

Architecture

'No Canoeing Allowed Here'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

QUESTION: What is more deadly than the automobile? Answer: The automobile and the Federal Government together. The combination has a destructive capacity that is one of the few efficiencies that bureaucracy has ever produced; vide the highway program.

Second question: What is more deadly than the automobile and the Federal Government together? Answer: The automobile, the Federal Government and real estate. There's a really explosive mix. Throw in a little politics and run for your life.

The Old St. Louis Post Office has been running for its life since 1959. Its Federal tenants have been moving out since the courts and custom house for which the structure was built in 1884 started looking for new quarters in 1935. Now its last government occupant, a branch post office, is about to go. The building is Federal surplus property. It is also prime downtown real estate.

The Federal Government in St. Louis wants more parking space and the city wants more tax base and the Post Office property is the pawn for both. But a surprising number of people want the Old Post Office. There is the Save the Old Post Office Committee, headed by Austin P. Leland, a trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Citizens' Old Post Office Committee, headed by Frank T. Hilliker. The building is listed on the National Register. Its preservation has been endorsed by the National Trust, the American Institute of Architects and the Society of Architectural Historians. Its cause has been espoused, editorially, by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and by its able and cool-headed art and architecture critic, George McCue.

All of these people want the Old Post Office because it is one of the best Victorian landmarks in the country. It was built by Alfred B. Mullett, in a style known popularly as General Grant and in more erudite circles as Second Empire. In these times of expensive money and cheap buildings, one can no longer construct colonnaded and domed pavilions of solid, sculptured granite with rusticated Roman Doric, Ionic and Corinthian orders piled profligately on top of each other. We build flat-faced boxes. A city of boxes doesn't have much art or character. The Old St. Louis Post Office has both.

According to Lawrence Wodehouse, writing in Historic Preservation, Alfred Mullett built about 36 structures for the Federal Government in this grand style after the Civil War, at a cost of over \$50-million. That is about \$300-million in today's expensive money-cheap building terms. The 20th century has spent a lot of time and little regret tearing these Victorian monuments down.

Of those cascading columns and rich Franco-Italianate references that Americans considered fashionably tied to the ponderous elegance of Paris under Napoleon III, only two major works remain. One is the State, War and Navy Building, next to the White House in Washington, built from 1874 to 1888 for a then-astronomical \$10-million and now handsomely refurbished as the Executive Office Building. The other is the Old St. Louis Post Office.

The Save the Old Post Office Committee has produced more than sentimental outcry. It has sponsored an expert and sensitive architectural study for the building's conversion into prestige offices, shops and a public plaza roofed with a transparent dome in the center light well. It has also commissioned an economic feasibility study in terms of net rentable square footage, a legal feasibility study, and an engineering feasibility study of its physical condition. The restoration plan has been called "sound and economical."

But the ways of the Feds, the city, the automobile and real estate are devious and, one even suspects, preordained. On Aug. 5, the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation will meet to recommend whether the Old St. Louis Post Office should be saved and commercially rehabilitated, as proposed, or be sacrificed in a super-swap scheme that would, in one fell swoop, make the city and a private investor each \$1-million richer, give the Feds parking near their new office building at another site with overflow parking for the city, and allow the razing of the Post Office for a "fully tax-paying" structure.

It sounds Machiavellian, and it is. First the swap scheme was announced, and then it was denied by the city controller. Next it was discovered, almost accidentally, that the Advisory Council hearing had been scheduled in Washington for the "dead" proposal. Since the Old Post Office is on the



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Think of all that cozy parking

National Register, the General Services Administration (GSA) is required to call on the Council for an opinion before any action can be taken, and it has formally done so.

If the Council approves the swap this week, the city of St. Louis will give GSA a piece of land to be used for parking near the new Federal Building in exchange for title to the Old Post Office. Half of the land is city-owned and half belongs to a real estate investor. The city would then sell the Post Office site, splitting proceeds equal to the value of the swapped land with the real estate man. The new owner of the Post Office would be free to raze the building.

Unfortunately, the tradeoff in this superswap is the loss of one of the few irreplaceable structures that still lends character and style to downtown St. Louis—a river city that has virtually swept its historic waterfront over the levee, replacing it with a featureless, scaleless park containing a magnificent arch that relates to nothing and some big and standard and consummately ordinary chamber-of-commerce renewal.

But the strangest part of the story is a letter that GSA has written to St. Louis. In reply to the city's inquiry about transfer of the Old Post Office from the Federal Government, GSA made a curious and convenient finding, postdating the swap proposal. If it were to turn over the building to St. Louis for the purpose of preservation, GSA points out, the application for acquisition of property as a historic monument states that the property shall not be used for park or recreation purposes.

The letter then seriously quotes among those forbid-

den uses swimming, boating, fishing, hunting, camping, picnic tables and firepits. GSA's regional administrator, Jeffrey P. Hillelson, adds that the property would therefore have to "be used for a historic monument and for those purposes only." (His italics.) And then, by an extension of firepit logic, he concludes, "Commercial or profit-making activities would not be permissible in a historic monument conveyance."

The letter is either terribly stupid or terribly clever. In any case, it is terribly clear. It makes any workable preservation scheme impossible. Someone, somewhere, wants to make preservation difficult and horsetrading easy. Think of all those cozily parked cars. Think of all that taxable development.

But what every urbanist knows is that the whole purpose of preservation is to keep landmarks alive and paying their way as a functioning part of the city. There is no conflict between

a landmark and a compatible commercial use. This is called "adaptive reuse," and it is the basic tenet of sound preservation practice. It is, in fact, an absolute economic necessity to make preservation viable at all, and GSA's restrictive stipulation is ludicrous and dangerous nonsense. It's stretching canoeing pretty far to say that the only landmark that GSA can give St. Louis is a dead one. That is a sure way for the United States Government to condemn United States landmarks to extinction.

We close with a final question. What has Boston got that St. Louis hasn't got? Answer: A smashing adaptive reuse program, funded and in progress, for the entire 19th-century Greek Revival Quincy Market and the Old Boston City Hall. The Old Boston City Hall is a colonnaded, Second Empire structure in the heart of downtown. But it isn't half the building that the Old St. Louis Post Office is.