

Only You Can Help Yourself

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Architecture

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YES, that's a broken column on this page, and this is going to sound like a broken record. The needle seems to get stuck on preservation, even though the commitment here is as much to the future as to the past.

But the officially sanctioned public and private vandalism that destroys the past also destroys the future. The environmental penalty is too great. Those responsible should be prosecuted like polluters. Unfortunately there is no law or court yet where one can sue for compensation for a patrimony.

That is why this column leaps to the cause of the urban asset that is absolutely irreplaceable, or a loss that is virtually incalculable in terms of the human spirit and the urban scene. There's no second chance for the past. And so bricks and plaster are constantly falling all over us. The basket cases arrive by the mail load. Some appeals are part of highly professional programs for salvation; others are just wild cries for help. But the refrain is the same in every case, stated or implied: only you can help us.

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That is nonsense, and here is some plain talk about it. Only you can help yourselves. Even if the sheer volume of material and requests that reach this office were not beyond the possibility of one person's response, I could not remotely research, write up, or even mention all of them. I would also become—if I have not already—a relentless bore. I care. But even concern becomes numbed after the hundredth incipient catastrophe. Therefore because I lose sleep over those unanswered letters and unsaved landmarks, this will be a kind of do-it-yourself little red book, or blue book, on how to deal with the preservation problem.

If you get lost or uneasy or have questions along the way, contact the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 740 Jackson Place, N. W., Washington, D. C. 20006. The Trust is there to help.

First, authenticate your

building or area and its importance. Ask the city or town preservation agency, if there is one, if it is a designated landmark. Find out if it is on the State or National Register of Historic Places. For this and other essential information, get in touch with your State Liaison Officer, the gentleman appointed under the 1966 National Historical Preservation Act to administer Federal preservation programs.

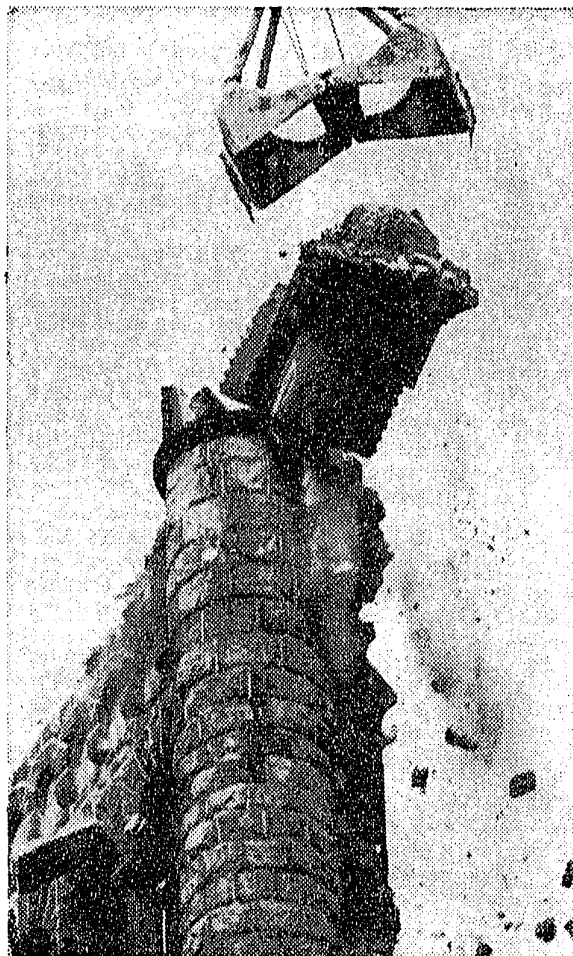
Each state now has a Liaison Officer and a Review Board of qualified professionals to pass on landmark nominations. The board accepts or rejects them for the State Register and forwards them to the Department of the Interior for consideration for the National Register.

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If your building or area is not a registered historic landmark or district, set the process in motion immediately. The next step is research: assemble full, verified and original documentation. Check the Society of Architectural Historians; you may find that a scholar has already done a professional research job on the building, the area, the architect, the style or the period. Enlist the resources of the local Historical Society. Call upon the preservation committee of the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, and any regional preservation group. Get the facts and make them complete and impressive.

In addition, get opinions. Assemble a set of endorsements from scholars, architects, planners and other specialists of reputation, attesting to the specific value of the landmark or area, architecturally, historically, and urbanistically. Get supporting letters from institutions such as the A.I.A. and the National Trust, and universities. Involve regional organizations with advisory powers, for example, the Hudson River Valley Commission in New York State. Have the building or district well photographed.

Submit the dossier to the State Liaison Officer for State and National Register



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"No second chance for the past"

nomination. This won't save your building, but it can help a lot. For one thing, the National Advisory Council on Preservation must be called in for an evaluation of the impact of any plan using any Federal funds on the designated building or district. This can delay demolition or stop it cold.

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At the same time—this act is done with six arms—check the local planning board, if you have one. See if any survey of the city's or town's landmarks or historic areas has been made, and whether the survey or the endangered structure figure in any official urban renewal or city plans.

Organize. Put together an impressive citizen group to back your efforts. Enlist political, cultural, legal, educa-

tional, social and planning support, at the community level and as far as you can go. Names count as much as expertise. Assemble the kind of leader-organization that will make politicians and bankers think twice. If there is no official local preservation group, form one, legally. This probably won't be your last battle.

Agitate. Get local press coverage. Asking for it won't do. Stage a demonstration or a confrontation; in other words, make news. Involve the local paper in a continuing issue. Ask for an appointment with the editor for your most prestigious and knowledgeable members to present your case concisely for editorial support. Write letters to the editor. National papers will only be interested if you've built up a head of

steam at home and the case has national implications. Keep all material brief and to the point or it won't be read.

Get information from your State Liaison Officer about help available from Federal programs. There are both preservation and open space grants, for example, from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and survey grants from the National Trust. Find an expert who knows all the fine print on this, so that no stone remains unturned. A good lawyer is essential; at some point you may have to bring a citizen's suit.

Raise money. You won't get grants from the Trust or from private foundations unless you come with some cash in hand; most are matching grants. Money is useful and proves you're serious.

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Have a feasibility study made to show how the property can become useful and self-supporting; you can't just be sentimental about downtown real estate. It should be a hard-nosed engineering and financial evaluation as well as a design plan. This is what some of those grants are for. And this is the ammunition you will need to convince City Hall or the business community that it is dealing with reality, not a pink or white elephant.

Put together your facts, blood oaths of historical, esthetic and urban value, feasibility studies, plans, funds, backers and supporters, local and national opinion, Government assistance options and designs and programs and apply pressure everywhere. A solid and steady blast of public opinion can do wonders, particularly if it is seen in terms of voter and community action. Be prepared to play every angle as it arises. No one can advise you about that.

Above all, don't give up hope. An attitude of fashionable cynicism doesn't save cities. Every preservation project is a cliff-hanger. Next week, some successes to spur you on.