

Architecture worth saving

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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.

This collection of architecturally important buildings was assembled by the Museum of Modern Art, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Architectural Forum magazine for a jointly sponsored exhibit prepared by the Museum for showing in New York and a number of other cities. The following article, which serves as a catalog of the exhibit, has been reprinted from the June 1958 issue of Architectural Forum.

Architecture worth saving

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Much of America's architectural heritage has already been destroyed; still more stands doomed today. Here are some tragic examples in each category. But here, too, are a few important buildings delivered from destruction, and a program for saving others.



Architecture worth saving

"Architecture," wrote John Ruskin a century ago, "is to be regarded by us with the most serious thought. We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her. How many pages of doubtful record might we not often spare for a few stones left one upon the other!"

Today, America, documented, indexed, and surveyed more thoroughly than Ruskin could have envisioned, seems to be deliberately destroying the vital record left by its architecture. And the Congress of the United States is, in this destruction, taking the lead. Its plan to extend the east front of the Capitol would trade an improvement of doubtful value and fabulous cost for the few existent stones of the original Capitol. The stones, however, are not the primary concern. The important fact is that the change would destroy a unique and historic space—the forecourt of the Capitol—and interrupt the dramatic cascade of row upon row of columns from dome to portico, which is the focus of the space.

In the case of the east front, historic events and good architecture coincide. But history is not only an affair of specific events. It

is dream and spirit and flavor, too. It is the continuity of the living nation and the definition of its civilization, and man's building shows, more deeply than any other activity, the state and character of his civilization.

But architecture is worth saving, not only for the record, but for enrichment of the present scene—and as a source of inspiration for the architecture of the future. And unexpectedly, the cost of these important benefits can often be confined to intangible expenditures, such as imagination and humility and an appreciation of beauty for its own sake.

Unfortunately, the cause of preservation has been badly bleared by sentimentalists out to save everything, regardless of significance. The photographs on the following pages are a first attempt to clear the air, especially in regard to the architecture of the nineteenth

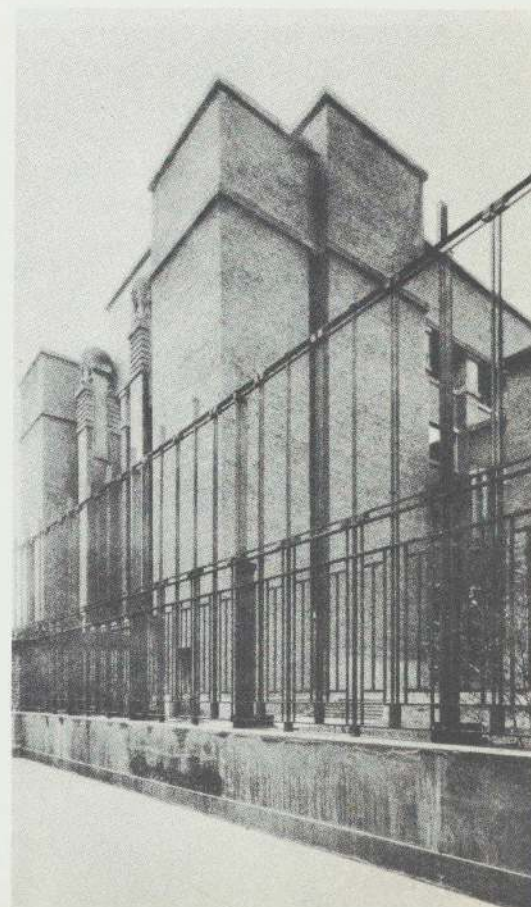
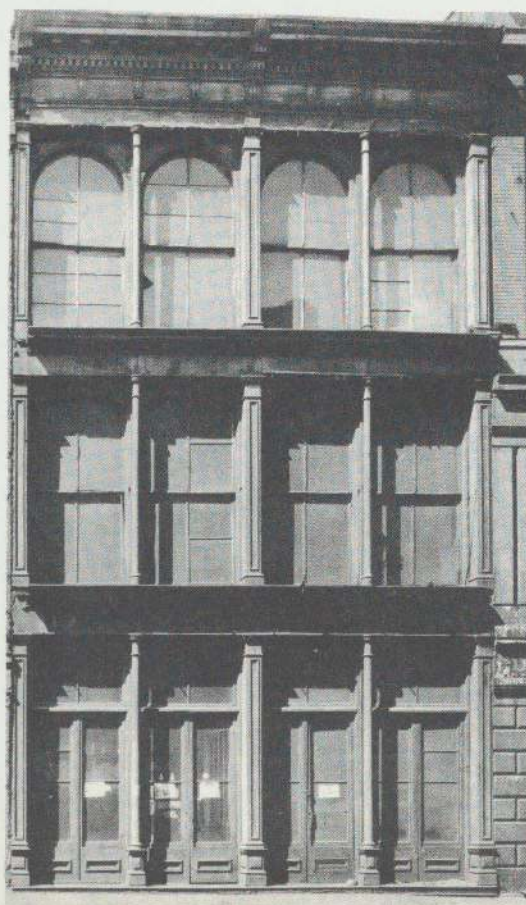
and twentieth century. The selection was made in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art and with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, cosponsors with FORUM of a traveling exhibit designed to demonstrate, by example, *what* to save and to suggest, by precept, *how* to save it.





