

The Ruin of Ruins Preservation and the Loss of Value

Raymond Streeter

There is no question that the Nichols Gymnasium is one of the most significant buildings on the campus of Kansas State University both historically and artistically. Even in its ruined condition it forms a striking terminus of one of the most important axes and remains a landmark on the Manhattan skyline. The whole visual richness of campus and town alike would be diminished if it were allowed to disappear.¹

—James Marston Fitch

On April 4, 1979, concerned students and faculty gathered in front of Nichols Gymnasium to protest the imminent destruction of its remains.² The structure stood in a ruinous state since its immolation ten years earlier. Burned during an era of protests against racism and the Vietnam War, the charred limestone walls still retained a powerful hold on the minds of many in the university. The reasons varied—a few understood the building's architectural significance—but most participants acted out of a sense of loss. To raze the building would be to deny history and to erase the memory that those ruins represented. The protestors that day made vocal their desire to preserve those memories, good or bad, and the landmark "castle" whose form contained them.

Today, after a six-year process of renovation, Nichols nears a new life for itself. Computer facilities, a

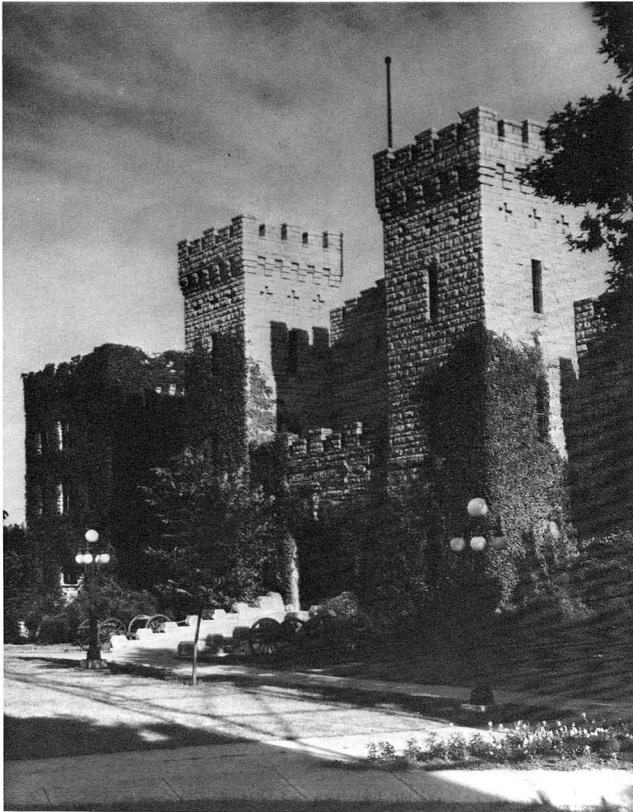


Nichols Gymnasium. December 13, 1968.

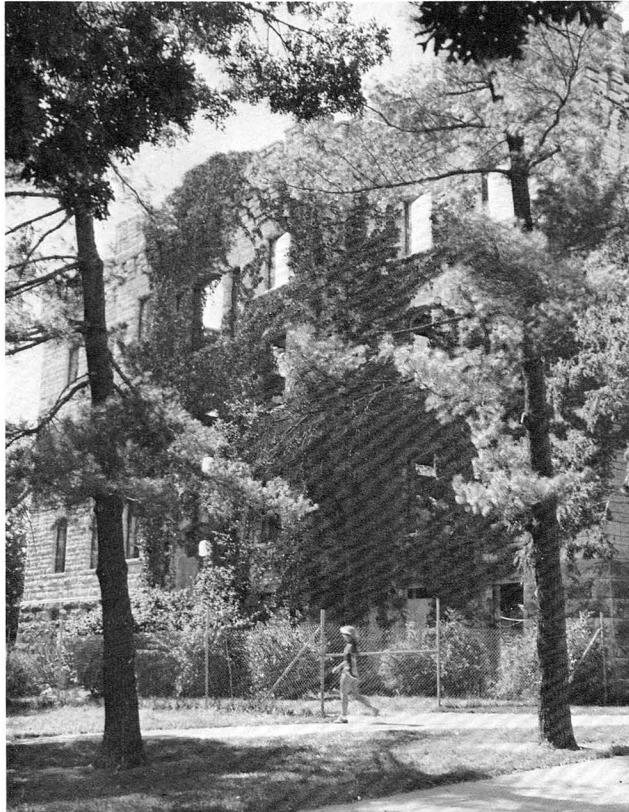
288-seat experimental theater, and library storage will be linked by a skylit atrium/lobby inside the burned-out shell. In spite of the architects' skills at accommodating a diverse program within the singular stone

walls, however, a new sense of loss appears. What is disturbing about the re-used Nichols is not what it *will* have, but what is *now* missing: precisely those memories that were evoked by the ruinous Nichols—the

