

**Remarks for the Design Review & Preservation Board's
"2001 Annual Preservation Awards"**

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by Alain Munkittrick

This afternoon we award two imaginative and forward-looking building projects. This mansion – the most elegant publicly funded building project you will ever see, and the new Police Station on Main Street that mixes mundane uses in a sophisticated and urbane solution. In addition to these two deserving projects, there is the exciting news that the Russell House will most likely be designated a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service later this month – Middletown's first designated national historic landmark. As a result of the efforts of the Wesleyan Landmarks Advisory Board, preservation consultant Jan Cunningham, and with the University's blessings, the Samuel Russell House will join about 50 other nationally significant Connecticut sites on this prestigious list. It should be mentioned as well that this month the Landmarks Board has submitted an application for national landmark designation (we hope to be announced next October) for the Richard Alsop IV House – which you may also know as the Davison Art Center.

It is instructive to consider these three grand Middletown buildings together at this time. Long Hill Estate, the new Police Headquarters, and the Russell House each represents a different yet successful historic preservation case study. Their individual stories demonstrate three types of historic preservation efforts that have marked this movement that had its beginnings in the 1960s .

The rescue of the Wadsworth Mansion and Estate by a dedicated group of citizens in the face of overwhelming odds against success, is typical of so many preservation struggles of the past 40 years. Obviously, not all of these preservation challenges have had happy endings. I am reminded of the loss of the Middlesex Opera House and the Mansion House Block, two grand pieces of Middletown architecture lost to the wrecking ball. Luckily for us, Colonel Wadsworth's Mansion evaded a similar fate. It was bastardized by institutional use, its open spaces sold to developers with an eye to carving up, then left abandoned, stripped of its architectural features, vandalized, set on fire and finally pronounced irretrievable by so many. Its only hope depended upon an entrepreneurial vision to be funded by significant taxpayer commitment in a time of economic stagnation. The subsequent history of the revitalization of Long Hill Estate is the story of historic preservation at the most dramatic level. Preservationists could not find a better case study for the arguments of adaptive reuse than Long Hill.

The new Police Station is the kind of urban project that preservationists could only dream about 40 years ago. This is a project that stands as strong testimony to what the movement had been pleading all along. Good architecture in context with the best physical cues of its surroundings, well built new construction of quality materials and sound craftsmanship, carefully considered design that speaks to the human scale of the streetscape in a language of traditionally understood elements, can combine to produce a new structure modern in concept and function while respectful of history and context.

Those with architectural memory recognize in the Police Station a reincarnation of the City Hall, constructed in 1893 on the opposite side of Main Street one block north. That stunning four story, castle-like structure was clad with carved brownstone, spanned with three monumental arched

windows, and was punctuated at each end by engaged towers. The tower at the south end soared to six stories and was capped with large and handsome clock faces. Sadly, this noble masonry edifice was demolished in 1961; its function replaced by the utilitarian and distinctly anonymous brick and glass City Hall on DeKoven Drive, its back turned to Main Street.

1961 just pre-dated the historic preservation movement's start in this country. Not coincidentally, the 1960s witnessed massive urban renewal efforts that wiped away many historic buildings in a convulsion of sanitation and do-good-ism. The historic preservation movement was born as a reaction to these redevelopments. New City Hall became the anchor for the Riverview Center redevelopment that cleared out whole blocks of historic Middletown neighborhood between Main Street and the River. The one story strip center Sears store and Metro Square were the result of a planning mindset that was embarrassed by Main Street and which embraced plans that suited the direct path and needs of the automobile rather than the meandering logic of the urban pedestrian.

So we have come full circle in a way, for the Police Station, erected to replace Sears, now fills in the former toothless gap that 1960s style redevelopment inflicted, with a punch, on Main Street. That the new Police Station recalls so many features of the old City Hall, is for historic preservationists, truly icing on this cake. This project redeems us from some of our past mistakes. It draws on the best from our past and establishes a presence on Main Street that preservationists of the future will, no doubt, have good reason to save from the wrecker's ball.