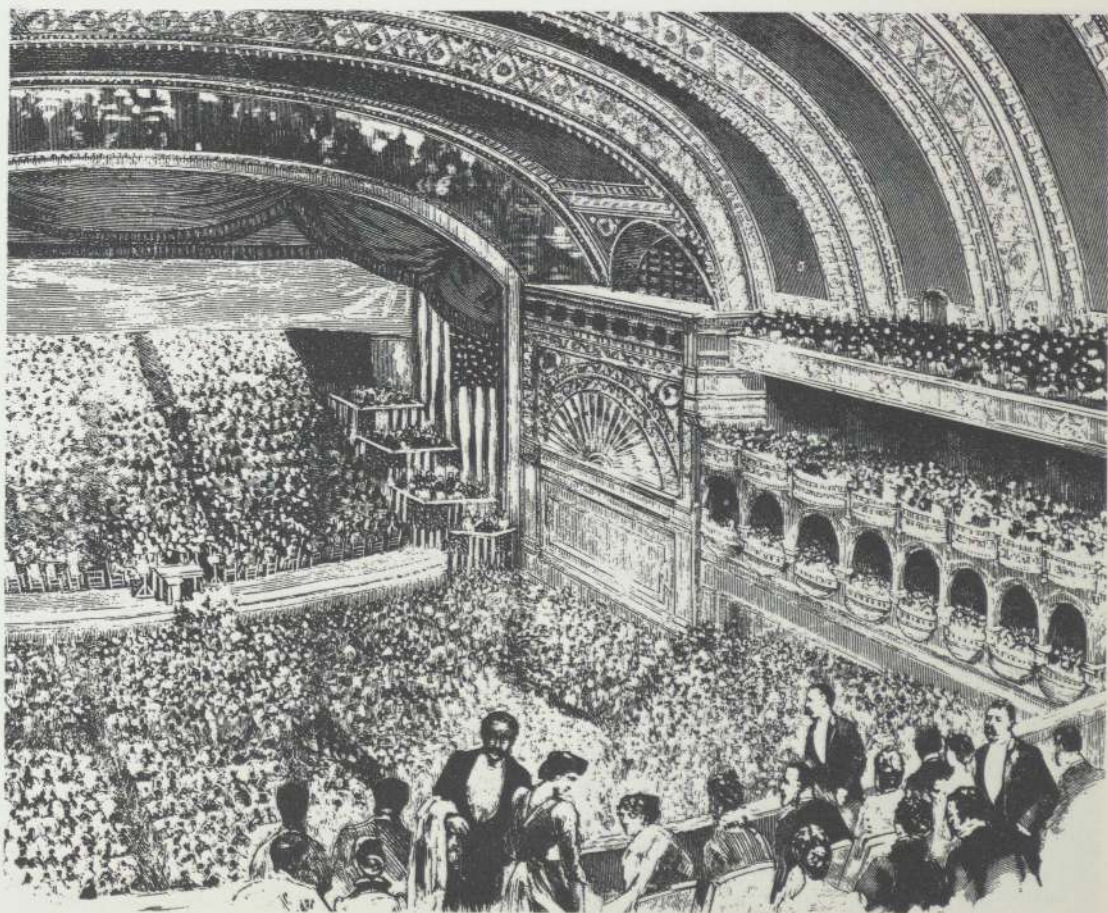
Destroyed

THREE EXAMPLES of the many important buildings already destroyed: Belle Grove (above), one of the great plantation houses of Louisiana, was burned by vagrants in 1952. The St. Louis iron front buildings (one example, right), built after the fire of 1849, were dismantled by the hundreds in 1939 to make way for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, which is now barely under construction. Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building (extreme right), built in 1904, was one of the most influential buildings of modern architecture. It was torn down in 1950 after the City of Buffalo sold the property to a trucking company, which now parks its trucks on the cleared site.



