Architecture

A Lot Happens In Ten Years

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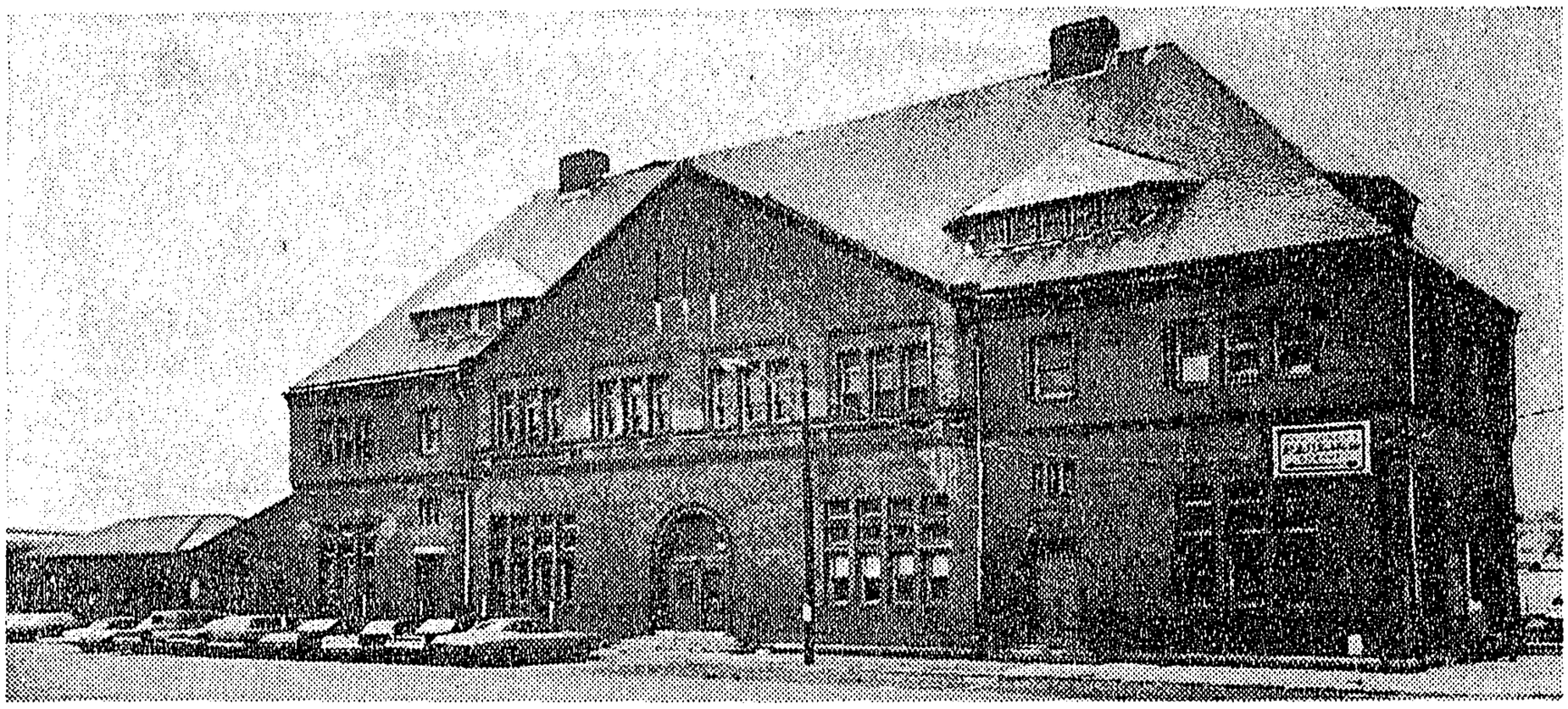

The Hartford Courant

Subject of last-minute protest: H. H. Richardson's 1885 New London station, to be demolished for urban renewal

"Ten years ago the gain of a department store seemed more vital than the loss of a landmark"

IT'S too bad about Paterson, N. J., and New London, Conn. Both have something of value. Both are about to lose it through those fates of our time — the highway system and the urban renewal.

In both cities, a confrontation is taking place between official agencies and their critics. And in both cases the problems could be solved to everyone's benefit by working together.

The conflict in Paterson is between the Great Falls National Historic District and a new state highway that would cut into it in such a way as to make rehabilitation plans unfeasible. In New London, the issue is the loss of Henry Hobson Richardson's Union Station, a landmark structure by an architect acknowledged to be one of a handful of American masters. It is slated to be destroyed by urban renewal.

Paterson's problem revolves around a remarkable grass-roots scheme to rehabilitate the Great Falls area of the Passaic River, which centers on a waterway of spectacular natural falls and man-made races that have served over a century of industry, and ranked with Niagara as a 19th-century tourist attraction. The wonders of nature and the wonders of technology held equal fascination for the Victorian mind and eye.

