THIS TIME EVERYONE WINS*

By Ada Louise Huxtable

THIS WEEK'S TALE is called how to have your cake and eat it, too. It is a classic American urban drama of the bulldozer versus progress in which, for a change, everybody wins. It is the story of the new Albany headquarters for the New York State Bar Association.

The story ended this month with the unveiling of a project for a building complex that is a sophisticated triumph in that most delicate, complex and poorly understood art of the environment: urban design. It did not start that way. It began with everyone on collision course, or completely normally for any American city.

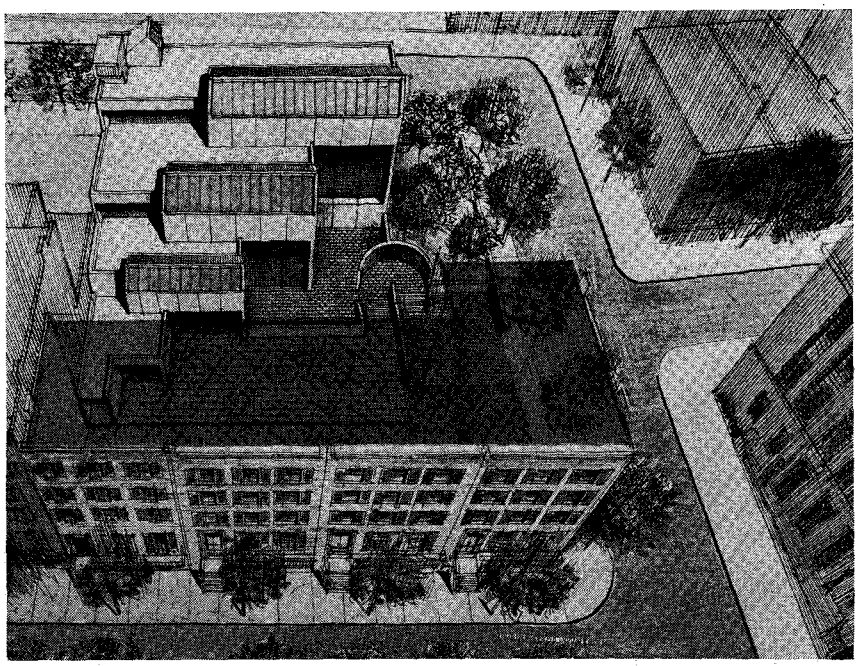
In April of this year the New York State Bar Association announced that it had negotiated the purchase of 2, 3 and 4 Elk Street, adjacent to the State Capitol and to court buildings, and would demolish the houses for its new headquarters, to be designed by New York architect James Stewart Polshek. The lawyers were quite certain that they wanted a fine, new, modern building.

Elk Street, or what remains of its iron-trimmed, four-story brick row houses of the 1830's, is Henry James-Albany; evocations of another age when the city combined traditional society and gubernatorial politics in more gracious surroundings and at a more stately pace. The houses face Academy Park and hold a tenuous line for period amenity against institutional encroachment. The street and its houses were designated as landmarks by Albany's Historic Sites Commission created in 1966 for the purpose of "safeguarding the historical, cultural and architectural heritage of the city of Albany."

Instant outcry followed the lawyers' announcement with every "good" intention of making the new structure "blend" with what would be left of a then totally decimated row—other parts have already been violated—the lawyers never knew what really hit them. What hit them immediately was the Albany Historic Sites Commission. This protest was followed by the concern of the Hudson River Valley Commission and a continuous barrage from the local papers, the Times-Union and the Knickerbocker News.

The Hudson River Valley Commission is a state agency that has the right to hold public hearings and review projects within one to two miles of the river from its source to lower Manhattan, to determine whether they would have an "adverse effect on the valley's resources." Although its powers and recommendations are only advisory, its functions were invoked.