Doomed?

THE AUDITORIUM, finished in Chicago in 1889, was one of Adler and Sullivan's great achievements. Built as the core feature of a hotel and office building complex, it marked Chicago's cultural coming of age. Its brilliant opening night (right, below) inaugurated more than 30 years of active use for opera and other cultural events. In 1929, Samuel Insull, ill-famed utility magnate, removed the Chicago Opera to a new building. Only occasionally used after that, the Auditorium, considered by many the finest room for music in the world, was last used during World War II as a bowling alley. Roosevelt University, which purchased the building complex after the war, established itself in the hotel and office space surrounding the Auditorium. Despite earnest efforts, however, the University has not yet been able to obtain the funds needed to restore the Auditorium itself, notwithstanding its basic soundness, good location, and excellent acoustics.

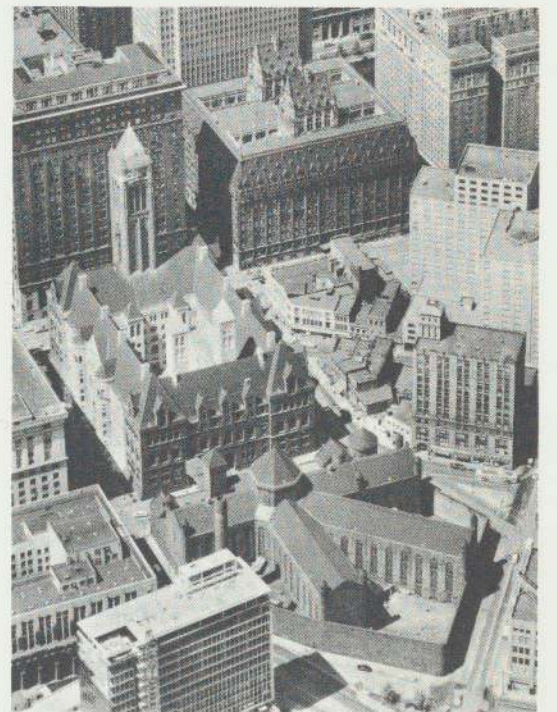


From "Ghosts along the Mississippi," by Clarence John Laughlin, 1948, Charles Scribner's Sons; National Park Service; Museum of Modern Art; from "The Idea of Louis Sullivan," by John Szarkowski, copyrighted by University of Minnesota, 1956; from "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper," December 12, 1889.



Doomed?

THE COURTHOUSE AND JAIL in Pittsburgh were completed in 1886 after the death of pioneer modern Architect H. H. Richardson. He considered the building his finest work: "If they honor me for the pigmy buildings I have already done, what will they say when Pittsburgh is finished?" Although the Courthouse (top, photo right) is not now threatened, the jail (below, photo right) may soon be torn down. While undoubtedly inadequate for its present use, the noble interior space and the stone-walled courts could be adapted to another use. One likely possibility: a Pittsburgh Museum of Industry.



Doomed?

GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL in New York, finished in 1913 to the plans of Architects Warren & Wetmore, and Reed & Stem is now overwhelmed with revolving autos and other rock-n'-roll-age advertising (below). The prime virtue of the great center concourse is as civic "open-space"—like a public square, roofed over. Unfortunately, the ubiquitous advertising art has badly damaged if not doomed the original concept of sponsors and architects.

