

Architecture

# Open Season on the Nation's Monuments

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

OLD statehouse domes may fall like autumn leaves this year, and it won't do any good to tell it to city hall — that's a candidate for demolition too. As new public buildings go up, the old ones go down; there has been a virtual epidemic of statehouse, city hall and courthouse construction and wrecking across the country. But the old ones are not going without a struggle.

The victims are usually doughty Victorian structures, and people are becoming much more knowledgeable about Victoriana. People are also becoming much more sophisticated about the environmental role of the architecture of the past. It is seen, properly, as an anchor and touchstone of who and what we are, nationally and culturally. It gives identity and substance to a society and its cities.

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As usual, we are learning all this too late. Too many monuments are gone. And there are those who make the decisions—bankers, businessmen and government officials — who haven't learned at all. They continue to short-change cities for the long run because their decision-making process has not been programmed beyond the immediate input of real estate conventions to values of pride or place or an understanding of urban quality. Understanding grows only as losses are recognized — nothing is as convincing as a hole in the ground. Significantly, it is the general public that is learning, and protesting, in numbers that politicians and the power structure still fail to grasp.

The battles are getting hotter. In Grand Rapids, Mich., the Kent County Council for Historic Preservation and a large group of citizens are currently pitted against the city and the Union Bank and Trust Company to save the 1888 city hall from the bulldozer.

We hate to sound like a broken record, but the initial villain, again, is urban renewal. The city made a contract with the bank in which the old city hall is to be demolished as part of cleared



Bill Langley

Grand Rapids City Hall, fighting for its life  
*Realization comes with a hole in the ground*

urban renewal land, with half the land to be sold to the bank for development and the other half kept as open space.

The bank says that it will sue if the city postpones demolition. (Attabank; that's the public spirit.) Clearance will be aided by a \$40,000 demolition grant from the Federal government. Federal funds are also available for preservation if that's the way a city wants it. Grand Rapids doesn't.

By a fortuitous accident for which the renewal plan can claim no credit, but which the planners lack the sense to capitalize on, the rusticated stone, Victorian Gothic mass of the old building forms the perfect closure for the new square. Its solid,

sculptural shapes and period style are essential enrichment for flat new facades and bland open space. The 19th century is the ideal foil for the 20th century.

These are matters of urban design, which involves more than emotion or esthetics. Practitioners and critics of urban design are professionally trained to recognize the factors that determine the character and quality of a city's physical patterns and the way they affect its image and functions. Their disinterested expertise should command at least as much respect and attention as the opinions of those who hold a piece of the development action.

What has been miscalculated in Grand Rapids is pub-

lic interest. A recent poll taken to determine areas of community concern found that saving city hall was one of the top issues and that the community felt strongly that the city was letting it down. Inquiries from citizen groups are met with evasion. The bank is dogmatically obstructionist. The preservationists are now seeking an injunction, and funds, to stay demolition.

The Grand Rapids city hall is the work of Elijah Meyers, who also designed the state capitols of Utah, Idaho, Texas, Colorado and Michigan, and the Richmond, Va. city hall. After a typical donnybrook, the Richmond city hall was saved. The Colorado State Capitol in Denver has been restored. The Michigan State Capitol is teetering on the brink.

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Meyers's home town, Detroit, was one of the first to get rid of its Victorian city hall (not his work) in the early years of urban renewal. Once its solid stone had been pulverized, the emptiness of the unmixed, undistinguished new construction of the urban renewal environment became clear. Everyone of urban sensibility knew that a mistake had been made.

On the cheerful side, Boston's old city hall has just been awarded the gift of life, close on the heels of the removal of the administration to the spectacular new city hall. And William Penn still stands firmly atop the greatest Victorian fruitcake of them all, the Philadelphia city hall, which escaped the bulldozer largely because it is so solid that it would have posed a greater problem to demolish it than to save it. (It is a nice touch that William Penn is by Alexander Calder's grandfather, and Grand Rapids has just installed a new Calder in its new plaza with great fanfare.)

In San Francisco, another government building, the Old Mint, has seesawed back and forth between life and death for decades. Completed in 1874 by Alfred B. Mullet, it is in a chaste classical revival style unlike Mullet's better known Second

Empire concoctions with waterfalls of columns topped by mansards and pediments, such as the restored Executive Office Building in Washington. His St. Louis post office, in this manner, is permanently embattled.

Recently, the General Services Administration, a singularly unfeeling agency which controls historic government buildings as "surplus properties," declared the Mint surplus and gave it to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. GSA had already done the building more damage than time or vandalism by the removal, rather than the restoration, of shaky ornament and detail. HEW is handing the structure over to the San Francisco State College, lege, which will demolish it for a new, in-town center.

The college's head, Dr. S. I. Hayakawa, understandably anxious with so prime a site within his grasp, considers the social value of an educational facility overriding. There are equally valid social aspects of preservation. New buildings have options; historic buildings have none. There is an obligation to find another site.

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The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, created by the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, has declared the Mint of "such historical and architectural importance that its integrity must be preserved." It has made this recommendation to Secretary Finch of HEW. In a similar action, the Council recommended against the New Orleans expressway that would have impinged on the Vieux Carrée. Transportation Secretary John A. Volpe accepted the recommendation and the expressway will be rerouted.

One of the Advisory Council's functions is to consider the fate of threatened landmarks that are listed on the National Register maintained by the Department of the Interior. Both the Mint and the Grand Rapids city hall are National Register buildings. This is the only civilized approach to the current open season on the country's major monuments.