landmarks' Exhibition Shows How Landmarks Can Be Restored and Reused



The New York Times (by Sam Falk)

Colonnade Row, Lafayette Street, once city's finest and handsomest row of mansions in its most fashionable residential neighborhood, is now shabby buildings in poor area. It was designated a city landmark by Landmarks Preservation Commission in September.



The drawing shows how the landmark could be restored and neighborhood redeveloped. The designer, Jim McCormack, suggests a combination of new and old buildings.

Landmarks at Work

Exhibit Suggests New Uses for Old Buildings, Making Preservation Pay

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

There is no smell of mothballs or sentiment at the landmarks exhibition co-sponsored by the Municipal Art Society and the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The exhibition of photographs will open today for a week of preview viewing at the Architectural League, 115 East 40th Street. Called Living Landmarks, this is the liveliest and most purposeful roundup of old buildings that New York has seen.

An Appraisal

It promises to be even livelier, in its later, full-dress showing at the Pepsi-Cola gallery from Feb. 3 to 23, when a street display of decapitated columns and fragmented gods, nymphs and satyrs from bulldozed New York structures will make a dramatic "Roman ruin" on Park Avenue. Everything is scheduled for a truly smashing affair except a Demolition Ball. (What a splendid one could have been given in the rubble of Penn Station!)

This is, and will be, a good show, but the point is that it is much more. The exhibition is the city's first frontal attack on the most problematic aspect of landmark preservation: What do you do with the buildings after you've saved them? In the steamy emotionalism of the fight for the past, the hard facts of high land values and outmoded spaces, services and functions—nowhere more pressing than in New York—are often lost. The question of practical re-use, or changing economics, is the central issue of any realistic preservation program.

With the help of a grant from the J. M. Kaplan fund, the exhibition comes up with some provocative answers. It presents an even more provocative picture of a city in which delight would have a toe-hold with commercialism.

Some of the suggestions include a galleria-type shopping center combined with a Long Island Rail Road station in the shell of the 34th Street Armory, and a naval museum in the 1804 Bulfinch house marooned in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Cafe For Central Park

An outdoor cafe to use the paved terrace at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, could reverse the present trend of gouging new refreshment services out of the greenery; the New York office of the new Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development could take over the Custom House at Bowling Green after the Customs Department abandons it for the World Trade Center, as a fitting advertisement for the Great Society.

The 1832 houses of Colonnade Row on Lafayette Street restored to their original elegance, and cast-iron buildings in lower Manhattan remodeled for studios and shops, would vary and enrich necessary new residential construction.

All of these studies have been prepared by experienced architects and designers, credited on the panels, with an obvious application of time, thought, practical construction knowledge and the kind of love for the city more common in New York than it is popular to admit. There is an assumption throughout that civilized pleasures and architectural quality are proper values on the urban scale.

But these schemes are only half an answer. Building a city can be a creative adventure or a humdrum repetition of speculative formulas. One system enriches the city; the other impoverishes it. One is with us; the other is being groped for by everyone except the city's builders. The rest of the answer, or how to build the better way, requires not only imagination but slogging persistence in the search for means to carry out superior, nonstandard proposals in a standardized, cost-plus culture.

It is now a matter of recognizing the "growing consensus for beauty," in the words of the exhibition, and extending tools that already exist for other purposes to encourage landmark preservation.

Bonuses for Landmarks

If construction bonuses are given to builders in New York under the new zoning law for embellishing their structures with plazas and arcades, could it not be amended to give them bonuses for landmark protection?

Why not add the category of landmark preservation to the area of eligibility for low-cost construction loans? Why is the subject skirted in incentives and aids to renewal through rehabilitation in Federal housing and urban renewal legislation, instead of assisted directly?

Should not the idea of tax abatement be part of the badly needed restudy of the whole topsy-turvy, slum-encouraging, landmark-destroying real estate tax structure? Where are the large foundations with preservation subsidies in areas of demonstrated need?

It is not merely respect for New York's history and traditions that motivates studies such as this exhibition; it is a growing concern for the quality of the living fabric of the city. Not only is the actual retention and restoration of landmarks an issue, but also the related use of landscaping, open space, new construction and all of the factors of environmental design that contribute vitally to the urban economy and the character of the city as a place to live.

"We come not to bury these buildings," states the text. "We come to bring them back alive."