OF FOOTBRIDGES AND PRESERVATION

JAMES D. VAN TRUMP

To consider bridges is never to lack matter for reflection, but in Pittsburgh such contemplation is a daily necessity inasmuch as our citizens can scarcely stir without their aid. They make our rugged topography passable, even convenient, and they clarify the haphazard pattern of our streets; lacking their services, this city of many hills would be but a series of unconnected islands. Necessary since the beginning of time, they are also pre-eminently symbols of human communication. As we are here concerned in some degree with history, we shall use the bridge as an emblem of cultural continuity, a link between the present and the past.

Having secured our bridge, we wish also to say something about preservation—a word much encountered today. In an era of rapid technological advancement, man often seems like an actor in an old movie, perpetually running against a whirling canvas background. Must constant mutability be our portion? Is there no permanence, no stay of change? Change there must be, of course, but in every healthy society there should be some traditional base against which the mutations occur. Old fashions, old buildings, old usages and customs are forever falling backward into history’s midden heap, but there are many things both great and small which should be kept, passed on. The instruments of change have their uses but so have those of preservation, and today we must consider them both. These words are concerned with the endurance of bridges and some reflections thereon.

Among the bridges of history, there are those of knowledge and unwisdom, of hate and of love, of dreams and of memory. Possibly in the face of such large issues it would be best to speak soft and in a small way. One man’s symbol may be another’s commonplace, and we have no wish to lead the reader into the palace of philosophy by our own viaduct. If he chooses, he can

Mr. Van Trump is not only a member of this Society but also of the Society of Architectural Historians, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Victorian Society of London. He is a Recording Collaborator for this area in the American Institute of Architect’s Historic American Buildings Survey and he has written extensively on local building history. —Ed.
find his way there by whatsoever bridge he chooses. We are not here preoccupied with grand passageways or wide vehicular arches, but only with footbridges. It may be said against us that we have fastened these slender structures to a large theme like toy horses tied to a lion's tail, but bridges should not be judged merely by their dimensions. The plank that carries us over a ditch may be as important as the causeway that spans a lake. Lastly, it may be observed that footbridges have truly the human measure and accommodate themselves easily to our steps; they are, so to speak, our size.

This being so, we commend to the attention of the reader two small Pittsburgh bridges which are covered passageways connecting buildings—the Bridge of Sighs which passes over Ross Street between the Allegheny County Court House and Jail, and a similar elevated passage that spans Market Street between the two sections of the Diamond Market House. One is of granite and the other of brick and terra cotta, but they are very like in form and the first may well have inspired the second. Each is in danger of removal, since the structures that sustain them may be demolished in the name of the "City of Tomorrow." Our concern is not with the morrow alone, but with today and yesterday, with Pittsburgh as a continuing organism which should look kindly on its past; therefore we are bold to say that these little bridges should be, if not cherished, at least preserved as graceful footnotes, as it were, to our history.

It must be admitted that in this country, bridges as links to the past are difficult to preserve. Our 19th or 20th century structures do not have the antiquity of imperial Rome or the sanctity of medieval usage to warrant their veneration, and modern vehicular bridges however splendid, however exciting, are held to be little more than continuations of the streets and highways they serve. Even the most passionate advocates of preservation would scarce lift their voices to speak in favor of an elevated by-pass once it has passed its prime. Not many champions, possibly, would come to the defense of Brooklyn Bridge were it to be found unsafe or no longer useful. True, that great landwork has become a symbol and as such it might be saved, but numerous lesser spans would be

---

1 It is not so important a symbol as it once was, but in recent times it was most eloquently celebrated by a famous American poet, Hart Crane, in *The Bridge* (New York, 1930). "And Thee, across the Harbor, silver paced . . ."
thought expendable in the interests of “Progress”—that tinsel temptress, that paper ghost who has deluded man since the dawn of civilization. Sentiment did not save the great railroad station train sheds, those aerial poems spun of steel, which were marvels in their day. A rail terminus or a cantilever bridge may be even more important, view it as you may, than an 18th century mansion, but if the former can no longer pay their way, they quickly disappear. And vanish they do without a trace, for they do not even make handsome ruins—the Baths of Caracalla and Melrose Abbey are in better case. If ever its dereliction should come to pass, who would go to view a shattered Bloomfield Bridge by pale moonlight?

