ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Money—The Root of All Preservation

Just in case anyone got the idea from my last two columns that absolutely everything is coming up roses, for every rose there is a thorn, and here are a few more news items, good and bad. Still on the good side, one very late bloomer is the New London Railroad Station, the H. H. Richardson building of 1886-87 for which local and national preservationists have engaged in a 10-year battle, reported here off and on, that seemed loaded against them in every way. It wasn't an uphill fight; it was perpendicular.

The bloom was long off the handsome but shabby structure as it settled into dingy decay, and a strong alliance of economics and politics seemed to spell its doom. The bulldozer was always just at hand. The New London city fathers were not only avid to get rid of it for a hotly-debated urban renewal scheme, but they also disliked it with a parochial intensity that led to all kinds of political shenanigans.

It is now reported in Preservation News, the National Trust publication, that the architectural firm of Anderson-Notter Associates of Boston—following a practice in which designers are increasingly becoming developers—has bought the building from the New London Redevelopment Agency. Rehabilitation and remodeling are to be financed by the Hartford National Bank. The National Register landmark will become a transportation center. Amtrak has a 20-year lease for part of the space, and the rest will be turned into restaurants, shops and offices.

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If everything is steaming ahead in New London, however, there is trouble in St. Louis. The exemplary Wainwright project is foundering. In an act of enlightened, pragmatic faith, the State of Missouri not only bought the 1891 seminal skyscraper by Adler and Sullivan to save it from demolition, but also—with the backing of Governor Christopher Bond—sponsored a national competition for an appropriate design for the landmark's reuse and expansion as part of a block-size complex to be used as a State office center. The winners were Mitchell-Giurgola of Philadelphia in collaboration with Hastings and Chivetta of St. Louis.

The root of all evil, of course, is money, and in this time of fiscal retrenchment, Missouri is also engaging in a little architectural retrenchment. There is, in addition, a late-blooming controversy over whether another 19th-century structure on the block that would be replaced by the new addition should be saved. That debate, in fact, probably helped the State Legislature cut funds for the project so drastically that the new addition is on the shelf, and only a minimum Wainwright remodeling is going ahead.

The problem lies in how the job is being done.

Now that the Wainwright Building has been saved from demolition, there is no money for restoration. Right, a doorknob from the 1891 landmark

The New York Times Studio

Apparently, only enough money is budgeted for corner-cutting interior work, with no outside restoration at all. That is supposed to come at some uncertain future time, with the construction of the addition.

This procedure has been accepted in the name of economy and speed, and it is a serious mistake. Somehow, the priorities have gotten confused. The exterior stonework and fine Sullivan terra-cotta ornament is in urgent need of attention. Proper interior remodeling must be more than an expeditious, blanket application of partitions and acoustic panels. It means a sensitive calculation of space to shell, of relationships of windows, light and layout, of the correct distribution of facilities and selection of materials and finishes, starting from such things as ceiling design and services. It also means the careful removal and restoration of stairs of the kind that the Metropolitan Museum was glad to get when Chicago destroyed the Adler and Sullivan Stock Exchange.

At this point, most of the important Mitchell-Giurgola design input has been lost, and work is proceeding in St. Louis with the Philadelphia firm increasingly out of the picture. Its principals are having a crisis of conscience about how much can still be rescued of the prize-winning design by staying on the job, nominally, as consultants.

While the Wainwright cutbacks were taking place, 90 pairs of doorknobs and doorplates and 15 stained glass windows that had been removed for restoration were stolen from a locked storeroom in the building. The St. Louis architects had asked the State to put them safely with firms that would refurbish them, but the corner-cutting had already begun. The door hardware was recovered by police from an antique dealer; the stained glass panels were held for ransom and later surrendered.

Politics have easily turned triumph into defeat. And the citizen groups fighting to save the other old buildings on the block have somehow gotten their eye off the ball. (That controversy will have to be resolved in terms of the value of a handsome single facade against the virtues of the block design as a whole.) They had better start looking to the issue of how the Wainwright restoration is being handled, if it is not already too late, or nothing will have been gained at all. To see the state start out so well and become a spoiler is bad enough. A Pyrhhic preservation victory is worst of all.

Speaking of stealing, it caused a mild sensation in New York a couple of years ago when several tons of a cast-iron landmark building were pilfered right from under everyone's nose. The demountable panels of James Bogardus's Laing Stores of 1848 (early prefab, protoskyscraper construction) had been carefully taken down when the building was doomed by the Washington Street urban renewal, and carelessly stored in a nearby lot. A fence didn't mean much to the thieves, who saw not a landmark but a lot of salable scrap iron. A few token sections were left.

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The idea then had been to re-erect the panels as part of some kind of new construction in the renewal area or somewhere else; they had been figuratively kicked around quite a bit with no final solution. The idea now is to use the remaining panels and reproduce them by casting (which is how they were made originally) to construct an infill building of predominantly 20th-century parts on a restored South Street Seaport block. That is an idea open to honest debate, and it may or may not materialize anyway, again depending on money.

Also in New York, in Marcus Garvey (née Mount Morris) Park, there is another landmark Bogardus iron structure, one of the city's early fire watch towers, built in 1855. It is described by the Friends of Cast Iron (a watchdog group of architectural historians) as an open, octagonal framework with three tiers of 13-foot high, delicately fluted iron columns. A spiral stair sweeps around a bell to a lookout platform on top, making a lacy silhouette against the sky. It is being used by local children as a tenuous jungle gym. The Friends of Cast Iron have had little success, in these impecunious times, in raising $15,000 for desperately needed paint and repairs. But no one has stolen it yet.