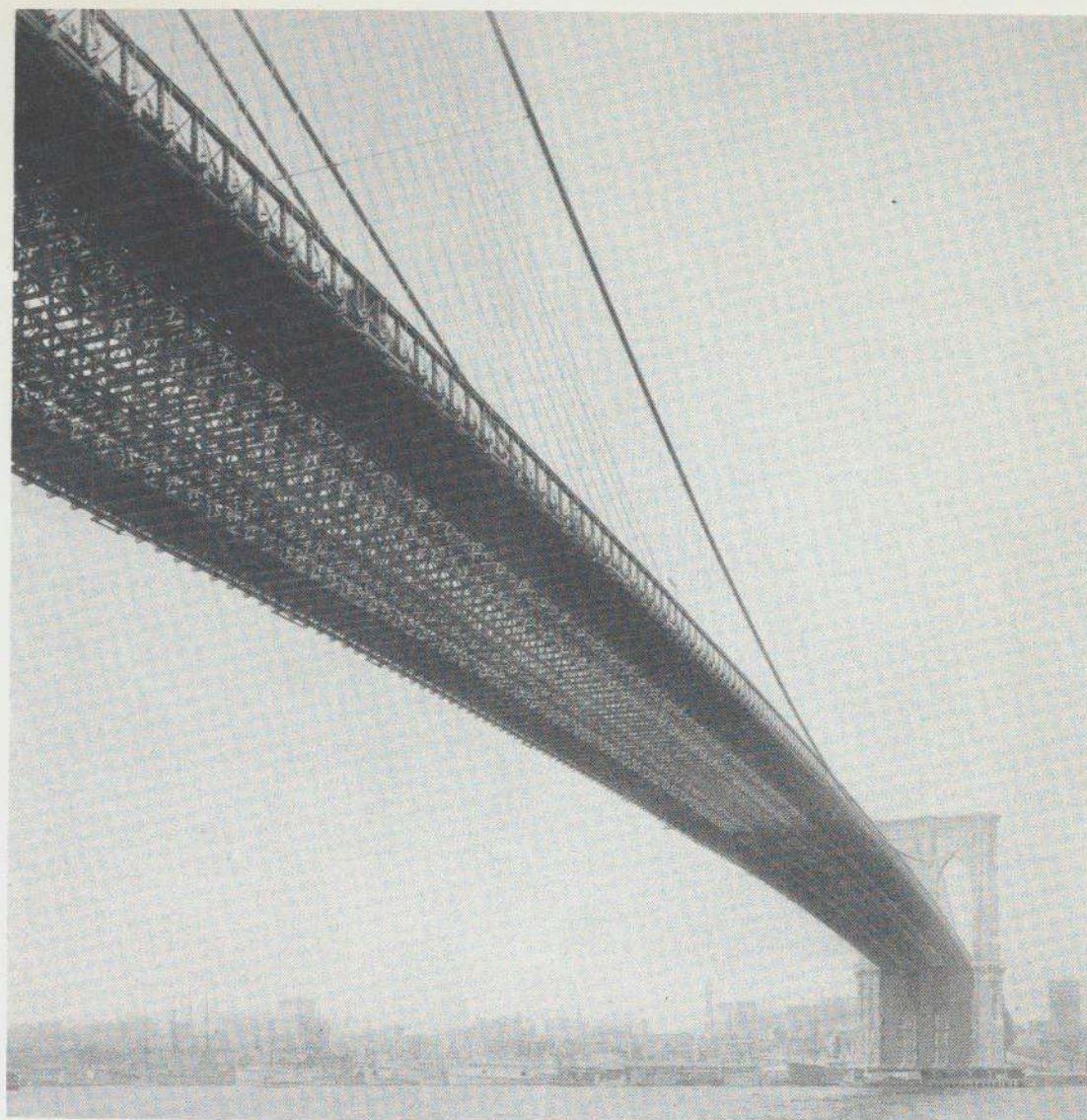


PENNSYLVANIA STATION, New York's other Great Room, was finished in 1910. The long-admired design of Architects McKim, Mead & White was recently intruded upon by essential renovations of the ticketing facilities. But many feel it should have been done more sympathetically. The arched canopy over the new equipment, which reveals its crinkled cover to entrants from the side streets, has a form and a scale which destroys the effect of the great room as a room.

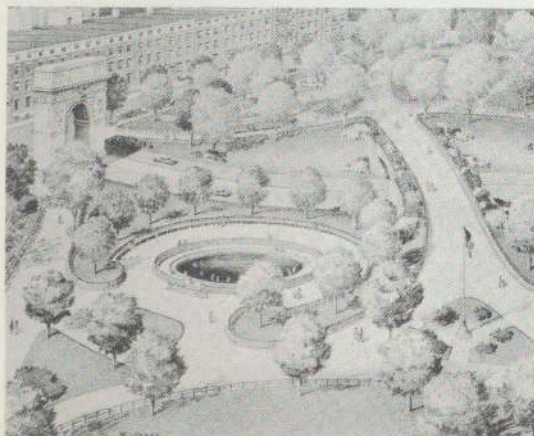


Doomed?