We have, alas, no time for contemplation, romance has deserted us, and we would merely, in such an eventuality, lament the inconvenience to motor traffic.

Footbridges, however, may still foster the romantic impulse or the contemplative moment. The endurance or the passing of such structures may be little remarked in the pages of history—an exception, albeit fictional, being that ancient Incan span whose fall inspired the novelist Thornton Wilder to erect a whole book on the subject. Although small, they may assume an especial importance in our lives or linger persistently among our memories. Who does not remember from childhood days, a fallen tree across a moving stream and the tentative, delightful passage over it to the farther shore; or again, from a later time, a stroll across a wavering suspension bridge, a web of slats and wire, where merely to touch another hand in the ripe sun of a summer day seemed to set the seal of heaven on that path. As a vantage point for contemplation, the footbridge has no peer. Near the writer’s home is the shortest of footways, an ugly construction of worn concrete and rusty plate girders, erected pig-a-back on the abutments of a demolished street bridge over railroad tracks. Here the solitary evening hour may induce in the passer-by a grand Wordsworthian mood; the luminous sight of the broad valley leading into the city,

2 Pittsburgh’s Bloomfield Bridge, erected in 1915, is a great deck cantilever span connecting Bigelow Boulevard and Liberty Avenue. The references to Melrose Abbey and moonlight are to be found in Sir Walter Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Only a few years ago this elucidation would not have been necessary, but it is doubtful if anyone, except candidates for the Ph.D. in English literature, reads Scott’s poetry nowadays.

3 *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (New York, 1928). The final sentence of the book is apposite to our discourse—“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”
the familiar towers and chimneys, the distant wooded ridges, leads one to a closer identification with his native place. To gaze widely, now here, now there, on this undistinguished but intensely known panorama, is to scan the very map of love. So we praise the necessity of footbridges, for they are elevations of no very alarming attitude from which each of us may overlook the kingdoms of his world.

These frail anonymous structures lead us persuasively to our theme and we shall speak first of the Bridge of Sighs since it is probably the best known and architecturally most elegant structure of its type in the city. Despite its brevity there is certainly no arch more graceful among its municipal brethren, and its rather bland design, executed in pinkish-grey Milford granite, seems to belie its grim purpose of transporting prisoners from jail to court room. In function it was no doubt inspired by its prototype at the Doge's Palace in Venice, but in form it favors the Rialto in the same city.\(^4\) Had our bridge, which was erected only in the mid-1880's, spanned a Venetian canal instead of the grey asphalt of Ross Street, it would probably have achieved a greater celebrity.

The name of its architect has surely increased its fame, since it is part of the Court House and Jail designed by the great American architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886). These structures reflect past architectural history at the same time that they forecast features of our contemporary building practice. The Romantic but disciplined mass of the Court House which suggests the form of French 16th century palaces has its Romanesque-Byzantine envelope pierced by an ample fenestration which opens the building to the world. It is altogether more ornamental, lighter in tone—one might say, more feminine—in contrast to the almost primitive, closely contained, masculine massiveness of the Jail. The main floor plan of the latter was inspired by that of the 6th century Syrian Church of St. Simeon Stylites, but the exterior mass of the Pittsburgh structure displays touches of the Romanesque Rhineland, as well as reminiscences of the medieval fortified buildings of southern France.\(^5\) Between 6th century Syria and Renaissance France lies

---

\(^4\) The Ponte dei Sospiri, erected ca. 1600 after the design of Antonio Contino, is a rather clumsy footbridge connecting the Doge's Palace with the old State Prison. The Ponte di Rialto erected 1588-92 over the Grand Canal is lined with shops.

a gulf of centuries far wider than a Pittsburgh street, but the Bridge of Sighs, the transplanted memory of commercial Venice, the stately leap of the suave stone, joins them commendably, even graciously. Complementary as they are, either building would lose much without the other, and if the Jail were to disappear the bridge could not survive.