Russell House, completed in 1830, has become an icon of Middletown's architectural and historical past. As one of its stately structures, it is also a monument to perhaps one of its most important citizens of the 19th century. It is almost always included in standard architectural histories of the United States as a significant example of the earliest temple-fronted residences of the Greek Revival style that dominated civic architecture of the 19th century and, as you can see in the Wadsworth Mansion, extended its influence well into the 20th century. Let me quote from Jan Cunningham's application to the National Park Service, summarizing the significance of this treasure: "Nationally significant for its direct association with the founder of Russell & Company, the legendary 19th century leader in the American China trade, the exceptionally well-preserved Samuel Wadsworth Russell House is considered to be the premier domestic example of the Corinthian Greek Revival style in the Northeast. Conceived and executed during the early flowering of a classically derived national aesthetic, Ithiel Town's design for this beautifully proportioned 'urban villa' was widely disseminated, fostering the rise of the Greek Revival as the universal style in the antebellum period."

Owned since 1943 by Wesleyan, the Russell House is also an excellent example of preservation stewardship. The thoughtful care of historical properties is as important for historic preservation as adaptive reuse strategies and the encouragement of new construction compatible with historical tradition and local context.

Long Hill, the new Police Headquarters building, and Russell House are excellent examples of what makes architecture grand, and why we should preserve Middletown's grandest statements, just as we value its vernacular heritage.

Long Hill is majestically sited within an estate setting of artfully landscaped allees, distant vistas, and woodland paths. Its grandeur is really a function of its great estate setting, certainly one of the last intact estate settings in the valley dating from the first quarter of the 20th century, including the Taylor's St. Clements in Portland and the Camp Family's High Lawn. One of these great places, the Hubbard Estate, was lost to fire and suburban development only a few years ago. Long Hill is not only the dream of an eccentric and dynamic man of wealth with a vision for the landscape, but also one of the few remaining examples of grand estate planning that will, no doubt, never be replicated again.

Russell House, the first High Street villa, was perhaps a bit too grandly ahead of its time, for there is some evidence that it was not so well received. A transcribed letter written by an Alsop family member in April of 1829 stated, "Mrs. Sam Russell is going to have a large house and every one thinks an ugly one too. It stands crooked from every place you see it excepting from the head of our street and has 6 pillars a yard square on the East side and six round ones on the west so large they make the house look clumsy." As you may know, local lore has it that the six round columns of the west portico came from an unfinished bank building in New Haven designed by Russell's architect, who secured them for Russell at little cost to insure that the full temple front design would get built. Coincidentally, Colonel Wadsworth also incorporated 4 round columns for this house that he salvaged from a house on Main Street which his wife had inherited.

Grand-ness though is not only about a portico and the use of a Greek Order. It is not only about an imposing setting, whether at the head of a tree-lined drive, or at the head of a High Street overlooking the Connecticut River valley. It is not only about the handsome way the new Police Station stands four square to confront yet embrace the streetscape. It is not only about monumentality of proportion, or the massive solidity of brownstone block coursing..

Really what truly makes these distinctive buildings grand is their civic nature and their civic use. Like good citizens, all three offer up more than they ask back in return. Each represents significant value-added investment in their community. Each demonstrates a fundamental optimism in the future of their community. These are meeting places where groups of citizens gather within their walls. Poetry is recited, music is played, weddings are celebrated, meetings (like this one) and conferences to debate issues and develop consensus are held, families and friends get together for dinner, within view of the sidewalk or better yet, on the sidewalk.

In other words, these buildings are grand because they serve civic functions. Their grand entrances invite the public in for participation, and the people, as they leave, feel ownership with these structures, and not a little civic pride. There is no better reason than this to preserve Middletown's grand architecture.