Architecture

Anatomy of a Failure

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE is no art as impermanent as architecture. All that solid brick and stone mean nothing. Concrete is as evanescent as air. The monuments of our civilization stand, usually, on negotiable real estate; their value goes down as land value goes up.

A typical statement of a major corporation, made with the utmost candor and the conviction of the true faith, is that land value is the whole bit. The fact that the Singer Building, for example, is now in demolition on the U. S. Steel site is totally irrelevant, as is the quality of any building, anywhere. It would be irrelevant if the site contained the Kingdom of God. The logic and the mathematics are immutable.

In addition to land economics, buildings, even great ones, become obsolete. Their functions and technology date. They reach a point of comparative inefficiency, and inefficiency today is both a financial and a mortal sin.

It would be so simple if art also became obsolete. But a building that may no longer work well or pay its way may still be a superb creative and cultural achievement. It may be the irreproducible record of the art and ideals of a master or an age. Its concept, craft, materials and details may be irreplaceable at any price (yes, some things are without price and that puts them at a distinct disadvantage) and therein lies the conflict and dilemma of preservation.

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Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo was an extraordinary record of the coordinated architectural and decorative arts of a single period, carried out in 1,009 days of on-site work by one of the great architects of all time. Fifty years later it was obsolete by current standards, as land use and as an operating hotel. It has taken less than four months to demolish what took four years and an astronomical, for that time, $4,750,000 to build.

What is the point in writing about it now? Does it have any more than the grisly fascination of post mortem? Actually, it is a terrifyingly revealing chronicle of some of the preservation problems of our time. It could be called the anatomy of failure.

The wrecking ball swung from 8 A.M. to midnight from Nov. 15 until almost the day that ground was broken, with appropriate Shinto rites, for a new, 17-story, $55-million, 1,000-room hotel, on February 28.

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Furnishings, including some of the famous Wright-designed fittings, were rushed without notice to a Nagoya department store and sold as second-hand goods. It all went in 45 minutes, cheap; Wright's peacock chairs sold for a dollar. Almost everything else, with classic Japanese neatness and efficiency, was baled, wrapped or tied in piles of copper (cornices, lighting fixtures), wood (grills, trim) or whatever, and sold as scrap. The heavier rubble made land fill. Some carved stone was saved; examples will go to the State University at Buffalo, where Wright's Martin House of 1904 is being restored.

As a result of desperate preservation efforts which read like a bad script, part of a central section of the building referred to ambiguously as the "lobby" may be re-erected in the Meiji Village 15 miles north of Nagoya. This is a 128-acre outdoor museum of 18 reconstructed buildings of the period from 1868 to 1912. (This equivocal triumph hung fire for a while because the Wright building was too late in date, but it was finally accepted.) Even that gesture is still contingent on raising $1.4-million.

For once, everyone had been well alerted by the press, beginning with Tokyo newspapers in March of last year. After some initial difficulty in getting interested persons together, the Committee for the Preservation of the Imperial Hotel was organized and met in July. In October, Mrs. Wright arrived on the scene, as head of the American branch of the Committee. She was followed by a stream of visitors who came with everything but money.

Even as late as November, the Committee's pitch was for retaining the whole structure on its site. In November, the Architectural Institute of Japan supported the cause with a report and resolutions also urging in *situ* preservation.

No one had spoken officially to the hotel management, which was understandably skittish. A meeting was finally arranged in November through the Ministry of Education's National Committee for Protection of Important Cultural Properties. Imperial President Tetsuzo Inumaru was adamant. The hotel was coming down. The Committee proposed an alternative: move the whole structure to another site. Estimates were over $4-million. The Committee was given until Jan. 15 to arrange to move at least part of the building; after that date demolition would be completed.

The timetable, of course, was impossible. So were the economics. Less than $10,000 had been raised internationally by the Committee. Even the cost of saving 97 carved stone samples came to $135,000, or almost $1,350 for each piece, and the Committee could not cover that.