There seems to be complete agreement that the Court House should be preserved both as a functioning building and as one of the remaining master works of the architect, but the survival of the Jail is still in question. It has been urged by many who love neither architecture nor the past, that the great walled structure, which deserves even more eminently the name of master work, is outmoded as a penal institution and should be demolished. The history of the prolonged preservation controversy that ensued has been very completely told elsewhere in this magazine and need not be retailed again. On the side of preservation, it has been suggested that the Jail, if it is no longer acceptable as a storage place for prisoners, be made into an industrial museum which would seem an admirable solution to the problem; thus the structure would not lack for a function which would contribute to the clarification and the chronicling of a much neglected but supremely important aspect of Pittsburgh history.

Again it has been said against the Jail that it is superabundantly an ugly building, that it is too massively a symbol of incarceration, that it too forthrightly thrusts its granite enclosure of man's evil into the public eye. It may be answered that this is not, and properly so, the architecture of mitigation; entirely salutary it is that we be so powerfully, so splendidly reminded of those lower depths which are such an inescapable part of the human condition. Why should the stones of sorrow be any less evident, any less persuasive than those of joy or light? All great buildings transcend even the lowest of their functions, as all famous men are something more than their smallest actions. The Jail is larger than the sum of its granite blocks and to destroy it would remove not only our strongest candidate for national architectural honor, but a magnificent artifact of the human spirit as well.

Since the question of the Jail's preservation as well as that of

---

the Bridge of Sighs has been for a little time in abeyance we have made another plea for them, in case the public may have become forgetful or indifferent. Should the preserver sleep, he may wake in dismay, for the demolisher is ever active and walks the city like a dragon. An uneasy respite is now the portion of the Jail, but the destroyer's breath is hot on the Diamond Market House and this part of the essay is in the nature of a last minute appeal which may become an elegy.

We continue also rather forcibly with our major subject since the Market House is a symbol of one of the most immemorial of human activities, the buying of food; and it is thereby a link of history, necessity, and affection with the past of our city as well as with the antiquity of mankind. Further to our purpose, the two sections of the structure are themselves bridges, which are connected at a higher level by the little footway over Market Street. Gaunt and tunneled, the Market House rises boldly above the low surrounding buildings like a neglected Venetian pavilion from a brackish lagoon of asphalt.

Located in the center of the square known as the Diamond, at the intersection of Forbes Avenue (formerly Diamond Street) with Market Street, the Market House is the most recent structure on a site that during a large part of Pittsburgh's history has been devoted to the provision of food for the city's inhabitants. The Diamond itself first appears in the plan of the town laid out by George Wood and Thomas Vickroy in 1784 and this particular tract of land was set aside "for public use" by the owners John Penn and John Penn, Jr. In March 1787, a public meeting was held to discuss the location of a public market at Second and Market Streets, but marketing activities soon settled in the Diamond. In 1795-99 the first Allegheny County Court House—a small Classical building with two wings—was built in part of the square, and opposite it was constructed a semi-circular shed known as the Horse-shoe Market. The Diamond thereby became a provision center soon after its establishment as public ground, although other markets

---

were established later in the Triangle, notably on Liberty Avenue and the Monongahela wharf.

As the years passed and the city grew larger, changes occurred in the Diamond. In 1852 the Court House which had not been occupied as such for ten years was taken down and a new Market House was built on the site. In that part of the square where the Horseshoe had stood, another structure used both as a municipal building and a place of public assembly was erected in 1854. Both of these structures were ready for occupancy by 1855. In the City Hall, soldiers were fed and entertained during the Civil War and it was here also that the United Presbyterian Church was formed in 1858.

