Charleston: Call It Making the City Work
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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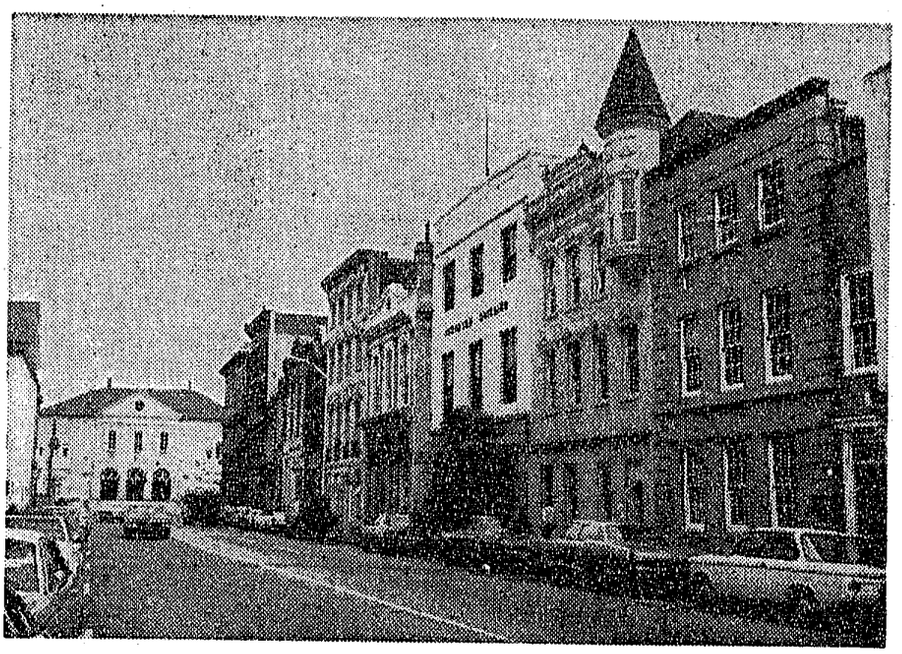
IT WOULD have been nice to fly the gentleman from Richmond, Va., to Charleston, S.C. Maybe some foundation would take on the job of showing bankers, businessmen and politicians that what can't be done, can be done, and in fact, has been done. It would have been nice to show the Virginia gentlemen how a business street of 18th- and 19th-century buildings of distinction and character can be restored and adapted to 20th-century uses with complete economic, esthetic and urbanistic success.

It would have been nice, but it's too late. The First and Merchants National Bank of Richmond is tearing down a row of almost identical 19th century buildings for its new Main Street headquarters with the curious idea that architecturally-average-new built to the same height as the superior, bulldozed old will be "compatible" with what's left. Which brings up the question of what's left. Will Richmond's business community take over the rescue of the remaining historic structures, as bankers and businessmen have done on Charleston's Broad Street?

Broad Street is not only a handsome street, it is the financial and legal heart of Charleston. Its concentrated architectural history goes from rare Georgian brick to mid-19th-century Victorian. It has prosperity, utility, scale and style.

In 1968, Broad Street owners and tenants, working with the Historic Charleston Foundation, established the Broad Street Beautification Committee. The five-step program, of which three are complete, includes restoring and repainting, replacement of garish signs, removal of overhead wiring, research and dating of buildings and the planting of trees—the everpresent palmetto. But this is much more than a facelifting. It is downtown revitalization (what city isn't crying for it?) through the constructive restoration of an urban heritage.

What has happened in Charleston is called adaptive use, and it works. Adaptive use finds viable modern functions for fine old buildings. It takes imagination, ingenuity and zeal. It assumes, correctly, that some old buildings are better than new ones. A community must believe that values are being served that make it worth working a little harder to balance economics and convenience with art and history. The results enrich and identify a city.



Garth Huxtable
Broad Street, Charleston, S.C., where the 18th and 19th centuries are alive and well
Preservation as neighborhood revitalization—what city isn't crying for it?