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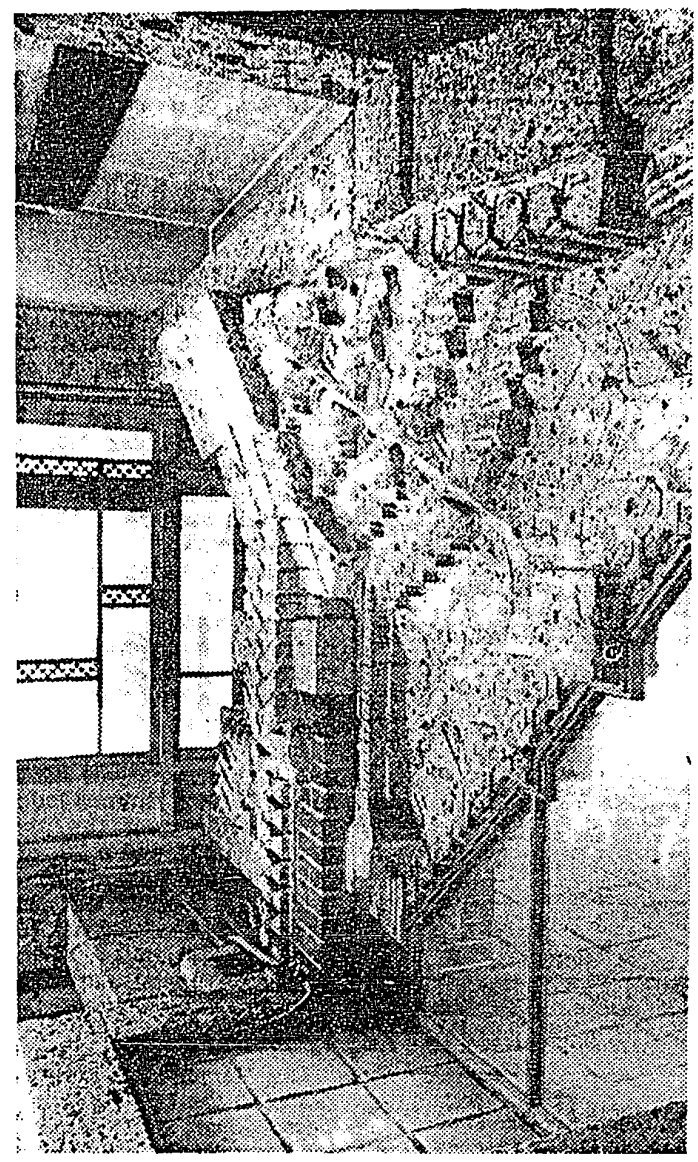
The first failure, therefore, was one of objectives. At too late a date totally unrealistic goals were being pursued. A hard look should have been taken at the facts of the situation and a feasible plan established. Some of the vast, rambling building's interiors with their remarkable architectural and sculptural details and furnishings—the peacoek alleys, parts of public spaces, individual rooms —might have lent themselves to selective preservation. Under the pressures of time and money, this was the only sensible procedure.

There was a failure of communication, as well. Japanese bureaucracy is rigid; different government agencies that controlled land or museums or other possible aids simply did not negotiate. Moreover, as Professor Bunji Kobayashi, an architect closely involved in the preservation effort points out, bureaucrats control the government tightly and "the voice of the intellectual community is seldom heeded. Some government figures feel that they lose face if they follow such outside voices."



Setsuo Saito from Magnum

Example of interior lava stone carving in Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo

Token salvation and abdication of the establishment

There were also procedural failures. As the deadline approached, the Committee found that it did not have the legal status to accept donations beyond small gifts. It was helpless either to take over the building or move it to another site, even if time or money had made either more than the wildest dream. Even now, it is extremely vague who will take on the final fund-raising to make the token Meiji Village restoration a reality.

But the most tragic failure is of the whole American art and cultural establishment. It seems incredible that not a single foundation, not a single major museum, not a single large university, not a single cultural institution or agency, not a single philanthropist saw the opportunity to select and preserve one part of one major spatial element, with its crafts and accessories, of one of the major works in American art history.

It was an unparalleled opportunity. While museums squabbled over acquiring the not-quite-prime glories of the Temple of Dendur and grants were given for still more theoretical studies, all were blind to the chance to add a meaningful part of a work of American creative genius to an American collection, by one of the masters of the modern movement, at a moment in time when it could have been plucked for posterity. In the final analysis, the worst failure of all was the total absence of vision and value judgment where it should have existed; a serious and shameful indictment of of our most illustrious institutions.