In 1872 when the new Town Hall on Smithfield Street was dedicated, the lower floor of the “Old City Hall” was taken over for market purposes, but the great room on the second floor continued to be used as before, notably as a concert hall. Famous singers like Patti and Nordica appeared on its stage, and Sarasate the violinist and Paderewski the eminent pianist, then just beginning his career, performed here. This close association of great music with vegetables is an intriguing one and the nearness of the market to the hall reminds one of London’s Covent Garden. In that far-off Pittsburgh, it must have been rather an adventure to go to a concert through narrow gas-lit streets and to watch the other concert-goers clad in brocaded satin and black broadcloth making their way over dead cabbage leaves and horse dung to hear a glamorous soprano sing “Casta diva” or the “Jewel Song” from Faust. People were less squeamish in those days and did not mind such curious juxtapositions or even unpleasant odors. In our own sterilized and sanitary day, it is unfortunate that along with the dirt

---

10 History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania—pp. 694, 701. The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania also possesses among its archives a portion of the minutes and other documents of Common and Select Councils of 1832 dealing with this market. (See “Footnotes” pp. 185-198)

11 Wilson, op. cit., p. 725.

12 There are bronze tablets commemorating both these events affixed to the outer walls of the Market House.

13 The City Hall, Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, 1874), pp. 11-12, 15-16.

14 Pittsburgh Dispatch, 21 June, 1914. The history of this concert hall has not, as far as the writer knows, been recorded, but announcements and reviews of the concerts are probably scattered through the newspapers and periodicals of the time. The Music Department of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh preserves in its archives the program of the first Paderewski performance (1893) as well as those of other concerts, notably the programs of the Mozart Club which performed in Old City Hall from 1887 to 1894.
and the germs, much of the color and glamor of city life has departed also.

In the early part of this century the scenery of the Diamond shifted again; both the Old City Hall and the Market House were removed in 1914 to make way for the present structure which was designed by the local architectural firm of Rutan and Russell. The east building was opened in August 1915 and the western section five months later, and the little footbridge was added to join them both. So it has remained to the present day, but it has fallen away somewhat from its early prosperity. In 1936, during the Depression years, the stall holders in the Market formed themselves into a group called the Pittsburgh Marketmen's Protective Association which made a lease with the City for the tenancy of the structure.

The fortunes of the building declined further. In 1947, the City sought to sell both the building and the land, but the Marketmen's Association and a group of farmers who used the structure protested. One of the latter group, seeking to restrain the sale, brought suit against the City. It was ruled by the court that the title to the land was vested in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with a reversionary interest to the Penn heirs and the City could not, therefore, legally sell it. There the matter rested until early in the present year when one of the terra cotta consoles ornamenting the Forbes Avenue vault fell into the street and injured a passer-by, thus calling to the public's attention the fact that although the Market is still structurally sound, its outer envelope does need repair. Since a considerable sum of money would be needed to rehabilitate the place, the City Council has been considering whether to retain and refurbish the structure or to demolish it and make the site into a public park.

15 The plans of the structure dated 23 April 1914 are preserved in the files of the Department of Lands and Buildings of the City of Pittsburgh. See also Architect and Building, XLVIII (June, 1916), p. 32 and the Pittsburgh Press, 1 February 1914. A projected elevation of the proposed Market House designed by Alden and Harlow is illustrated in the Pittsburgh Architectural Club Year Book, V (1910), p. 56.

16 See Pittsburgh Dispatch, 21 August 1915, and Pittsburgh Sun, 27 August 1915.

17 See "Hoffman versus city of Pittsburgh," in 335 Pennsylvania Reports, pp. 650-655. This report contains not only the ruling of the court in the case, but also considerable material on the history of the Diamond and the Market House.

