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Carol Clark

The Exchange Court renovation— “nothing to do with sensibility”

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

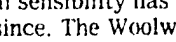
ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

‘All New’ vs. Rehabilitation

This is a tale of two vintage Broadway buildings: Exchange Court at 52 Broadway, built in 1898 by the architectural firm of Clinton and Russell, and Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building of 1913 at 233 Broadway. Each has its place in the history of the New York skyscraper. Exchange Court is an increasingly rare example of early steel frame construction, with a facade of six-inch-thick Indiana limestone and terra-cotta trim. Designed when architects were architects and stone was stone, and a building was naked without cartouches, voussoirs and cornices, its 12 stories are rich in the kind of classically detailed masonry that a leading architectural firm of its day produced as a matter of course for its business clients. Even with some alterations at the base and the loss of the statues that once topped the Broadway entrance, the building still has the kind of substance and presence that marks an endangered architectural species.

The Woolworth Building represents a towering achievement in the early skyscraper style. Its 54 stories grew directly out of the state of the engineering art achieved 16 years earlier by the pioneering Exchange Court. In 1913 that art had reached the point where Frank W. Woolworth could put up the tallest building in the world, at 792 feet, as symbol and monument of his five-and-dime empire, a title that it would retain until 1930. Woolworth's stylistic aspirations matched the building's size. The structure was faced in gleaming white terra cotta in the Gothic revival style, replete with traceries, trefoils, crockets, finials and gargoyles, in the direct pursuit of a kind of architectural art that was still expected by business patrons, and still delivered by their architects.

The Woolworth Building's \$13.5-million cost was paid for in the equivalent of genuine nickels and dimes; Woolworth believed in cash on the barrelhead, or one might say, the pinnacle. The money also bought him a basilica-like lobby of glowing mosaics and personal offices modeled after Napoleon's chateau at Compiègne. In those days, real style was worth real money. Reviewing the new arrival on the skyline, the respected architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler wrote of its "white spectrality shining over city and river." The building, he said, was "an ornament to our city and a vindication of our architectural sensibility."



That architectural sensibility has had a bumpy time of it in New York ever since. The Woolworth Building has always been considered a landmark, although it achieved that status officially only recently through designation by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Exchange Place has not received landmark designation from the city, but a nomination for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places is pending. Although it is a landmark quality building in itself, the part that it plays in the architectural quality of Lower Broadway is equally important. With "investment opportunities" picking up in Lower Manhattan, that is something that is going to have to be faced.

Exchange Place is part of a continuous row of older, stone-faced structures that represent a special phase of New

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York's commercial and architectural history. They are not all of one moment, or all of one style, but they are united visually by the masonry detailing of a related period of the art of building, and together they make a distinctive and significant whole. The row is superbly sited, following the line of Lower Broadway to the Old Custom House, Bowling Green and the harbor, for a most gratifying vista, unlike the city's normal grid. As a unit, this group has a very special sense of history and place. I have always found these buildings and their location extremely evocative and exceptionally handsome, and have often gone down to the Battery for the pleasure of seeing them. Architectural historians show this characteristic and admirable piece of Lower Manhattan to visitors with considerable pride.

The way these two Broadway landmarks — Exchange Place and the Woolworth Building — are being handled right now is a demonstration of different attitudes toward the architectural environment and an object lesson in Montgomery Schuyler's "architectural sensibility." In comparing the two, there are, of course, other factors involved, such as the nature of ownership and investment and a number of legal and economic considerations, but underlying all of it is the question of preservation or destruction of the city's style and amenity, and the value of those irreplaceable qualities to the community at large.

The Woolworth Company is currently engaged in a five-year program of extensive exterior restoration to preserve and protect this early skyscraper's ornate facade that will cost more than the construction price of the building. The terra cotta is being cleaned and strengthened, with replacement of elements where necessary, to return it to its original condition and guarantee its future life. This investment in the city's heritage has just been honored with the Chairman's Award of the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Exchange Place is less fortunate. It is not a corporate headquarters, with the strength of corporate resources and a corporate image behind it — although even that is no guarantee of architectural sensibility; some corporations are quick enough to destroy a landmark if it looks better on the books. Exchange Place is owned by Jack Resnick and Sons, investors who see it as a

chance to tap the market for prime commercial space developing in this part of Lower Manhattan.

There is an investment formula for doing this sort of thing that has nothing to do with architectural sensibility. It deals in "all new" renovation, as opposed to restoration or rehabilitation, in the belief that the ordinary new will be perceived as somehow better and pricier than the distinctive old, even if it means destroying fine materials and details for a tinny or plastic esthetic. The owners of Exchange Place have therefore applied for, and received, from the Board of Standards and Appeals, variances on the existing zoning that will permit the addition of six more floors for a building half again as high, increased from 12 to 18 stories, and filed with the Building Department plans for an "all new" facade. The architect for the project, Emery Roth & Sons, will strip off the richly detailed six-inch-thick limestone and replace it with one of those thin, featureless, anonymous glass curtain walls which the city is so depressingly full of already.

Unfortunately, this is more than just a questionable architectural judgment; it is a destructive urban act with public and environmental consequences. Nor is this architectural sabotage really necessary. The Tax Reform Act of 1976 gives tax advantages for restoration and rehabilitation comparable to those for new construction for anyone who wants to use them, and many have done so successfully. Restored and renovated buildings are already a proven market asset in terms of rentals and prestige. The example of the impressive updating of Bruce Price's 1898 American Surety Building for the Bank of Tokyo, a building of identical date and close style, is a few blocks away.

At present, there is a lawsuit pending against the owners of Exchange Place, concerning the correctness of the application procedure to the Board of Standards and Appeals, and the environmental effect of the planned changes. The Landmarks Conservancy is also pursuing the National Register listing. It is too bad that the matter has to go through such elaborate and costly legal maneuvers when a little attention to the art of building and the style of the street could have saved a lot of time and money and a significant slice of the city's architectural resources. More than 60 years after Montgomery Schuyler, architectural sensibility still has a long way to go in New York.