BROOKLYN BRIDGE, designed in 1867 by John A. Roebling and completed in 1883, is a pioneer among great suspension bridges. In 1950, its streetcar tracts were removed and additional automobile lanes were substituted. But in the process, structural additions and utility lines (below) cluttered one of the beauties of the bridge—the exciting high view of Manhattan from the pedestrian walk. Now a maze of approach roads is being built on the Manhattan side. None of the “improvements” measure up to the bold simplicity of the original Roebling idea.



WASHINGTON SQUARE has been the center of New York's Greenwich Village since the 1830's. After Architect Stanford White's arch (photo, right) was built in 1895, bus and local traffic was admitted to the park. Now, neglected by the Park Department, the Square is threatened by further inroads in the form of a road carrying arterial through-traffic (see plan, below) despite protests of Villagers and critics such as Lewis Mumford, who think traffic should be entirely excluded from the Square. On these grounds, Mumford termed the new road “an almost classic example of bad planning.”

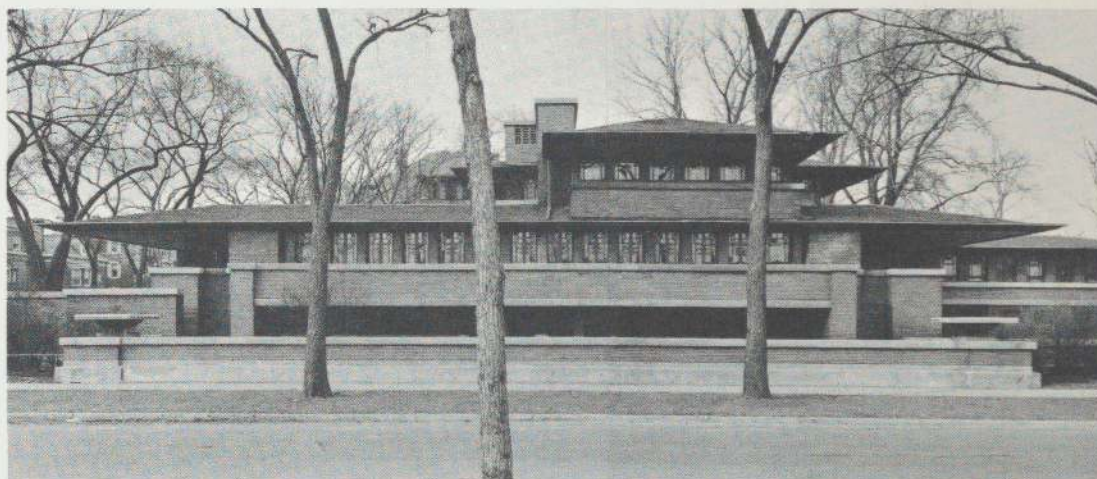


Delivered

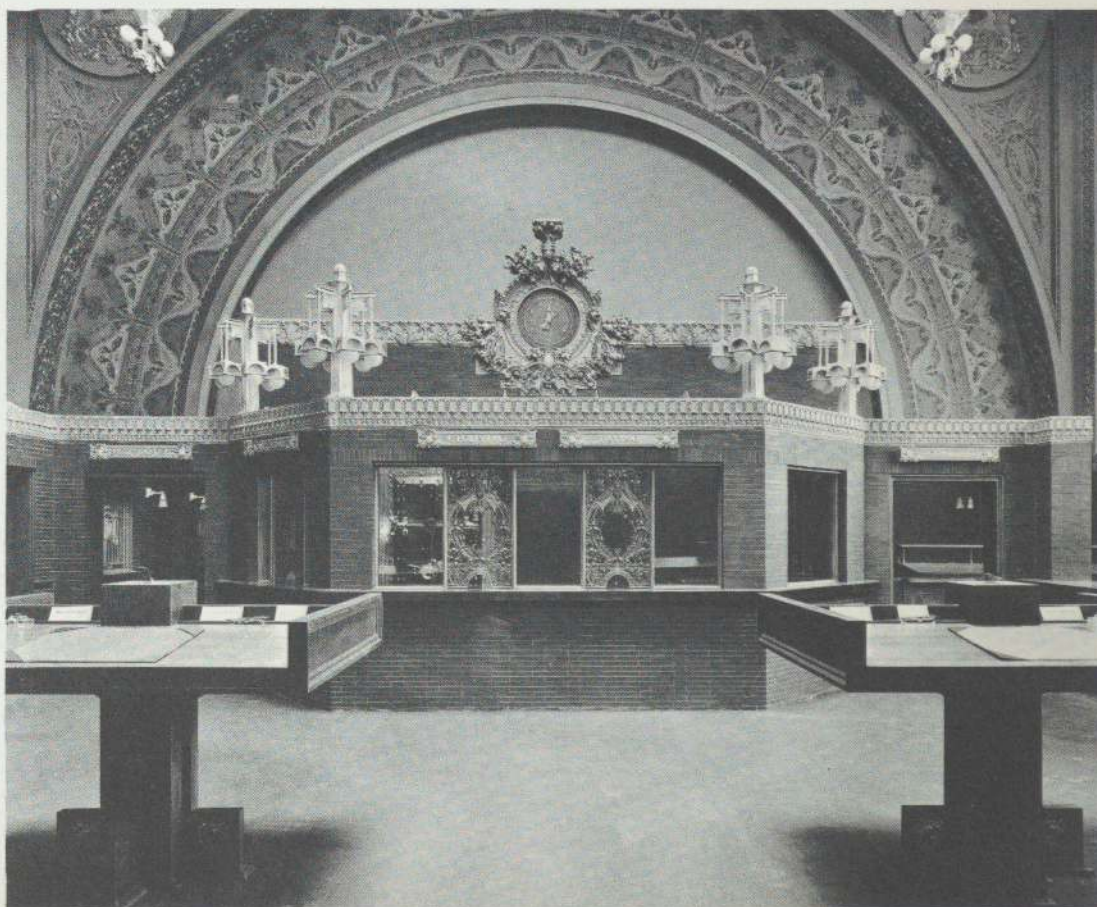
THE OLD PATENT OFFICE in Washington, D.C., which was started in 1836 to the plans of Architect Robert Mills, may be the symbol of a more hopeful trend. Scheduled for destruction this year, it was to have been replaced by a parking lot. In March, however, Congress passed a bill turning the Doric-columned building over to the Smithsonian Institution for use as a national gallery of portraiture and contemporary art as soon as the Civil Service Commission, which now uses the building, moves to new quarters.