18 This was suggested by Frederick Law Olmstead in 1910 before the present Market House was built. At that time, a public square would not have been unacceptable, but the clearing of the Point area now makes another green space superfluous. See Olmstead, F. L., Pittsburgh Main Thoroughfares and the Downtown District (Pittsburgh, 1910), p. 18.
cil, while the preservers protest and the demolishers wait gleefully for the bricks to fall and the dust to rise.

Unfortunately, nowadays, architecture too often lives—or dies—by analogy with the machine, and to the citizen who cannot bear to own a motorcar more than two years old, the Market House is of none account. Like the Jail, the newer building in its use of stylistic tags—in this case the general 18th century form and the Classical detailing—is linked with the past, but unlike Richardson's structure it is put together in the modern fashion and is therefore in line with contemporary building practice. It is really a light pavilion masquerading as a construction of the older tradition and in that fact lies part of its interest for us; despite their archaistic treatment the brick and terra cotta screens hung on the basic steel frame are eminently modern and near in spirit to the neighboring Gateway Center IV19 which is merely a metal cage covered with glass. At some not too distant date, we shall probably be able to move our architecture about like stage scenery, but that time is not yet. The Market House, again, is caught between the old and the new—it is not rooted in the rock like the Jail, but it cannot be folded up like a tent. In the fleeting panorama of our city-scape, would it not be pleasant to entertain, as it were, a few architectural illusions, to keep certain "permanent sets" as bridges with the past? In the Triangle there could be no better candidate than the Diamond Market.

Weather-stained as it is, the Market House has an aesthetic role to play in the neighborhood of which it is the focal point. The pierced mass of the building constitutes an interesting optical adventure and the eye is intrigued by the architectural composition of solids and voids. Space not only surrounds this structure but penetrates it—the smaller volumes of the tunnels meeting in the larger more open division of Market Street, which is itself spanned by the footbridge. The skewed course of Forbes Avenue through the two sections adds yet a further note of variety to the spatial interest. The green vacuity of a public square, however well provided with geranium beds and assorted loafers, would be poor compensation for its loss.

Above all, the Diamond Market still has a function to perform in the life of the City. Even those zealots of preservation most

19 A large skyscraper designed by Harrison and Abramovitz now nearing completion.
enthusiastic in the cause, would probably admit that it is foolish to preserve a dead building or one which the public has ceased to frequent. A building has to be preserved for something, if it is not to become like a mausoleum, or worse—for even sepulchres have their uses.

Despite its wrinkled face, the Market House is yet far from moribund and all that is needed is a little showmanship and imagination, some paint, bright shop windows and awnings, to make it a distinctive feature of the Triangle. It has been suggested by out-of-town observers that not only the Market but the Diamond itself be refurbished and made into an attractive urban shopping center which would attract not only the inhabitants of the metropolitan area but tourists as well. Why create in the future, in some corner of the "new" Triangle, an ersatz "Olde Pittsburgh Nooke" suitably antiqued a la Williamsburg, when we have the still functioning units of the real thing which could be welded together into a market area which would have the advantage of authenticity and the promise of real vitality? Possibly the City, the Marketmen's Association and other interested parties might work together to advance such a project. Only thus can a preservation scheme of this sort have any chance of success.

The market place has always been an important focal point of town or city life, the very stomach, if not the heart of urban existence. The Diamond invites our consideration as the Pittsburgh site much hallowed by tradition in this respect, and it is therefore eminently a bridge of history. But it is also, like the little footbridge over the railroad, a link of sentiment and affection, in a way, of love; here one especially has a sense of direct contact with one's fellow human beings in the ancient companionship of the market place. Food is, after all, one of humanity's strongest bonds.

