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ADAPTIVE REUSE

The Past Revisited

FOUR INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS ARE INVENTIVELY TRANSFORMED, WHILE THE FATE OF MANY ’50S AND ’60S STRUCTURES HANGS IN THE BALANCE.

by Tracie Rozhon

Even the most determined development devotee can see what’s worth saving in an old limestone custom house with 48-foot-high Doric columns. Or a brownstone church with an elaborate stele, casting its dignified shadow over a graveyard dotted with mossy headstones of 18th-century notables. Or those cast-iron-fronted warehouses with elaborate copper cornices and tin awnings, forever stamped on our consciousness by shelter-magazine profiles of the celebrities who live in them.

It’s the problem buildings whose fates are increasingly up for grabs. They’re not only too big or too small, but too weird: a monumental automobile factory in Italy with a racetrack on its roof has been saved, but hundreds of 1920s tourist cabins along near-defunct byways in the United States are still threatened. A 1953 gem of an A & W Root Beer stand in Boise, Idaho, was reincarnated as a coffee bar, but mid-19th-century mental institutions scattered across the nation—sometimes the grandest buildings in town—are slated for demolition, often despite their national landmark status. Industrial buildings without industry. Tourist cabins without tourists. Asylums without patients.

With grand houses in well-to-do villages and cities, the solution has often been clear, though not always ideal: make a museum. In Utica, New York, civic-minded planners proposed turning a 19th-century mental hospital—a palatial, 350,000-square-foot, neoclassical national historic landmark—into a museum of mental health. Perhaps not surprisingly, the idea came to nothing. Now preservationists are trying to find ways to turn these hospitals into apartments, hotels, or even golf resorts. Can you imagine billboards advertising these garden condos? “If You Lived in the Binghamton Asylum for the Insane, You’d Be Home Now.” Maybe not.

A more realistic approach comes from John G. Waite, an upstate New York architect who is working on a multipurpose plan for an Athens, Ohio, mental hospital. While a museum figures into his current scheme for this 1868 brick behemoth with towers and slate roofs, at least it’s a museum of American art, not a gallery of mental health. And his master plan for the 10-building complex also includes a much-needed expansion of nearby Ohio University.

Tracie Rozhon is a reporter for the New York Times, where she covers real estate, preservation, and architecture.
Preserving the 1950s and 1960s

For both preservationists and architects, an even stickier problem is the fate of thousands of exemplary '50s and '60s buildings (see "Bringing Back 1960s Buildings," in this issue)—which, because of their sheer numbers, may prove even more pressing than the rescue of stand-alone monuments like becolumbed banks and one-of-a-kind Beaux-Arts power plants. With their perceived shoddy construction and the widespread belief that they aren't beautiful or interesting enough to save, these buildings may face an even shakier future than the grand-scale and soundly built asylum.

"There's a clash coming," predicts Peter Brink, a vice president at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, "between two streams of preservation thinking," between people who want to save newer buildings as layers of time and those who would just preserve beautiful old neighborhoods, rich with history and architectural detail. The first camp, he says with the suggestion of a sniff, "wants to save the first major strip mall," while the second group thinks, "Oh, but that stuff's crap." He admits he's of the latter faction. "We'd go to the wall for a great Victorian neighborhood," Brink says. "But I'd be much more selective with the '50s and '60s."

And right now, at least, his faction is dominant. Generally speaking, buildings must be at least 50 years old to be considered for the National Register, though exceptions are permitted. Nevertheless, a search found no individual buildings completed after 1950 listed as national historic landmarks—only Philip Johnson's 1949 Glass House, in New Canaan, Connecticut, comes close. And only buildings with historic attributes (i.e., either listed on the National Register, or deemed eligible for it) are entitled to the 20 percent tax credit that makes so many adaptive-reuse projects economically feasible.

For John Waite, who is rescuing the Ohio mental hospital, '50s and '60s buildings present a much tougher challenge, not only economically, but also aesthetically and technologically. "I went to architecture school in the mid-1960s," Waite says, "and one of the reasons I went into preservation was a real concern about the craftsmanship of buildings just being built: they weren't being built to last." Indeed, the word craftsmanship seemed foreign when applied to post–World War II technology. "Eighteenth- and 19th-century buildings were constructed by hand or by early machines," he explains. "It's easy to replicate a hand-hewn brick or stone, and have better quality control than today."

