

Architecture

Having It Both Ways in Montpelier

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

NO, friends, the pictures you see on this page are not what you think they are. This is not a repeat of the recent saga of Irving Gill's doomed Dodge House in Los Angeles. It is a far more complex and curious story, and it could have been written by Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. Actually, it was written by tight money and the Vermont State Legislature.

The building is the Pavilion at Montpelier, the hotel called the Vermont capital's "third house," in its last and High Victorian incarnation dating from 1875. It is a landmark listed in the National Register. The Pavilion has been the object of a preservation battle in connection with expansion plans for the State Capitol complex. (The story appeared here on March 2, 1969.) It has been, as they say, a regular cliff-hanger. When last heard from, the landmark was racing a state-set deadline to demolition for a parking lot.

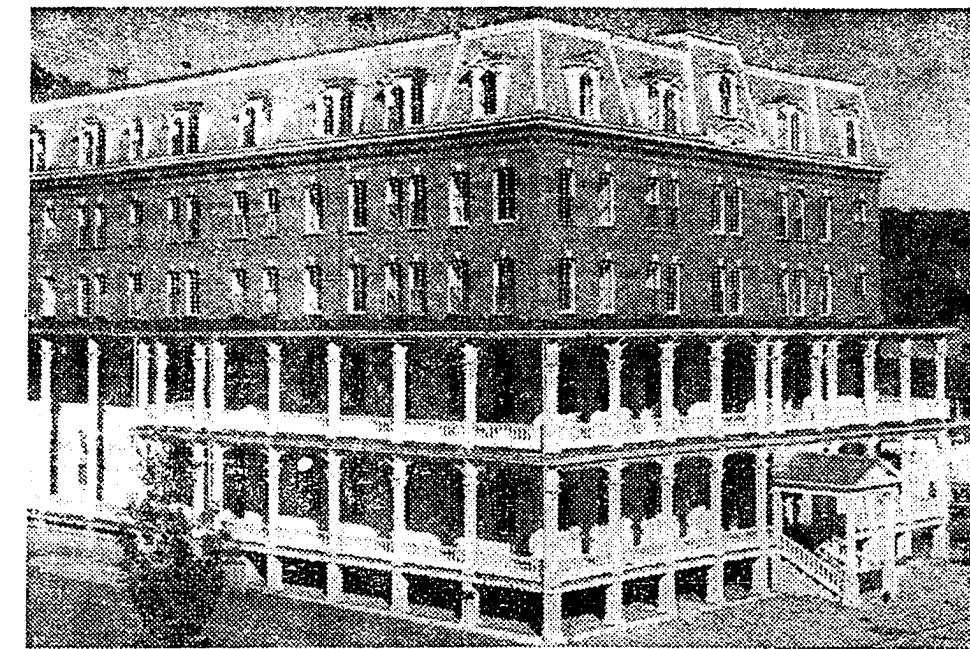
*

We have now received an announcement from the Pizzagalli Construction Company of South Burlington, Vt., telling us that a solution has been found that has "satisfied both those who wanted to keep the historical building and those who wanted to tear it down." They're going to have it both ways in Montpelier. Everybody wins.

Now you see the building (in the first picture, taken in September, 1969); now you don't (in the second, a demolition shot of December, 1969). But from the ruins will rise a replica—a new Pavilion just like the old one.

The new-old building will be on the same site. It will, however, be moved 10 feet to put it on axis with another State building. This will also straighten out an awkward dogleg in the road. The replica will get pile foundations, new brick walls and a new roof, and the interiors will be designed for State offices. It will be trimmed with what has been saved of the woodwork, with missing parts made to match. When better landmarks are made, careful copying will do it.

Sounder construction, new materials, better siting, historical recall, duplication of



The Pavilion, Montpelier, Vt., before and after demolition.

Now you see it, now you don't; now you do again

the same color, detail and proportions that add so much to the Capitol green, are all advantages offered by the replica. But the ultimate advantage and determining factor is that it is cheaper. That's right; it costs less to build the building all over again than to restore and convert the real thing.

It's all a little like Catch-22. According to army rules, if you remember, it is possible to get a medical discharge if the doctor can be made to certify that you are crazy. But (catch) if you have wit enough to try to get the certification, you are obviously sane, so you can't get out.

Here's Catch-23. If you want to keep a landmark building, the cost of restoration and conversion (the Pavilion figures) will be \$2.7 to \$3-million. But (catch) if you can save \$250,000 to \$500,000 by tearing it down and building an exact copy, you obviously can't keep the landmark. It's pretty hard to object to an "authentic" replica that has so many fringe benefits. If it's good enough for Williamsburg, it's good enough for Montpelier. The only thing missing is historical integrity.

Integrity is not a commodity much in vogue now, anyway. When it was found that more space was needed for State offices, everyone thought it would be a fine idea just to wrap a few more reconstructed porches and mansards around a bigger new-old package. Robert Burley, the architect of the Cap-

itol expansion plan who has fought valiantly for preservation of the Pavilion, worked hard to get the idea across that if you are going to build an honest fake, people should see a copy of what was really there. The addition will not be a copy.

What turned the saga of the Pavilion into a performance of devastatingly ludicrous logic that Gilbert and Sullivan would envy? Politics, of course. Opponents and champions of preservation can now have their cake and eat it. And the prevalence of the kind of values that promote, both in the country generally and in the preservation movement in particular, a strange and sinister confusion of real and imitation that denigrates and downgrades the intrinsic and irreplaceable worth of the genuine article.

*

But it is economics that calls the tune. When the divided legislature set up a committee last year to study ways that the Pavilion might be saved, it authorized a lease-back arrangement in which a sponsor would have to restore and convert the building and lease its offices to the State. Not a cent could be found for purchase, although \$600,000 was appropriated for demolition if the August deadline came with no takers.

Enter the real villain: the high cost of money. Estimates for saving the building, as noted, ran from \$2.7 to \$3-million. The best deal



available for the required 25-year lease just about doubled the eventual cost of the building to the State, to \$6-million. The savings offered by the Pizzagalli Company through demolition and reconstruction translated into an \$870,000 economy over the lease period. The contract was signed with Pizzagalli on a weekend, just before the August deadline.

Now for Catch-24. The legislature has just decided that it can save a substantial amount by purchasing the new-old replica, eliminating all that high-cost lease money. It will pay, believe it or not, \$2.7-million, the original estimate for restoring the building. But Catch-25 is that everyone really thinks the "improvements" of the new-old building make the new-old building more O.K. than the old-old building. That is perfectly understandable in a country that admires the plastic fool-the-eye esthetic and thinks fake plants and flow-

ers are more satisfactory than the real thing. They may get dusty, but they don't die. Of course, they never lived.

Catch-26 is that it is so open to question as to how much of the exterior fabric could have been saved in gutting the structure for conversion that the old-old building might have become virtually a new-old building, anyway.

Meanwhile, the Pizzagalli Company, in a public-spirited gesture, is recording both the demolition and the new construction. "A specially designed movie camera has been erected in a window across the street, programmed to take four pictures per day. Pizzagalli will make the final film available for schools, civic and church and other organizations interested in this historical and unusual project. The Vermont Historical Society will also have a copy of the film in their section of the new building." Catch-27?