

Recycling Buildings

The growing list of shortages now seems to embrace almost everything, including common sense. But that commodity has been in scarce supply for a long time in the building field. Probably nothing has been more wanton in waste and illogic than the prevailing notion that you tear down solid old buildings and replace them with shoddy new ones. This has been called progress.

There is a movement now referred to as building recycling, born of high costs and the energy crisis, that has a far more pragmatic than sentimental base. It deals only incidentally with landmarks. Good old buildings of any kind are being looked at as an untapped resource. They often represent materials, techniques and styles that will never be seen again.

There has been the spontaneous recycling of brownstone neighborhoods in New York, for example; and a remodeled office building successfully houses the City University Graduate Center. Nineteenth-century warehouses are now distinctive shopping complexes in Washington and San Francisco. Firehouses and armories have become churches and commercial facilities with economy and character. In the housing field, rehabilitation through urban homesteading is a noteworthy trend.

The simple, rational premise involved is that at a time of rising costs and increasing scarcities, a lot of money, trouble and material can be saved by remodeling or adapting sound old structures for new uses. Not infrequently, the savings are in money. But something is also saved of the substance and spirit of the community. With greater understanding of the environment, this is not considered the optional luxury it once was.

When nothing was in short supply except sensitivity, it was easier to bulldoze than to rehabilitate. The fault has been in the common conceit that the architect or builder should start from scratch. This proposition has produced a surprisingly second-rate landscape. Conversion as a viable alternative to new construction may be the best idea since cities.