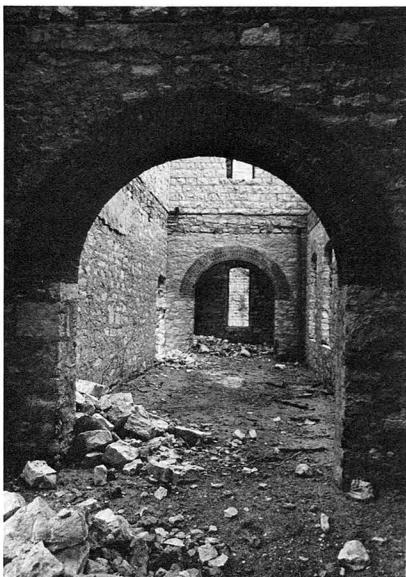
knowledge that it has a history which included a cataclysmic demise, and some sort of visual evidence of "the conflicts between the legacy of the past and the values of the present."³ Time has been eclipsed.



North Elevation, Original.



East Elevation, Shell



South Lobby.

The futility of such a time-stopping attitude toward buildings was discussed by Alois Riegl at the turn of the century. In his essay, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin,"⁴ Riegl argues that age and

time give value to buildings. He points out that "restorative gestures typically conjure up a past that never was and compel the present to acts of homage before a vacant throne."⁵ Riegl provides a systematic framework for the consideration of preservation by defining and analyzing what modern man values in his monuments. He lists three categories and describes specific characteristics attributed to each.

The first category discussed by Riegl is *age-value*.⁶ Riegl claims that certain value is given over to a monument or building simply because of its age. We recognize age in an object due to a number of changes occurring over the passage of time. Natural processes may encourage decay, materials and craftsmanship may become obsolete, or the *Kunstwollen* or style of a particular era may fall from favor. The combination of these changes creates an artifact that can be easily recognized as one whose time is of another

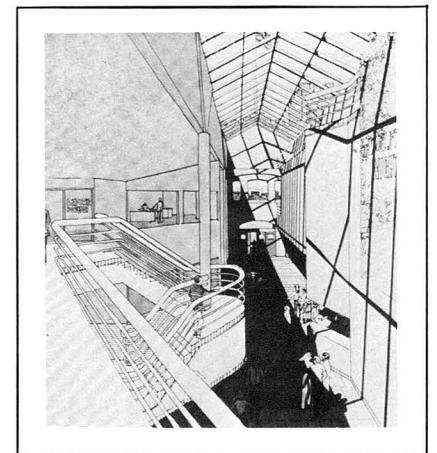
period. In age-value we admire this "otherness"—not the perfection of making, stylistic or technical. Riegl maintains that age-value is the easiest category of monumentality to comprehend; it is the basis of nostalgia and is intuitive and popular. He adds that he believes age-value to be the most relevant category to our modern period.

The second category outlined by Riegl is *historical value*. This he defines as the status or importance attributed to an object due to "the individual stage it represents in the development of human activity in a certain field."⁷ Its value lies in the form the object takes at the moment of that object's creation—its historical importance to civilization. Historical value does not refer to the conservation of traces left by the aging process, but rather points to maintenance of the object in its original condition. Any deterioration or decay is to be avoided, for any change removes the ob-

ject from its appearance at the time of its development and obfuscates any attempt at understanding in terms of the object's historic importance. Riegl observes that a change in an artifact's form may result in a corresponding change in the perception of history.

Third, Riegl discusses *commemorative value*. This category, he argues, makes a "claim to immortality"⁸ and preserves the memory of a person or act in the mind of those who come afterward. A commemorative monument or object fights against the processes of decay. To remain present in perpetuity, it must counter the forces of nature or be continually restored.