20 Douglas Haskill of the Architectural Forum—see Reeves, Jerome R., and Rawlins, L. R., "The Diamond Market Controversy" (the printed version of a program broadcast and telecast by Station KDKA of Pittsburgh on 10-12 March, 1960)—"It's picturesque—just the kind of quaintness which it would be a major error to remove." See also Jacobs, Jane, "Downtown is for People" in The Exploding Metropolis (New York, 1958), p. 160.

21 Burke's Building (designed by John Chislett in 1836) on Fourth Avenue nearby, one of our few remaining Greek Revival structures, could well be included in such a project.

22 The city of Pittsburgh and the Downtown Triangle Association are in process of commissioning the Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association to make a plan for the Downtown area. Since the project is just beginning, this group has no recommendations at the present time concerning the Diamond.
of community; as a sign of peace and brotherhood, we break bread together and even our shopping for it should beget amity. At certain seasons in this place when the brick walls are adorned with flowers, and the fruits of the earth are spread to view, we are aware of a cheerfulness, a warmth, a balm more sure than that of Gilead, in the very air about us. It is difficult to nourish hatred over a basket of new potatoes and he is passionate of vanity who would not be humbled before an apple or a rose. True, the market place has also encouraged gossip, malice and disaffection, but we prefer to think of its more beneficent aspect, that of the well-filled stomach which conduces to the widest charitable view.

The writer confesses to a partiality for the atmosphere of the Market House, he admits to a profound affection for these antiquated stalls displaying their primroses and pig’s-heads and cauliflowers. How pleasant on a May morning to carry away lilacs and hot rolls and on a December afternoon, holly and Christmas cakes. From these felicitous expeditions, these excursions of light, it is a dolorous descent to the packaged inanities, the mechanized impersonality of the modern supermarket. And to reduce the gewaltlich amenities of the Diamond to concrete walks and ivy borders would be a betrayal not only of the past, but of life itself. Green grows the ivy, but its proper station is the grave.

There is something deathly about this creeping greenness which now invades our cities with the advent of the site planners. Half the attraction of any urban center lies in its denseness and compactness of construction, the variety and life of its streets. In the street or the avenue lives the essence of “downtown,” not in the park or the “mall,” and if Pittsburgh’s Triangle is to survive at all it must be redefined in urban terms as the core of the metropolitan area. To impose a suburban neutrality and greenness on it, to make of it a park ornamented with the pervasive ivy and huge glass skyscraper obelisks is merely to anticipate the necropolis. And the New Jerusalem foretold by the site planners, those prophets of municipal felicity, will still glimmer before us, distant as a dream.

Modern urban planning is, of course, necessary if areas of blight and chaos are to be avoided, but why cannot it be done with discretion, with some small reverence, a little ancestral piety, if you will, for what has gone before? In these days when city plans descend on us heralded by the angels of “Progress,” the past still has much
to say to us and we speak again for the retention of the best features of that past, as well as for our little bridges, the grace notes of our metropolitan theme.

Perhaps the preservers had better adopt some of the methods of the planners, and certainly the two groups should work together. The present plight of our small bridges is one all too common at the present time. These last minute "preservation" cases which occur when a building or even a whole quarter are in imminent danger of demolition, although dramatic and suspenseful (will the heroine be rescued before the skiff goes over the falls?), demonstrate the inadequacy of our approach to the matter. Our own city has been prodigal in the destruction of its 18th century, even its Greek Revival buildings, and now there is little left that dates before 1850. Much of interest still remains from the period 1850-1940, and something of this store is worth keeping. Other American cities would be in similar case. All interested members of our citizenry, site planners, governmental agencies, as well as private cultural institutions such as museums and historical societies, should diligently inquire into, and study the problem. We had better decide now, to what degree we can, what we are going to preserve and why—otherwise our bridges will fall, one by one, behind us.

And so the little bridges have carried us quite far enough for our purpose. Among the minutiae of the city—those "trivial fond records" which are necessary to our days and our remembering—they have a graceful and essential place. We hope for their long continuance in our midst.