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The natural beauties are still there, rubbished by 20th-century debris and decline. (If "trashing" is the current word for deliberate destruction through fire and vandalism, why not "rubbishing" for the casual destruction of the environment by litter and neglect?) The factories are still there, too, dating from the 1820's to the 1920's, begun under the sponsorship of Alexander Hamilton in 1792 as the Society for Establishing Useful Manufacture with the aim of making Paterson a model national manufactory. The history and artifacts of the area, including some very handsome and sturdy brick structures in the American factory vernacular, are an industrial archeologist's dream.

The Great Falls were listed as a National Historic Landmark in 1967. An 89-acre tract with 40 buildings was designated as a National Historic Site in 1970.

A group of young architects who have formed a non-profit, public service organization called Urban Deadline, headed by a recent Columbia Architecture School graduate, John Young, has taken on the "advocacy" role of making rehabilitation studies for the city of Paterson. Their sponsor has been the wife of the mayor, Mrs. Lawrence F. Kramer. They have given city officials the professional surveys and proposals necessary to make a Great Falls project more than wishful talk. Chalk that up to theories of social usefulness fired by the 1968 Columbia "revolt" and put into post-graduate action.

A number of the factories are functioning and vital to Paterson's economy. Part of the project charts a new site for a local community college, utilizing new construction and adaptive conversions. The city's departments and agencies are committed to cooperation. Money could be gotten from the Federal Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Health, Education and Welfare, the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Department of Labor, and Small Business Administration, state and local educational construction funds, state and national park funds, and infusions of private capital. Because this is a National Historic Site, matching preservation grants are available.

So far, so good. But along comes the highway. Well, not exactly that suddenly, as if no one had ever known. It has been mapped and in planning for ten years, and it is now about to be built. As it is currently projected, it cuts through the Great Falls Historic District, destroying groups of buildings and isolating others.

Paterson needs the road; it asked for it. But the route has grown over the years from a fairly simple artery into a superhighway, without much local awareness. The Urban Deadline architects have provided Paterson officials with an analysis of the road's history, revisions and effects. They have suggested design alternatives that would not put all of Paterson's transportation eggs into one superhighway basket. These suggestions would also make the Great Falls project viable again. The State Highway Department is understandably balking at redesign costs and late-date changes.

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In New London, the urban renewal plan that will destroy the 1885 station that Henry-Russell Hitchcock, an authority on Richardson, calls the last and best of its type, is also no surprise. It, too, is ten years old, and it has always called for demolition of the Richardson building. Ten years ago the gain of a department store for the central business district seemed more vital than the loss of a landmark.

There is no excuse for the fact that professionals and the public are only rallying to save the building now, and there was no excuse, ever, for renewal to specify the demolition of one of New London's few structures of architectural distinction. Adaptive use was called for, then and now. It is being demonstrated in examples from Washington's plans for a national visitors' center in Daniel Burnham's vast Union Station and the Maryland Institute's station-studios in Baltimore to small station-shops all along rural lines.

According to Robert P. Turk, director of the New London Redevelopment Agency, the station is to be bulldozed for a river view. But it is quite clear that most New Londoners dislike the shabby old building and are resentful of "outsiders" who champion it at the 11th hour. Mind your own business and we'll mind ours, goes the familiar refrain in cities and towns that deal harshly with their heritage; we know our "real problems" and we can't afford the "luxury of preservation" and let those out-of-town bleeding hearts learn something about this place before they meddle in our affairs. It's a sorry, sour argument. Preservation has emerged, in recent years, as a powerful tool of urban revitalization.

Mr. Turk will present the Redevelopment Agency's viewpoint at a May 20 hearing before the State Historical Commission in Hartford (another "outside meddler") as a follow-up to an April 15 hearing at which the preservationists made their case. What he has said so far, in a letter to architectural historians, is that they are dealing in "sheer academic nonsense" and have failed to familiarize themselves either with New London's problems or its plans.

"Where have you been for the past ten years?" he asks the preservationists.

"Where have you been for the past ten years?" the New Jersey State Highway Department asks the city of Paterson.

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Where everyone has been, except those blindly busy in agency drafting rooms, is out discovering the environment. They have been learning something about it through observation of the trials and errors of ten years of renewal and road building. They have been gaining insights into the value of natural and historical assets and some comprehension of their place and use in redevelopment. They have been generating new urban design principles and legislation to match a new understanding of environmental needs.

A lot can happen in a decade. If times and standards change, so must plans. If we recognize new values, so must agencies, even to the extent of redesign. The Paterson and New London examples show exactly how hard it is to adjust bureaucracies to changing urban values and to retread old plans for better understood environmental goals, and why good things get steamrollered to oblivion even though everyone knows the score. It is happening in hundreds of cities with irreparable losses.

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