In Marina del Rey, California, Jim McElwain of Caldwell Architects reports that his office has been swamped by recent requests to turn '50s and '60s schools—previously mothballed or used as office space—into state-of-the-art schools that meet current codes for fire safety, accessibility, and lead-free paint. Caldwell is working on six such projects, including the conversion of a 1959 concrete vocational school building into liberal arts classrooms for Santa Monica College. "Life has changed," he observes. "Community colleges are not interested in teaching people how to weld anymore. There aren't any factories!"

To effect the transformation, Caldwell's firm added a floor to the two-story structure, since land in Southern California is no longer cheap. The architects sprayed concrete on the floor slabs to stiffen them for earthquake resistance, and replaced tiny slit windows (that rendered the welding labs as dark as mushroom caves) with big, operable ones fit for sculpture classes. The building was then retrofitted with air-conditioning ducts and to the steel, gut the inside, and re clad the outside, trying (sometimes desperately) to make the building either look brand new or fit in with historic surroundings. In her new book, Architecture Transformed (Rockport, 1998), Nora Richter greer highlights two such projects: a group of 1960s dormitories at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, and a 1960s hotel overlooking St. Andrews Golf Course in St. Andrews, Scotland.

At Middlebury, architects Einhorn Yaffee Prescott of Albany, New York, took a group of faded 1968 dorms by Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott, tore off the gray, ribbed-plywood panels, stripped them down to their concrete structure, and refaced them in Corinthian granite (which ranges in color from browns to blacks) with pink Stony Creek granite lintels.

Stripping down and changing styles

So far, most architects renovating 1950s and 1960s buildings have chosen to strip them down to the steel, gut the inside, and re clad the outside, trying (sometimes desperately) to make the building either look brand new or fit in with historic surroundings. In her new book, Architecture Transformed (Rockport, 1998), Nora Richter Green highlights two such projects: a group of 1960s dormitories at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, and a 1960s hotel overlooking St. Andrews Golf Course in St. Andrews, Scotland.

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At St. Andrews, RTKL Associates of Baltimore began with a 1960 four-and-a-half-story, brick-and-stone-faced hotel—dubbed "a file cabinet with its drawers hanging out" by locals—and gave it a mansard roof, stone cornices, and French doors to harmonize with the golf course's grander, older hotel. All the first-floor corridors were interior, says Tom Witt, the partner-in-charge, and one of Scotland's most idyllic views— the town, golf course, and North Sea—had been totally ignored. "We turned it inside out," he explains, "and softened the edges of the file cabinet.”
“SHOULD WE PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS,” ASKS ARCHITECT JOHN WAITE, “AND USE SILK-PURSE TECHNIQUES ON SOW’S-EAR BUILDINGS?” PERHAPS NOT.

Although a multitude of ’50s and ’60s buildings were built, preservationists grumble that few distinctive examples remain. J. Winthrop Aldrich, New York State’s deputy parks commissioner in charge of historic preservation, describes his office’s futile search for the quintessential Levittown Cape Cod house. “We can’t find one that hasn’t been monkeyed with,” he says. “How many thousands of these houses were built to the great model of William Levitt? For returning servicemen? But before half a generation went by, the little houses were being remodeled for three children.” Aldrich says he’s conferring with state historic preservation officers around the country, trying to formulate “our positions on the big subdivisions, the shopping centers, and the freeways: the postwar era when automobile was king.”

One Midwestern firm, Trout Architects of Boise, Idaho, has found a solution, at least for delightfully tacky roadside architecture: strip away the haphazard accretions and restore it to an eye-popping version of fin-de-millennium kitsch. In Boise, Trout took a much-altered former A & W Root Beer stand—a cinderblock structure with a flat roof and a drive-through canopy—ripped off traces of its past, and transformed it into a drive-through Moxie Java hut. The architect turned the backyard into a patio and commissioned a giant neon coffee cup for the roof.

“It’s wicked cool—it rocks,” says Bert Bedeau, the architectural historian at the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office. “I’m just waiting until it turns 50 so I can put it on the National Register.”

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turned—seafood store

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