CHICAGO'S ROBIE HOUSE, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1908, was to be replaced by a dormitory by its owners, the Chicago Theological Seminary. In December 1957, a national effort obtained a stay of execution and a temporary use for the house. Webb & Knapp, who purchased the property for \$125,000, will occupy it while their Hyde Park redevelopment project is underway. When they have finished using the house, it will be turned over to a national preservation group.



THE OWATONNA BANK, designed by Louis Sullivan in 1908, was nearly destroyed by careless remodeling in the 1930's. Recently, when the need to expand threatened the building further, five groups of Minnesota architects and historians prevailed upon the owners, the Security Bank & Trust Co., to proceed with care. On the recommendation of the professional groups, the bank employed Architect Harwell Harris as consultant and proceeded to adapt the building to modern needs without destroying its architectural character.



A plan for local action

In many cities and towns throughout the U.S., there are hopeful signs of an aroused interest in saving notable examples of American architecture. In Bridgeport, Connecticut, for example, the threatened demolition of the Harral-Wheeler house (1) by the city was an important issue in last fall's mayoralty campaign. In San Francisco, the State Highway Department's plan to plaster an elevated highway against the face of the venerated Ferry Building (2) raised a storm of protest that ultimately involved more than 30 government departments, newspapers, and professional and citizen groups. Unfortunately, in the latter case public opposition came too late.

A successful civic preservation policy requires continuous planning. Too often, as in the case of the 1850 Dayton, Ohio Courthouse (3) there is no planning for preservation because there is no *immediate* threat to the building. Yet the fine old Dayton building has been threatened before, and everything about it—its location, its present use, its atrophied physical condition—virtually assures that it will be threatened again. Preservation efforts should begin now.