A hearing was held on April 15, and sentiment for preservation ran strong. The Albany Historic Sites Commission was joined by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Albany County Historical Association, the Center Square Association, the Schenectady Historical Society, the Eastern New York Association of Architects and an assortment of public and private persons from Mayor Erastus Corning to those who felt, not always with as much clarity as conviction, that there was something impor-



Birdseye view of design for State Bar building, Albany, James Polshek, architect
"A conscious accommodation of the best of both worlds"

tant on Elk Street that ought not to go.

Without the ultimate cooperation of those whose action is being questioned, this show of sentiment means nothing. The Hudson River Valley Commission held a similar hearing last fall in Troy, N. Y., where feeling ran just as high for keeping a far handsomer street of unified brownstones called Doctors' Row, which the local renewal agency planned to demolish for a dismal new doctors' building. The Commission recommended against demolition, and after a brief academic pause for a nonmaterializing sponsor, the city bulldozed, anyway. (The neolithic planning policies and practices of small city urban renewal in the United States is a sad subject to be dealt with at another time.)

The Albany houses, individually, are not architectural gems or notable historical monuments. The cry, as is so often the case in American cities, was "They may not be great, but they're the best we've got." The real point was made in hearing testimony by Bernard Foerster, professor of architecture at Troy's Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute who stated that the significance of Elk Street far exceeds the importance of the separate structures. This was sensed by others who saw the street as the increasingly rare, still-living fabric of another, past life style of the city that it would be infinitely poorer without.

To the trained eye, it was a classic case of urban design. The values involved were the qualities of streetscape, through special period scale and character, and the role of the whole row as a "wall" or strengthening space enclosure for the park and

as an "anchoring point" for the State Capitol complex and Albany's past. What was significant was the cultural, esthetic, historical and human sum of the parts. These are the concerns of the professional urban designer that add up to felicities of scale, style and ambience that are a large part of what environment is all about. It is very rarely about monuments or single masterpieces.

To make a long story short, the lawyers got the message. They did more than that; their architect set to work to make a valid use of the old buildings without sacrificing a proper solution of the Bar Association's modern needs.

The result is a demonstration project of how to use the past without turning it into a charade and how to extend its fabric functionally into the 20th century for the best kind of living environmental continuity. The philosophical and design lesson here is of national importance. So is the lesson for preservation.

There is, too, the inevitable note of irony. After fruitless attempts to find someone who would save its old, outgrown headquarters, the Bar Association sold its landmark building on Washington Avenue—built in 1789 and later remodeled—to a real estate developer who has demolished it for a 22-story office building.

The idea of merely retaining the Elk Street facades and destroying everything behind them was rejected immediately as "false-face preservation" by the architect. What Mr. Polshek has done is to keep the main part of the houses, to a depth of about 30 feet, and to use those 19th-century front parlors for reception space, a conference room and the president's office.

Behind these handsome rooms there will be a glass-enclosed corridor, facing a multi-level open plaza and the new building, joined to the old ones by another connecting corridor. The landscaped plaza between will provide entrance to both new and old structures.

The new building will be uncompromisingly new. Its deference to the old ones will not be in the kind of copying or "adapting" of style or details that leads to smug architectural pratfalls, but in a basic sympathy for scale and compatible contrast. The bulk, for one thing, will be broken into three stepped, skylit structures: one for reception, the second for a 35-to-40-foot high grand hall for meetings and group functions, the third for offices. The design is a conscious accommodation of the best of both worlds.

Construction is expected to begin next year for 1970 completion. There will be approximately 30,000 square feet of space and the cost will be something over $1-million. The cost is higher than for demolishing and building new, but the Bar Association could not buy the luster added to its institutional image. About 85 percent of its functions will be in the carefully programed new space; the rest in the old houses. There is no sacrifice of utility to antiquarianism. And it all works.

It works in a creative, comtemporary solution of superior sensibility and cultural maturity that promises richness, interest, and a variety of pleasurable environmental experiences embracing past and present that should be a prime objective of 20th-century urban design. We hope the lawyers live happily ever after.

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