In Charleston the Public Works commissioners have been in the austerely elegant and beautifully kept 1797 Middleton-Pinckney house since 1917. The City Hall is an 1801 bank by Gabriel Manigault "reused" since 1818. The Housing Authority has its headquarters in Robert Mills's Gothic-classic Marine Hospital of 1834. Early houses and taverns and commercial structures have become professional offices. (There is a flock, or platoon, or army of lawyers on Broad Street.)

Unfortunately, other American cities do not seem to be getting the word. Charleston might as well be on the moon.

The word is that the best kind of preservation is not the Williamsburg variety, in which history is reproduced and canned in architectural stage-sets with costumed living actors and consummate archeological skill. That particular message has gotten across too well, with communities tearing down genuine 19th century buildings to reconstruct 18th-century "replicas," preferably where they won't keep "progress" from destroying landmarks. Charleston has not created a museum masquerading as a town. Charleston is real.

Its successful adaptive use has retained the fantastically rich and beautiful architectural fabric of a city that dealt in excellence from colonial times to the Civil War. This heritage has been saved by the accident of poverty and spared to a surprising degree from the disasters of nature and war. Charleston does not cherish just one Mills building; it has them by the handful. Greek Revival churches stand back-to-back. The old city, an amazing 412 acres at the foot of the river-flanked peninsula is, in good part, a registered historic district. It was zoned as "old and historic" by Charleston in 1931, with its boundaries widened in 1966. Other cities followed 20 and 30 years later. All alterations are passed on by a Board of Architectural Review.

In these spring days the old city is surpassingly lovely, with purple Judas trees against white clapboard and lush green gardens flamed with azaleas glimpsed through alleys behind pastel stuccoed walls. The sun is high and the water takes the breeze. Gibbsian church towers terminate intact historic streetscapes where people live and work. ("You're welcome to come in," says the proper Charlestonian to the architectural voyeur.) The richness of the American tradition — yes, there is one, massacred cross-country because it is easier to destroy than to save—strikes one with stunning force.

Nor is the impression shattered by a return to the prepackaged plastic trauma of a Howard Johnson's or a Holiday Inn. They are there, teetering on the edge of the historic district, but so is the new Mills-Hyatt House—a one-eye-closed "replica" of the old Mills House demolished on its site, with gracious parlors, high-ceilinged, daylit public spaces and fine antiques. Here one does not indulge in the polemics of authenticity; one simply thanks the local gods.

The Preservation Society of Charleston was founded in 1920, and the Historic Charleston Foundation was incorporated in 1947. The Foundation is headed by Frances Edmunds, who combines a preservationist's zeal with an urbanist's sure instincts. The name of her game is making the city work.

The Foundation's latest undertaking is Ansonborough, to the northeast of the oldest section. Begun in 1959, this is a demonstration project of neighborhood revitalization, or what to do with historic properties in a problem area. Starting with $100,000 and nine properties and using the money as a revolving fund, the Foundation has bought, restored and resold buildings to the tune of $1-million, with $6- or $7-million in additional private investment.

There is, of course, a negative side to even the most positive story. Some overenthusiastic "Federalizing" of later buildings could be spared, and a peeling wall might be welcome occasionally although one cannot fault superb maintenance. Since the publication of the excellent guidebook "This is Charleston," Johnson Thomas, the city's journalist-historian, estimates that a quarter of the buildings have been lost, plus others unlisted. "People came in," he says, "and just carted some of them away."

A strong plus is that the old city is a mixed community and Ansonborough is racially integrated. But as Ansonborough is upgraded and assessments and prices rise poor families will leave. There are places to go, but segregation rather than integration could be reinforced. Since Charleston has voted for urban renewal for the first time, there is now a possibility that the techniques learned could be used for subsidized restoration and rehabilitation for lower income families. What the private sector has done could be extended to the public sector. A surprising number of people in Charleston seem to care. And caring is what counts.