Fortunately, the local chapter Preservation Committees of the American Institute of Architects are now prepared to advise local groups on whether or not a building is worth preserving. All chapters have nearly completed records of buildings worth saving. But a mere list is not enough. The depression-born U.S. Park Service survey recorded some 7,600 important buildings built before 1860. More than 25 per cent of these buildings have been destroyed since 1933. To promote interest—and action—in preserving worth-while buildings, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (2000 K St., N. W., Washington 6, D.C.), a private organization chartered by Congress, is now operating a national clearing house and information center on preservation matters.

Contrary to popular opinion, preservation is seldom a matter of saving a building in the face of "progress." More often, the loss can be charged to simple ignorance of the architectural value of the structure. And often the problem is not to save the building from demolition at all, but to prevent it from being destroyed by bad remodeling. Unfortunately, most architects think that they can "improve" anything.

In few cases can a piece of architecture worth saving be turned into a museum. More often, new uses and new owners must be found.

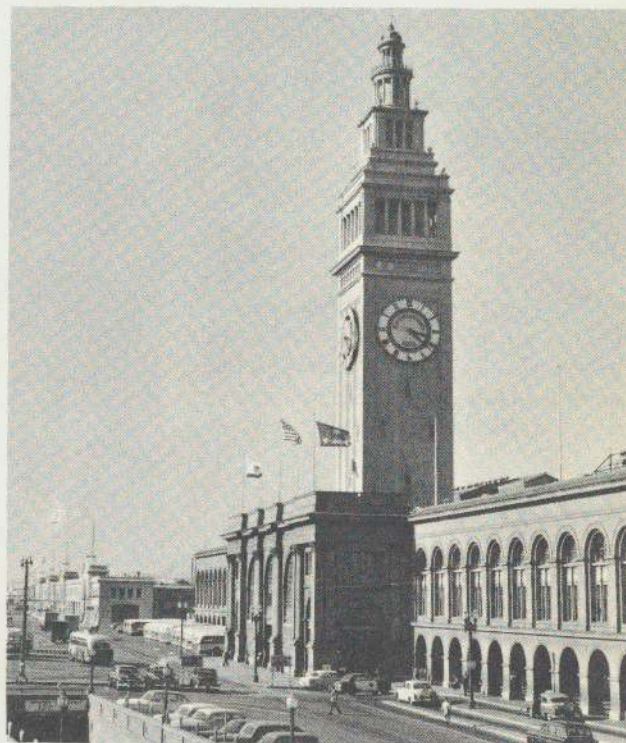
Sometimes, however, the only hope is legislation, which places important works of architecture—indeed entire districts of good architecture—under special zoning and building controls of the municipal government. Such legislation is being successfully used in Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities, and it would go a long way to solving knotty preservation problems elsewhere.

1



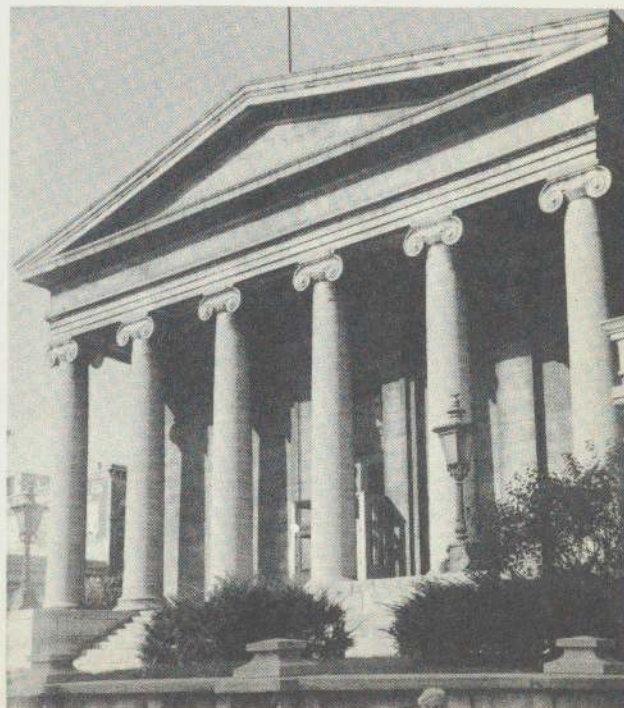
Richard Wood

2



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Perry Borchers

Modern Art



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Architectural Forum / magazine of building / published by TIME, INC.