Riegl's essay not only enumerates the types of historic monuments that surround us, but concludes by offering suggestions about their treatment as well. In doing so, Riegl goes beyond the common tenets of preservation to recognize the sharply varying roles which old artifacts play at different times in history. *Some objects are carelessly discarded and wilfully destroyed, while others are being collected or restored. What holds for one may be meaningless for another; some buildings attract interest precisely because they have fallen into ruins, and others require careful maintenance to sustain their meaning.*⁹



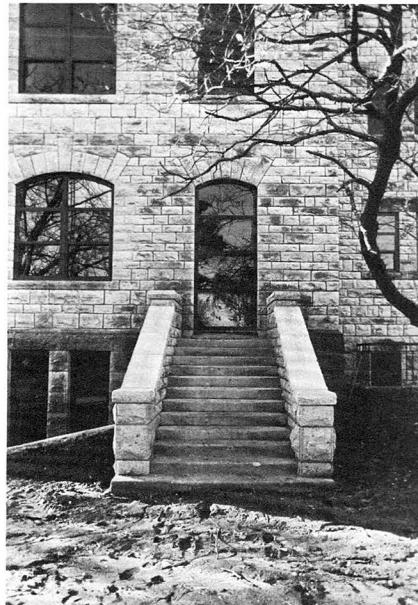
View of New Atrium Lobby.



North Elevation, Renovated.



Entry Elevation, Renovated.



Window Renovation.

This understanding of the contingency and multiple associations of each monument or building that is of importance to Nichols' restoration. If we consider the ruinous Nichols we realize that we respond to it because it contained elements of all the value systems defined by Riegl. Named to honor Ernest R. Nichols, an early University president, it held commemorative value. Its unique design and its unfortunate conflagration, related to timely events, placed it within the category of historical value. Finally, its massive limestone walls,

built with a craftsmanship unattainable by current building technique, and the decay that had set in as a result of the fire combined with ten years of neglect, gave it the nostalgic associations necessary for age-value. We see, therefore, that Riegl's theories about the preservation of monuments are not only usable analytical constructs, but also that Nichols' restoration was a very complex problem consisting of not one or two but three types of modern monumental value. To save Nichols, from Riegl's vantage point, would re-

quire preserving aspects of all three of these "values" whereby we perceive the building's worth. To do less would be to ignore the contingencies discovered in the building and to lessen its importance concerning commemoration, history, or age.

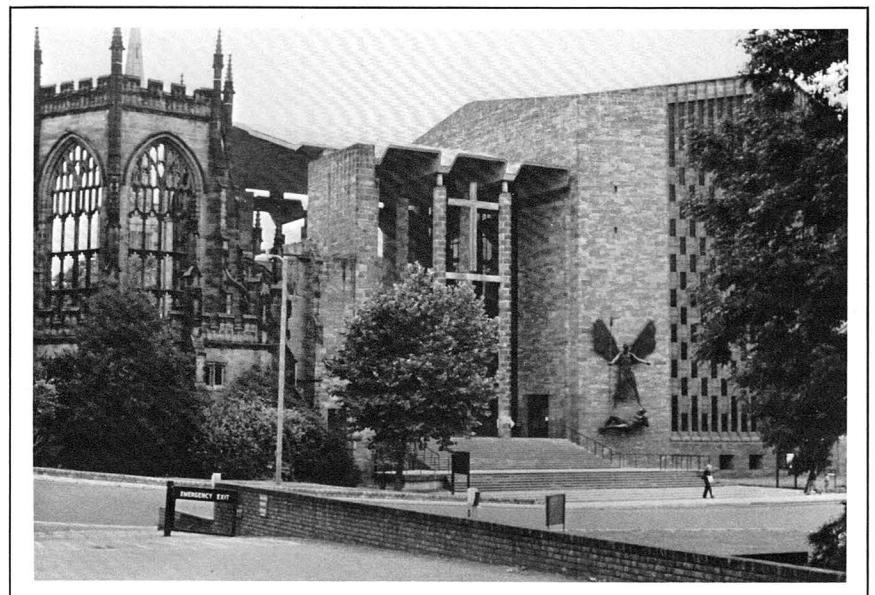
If we examine the new Nichols, however, we see that Riegl's point of view is sorely lacking. The age-value of the ruins has been forgotten. The oldness of Nichols' walls, the ruinous state of their post-inferno condition, indeed, the traces left by time upon the building have been erased. The shell has been completely filled; nowhere is it evident that the creature now inhabiting it is not the original one. New windows fill the once-gaping openings. Metal frames, set disturbingly close to the exterior face of the stonework, feebly represent their wooden predecessors. Their deep shadows have been eliminated, instead presenting a taut surface. No traces of the building's ruinous state are to be found.

Herein lies the problem. An interference with the natural processes of aging in the building has occurred. With the preservation process, the ruins of Nichols have been designed

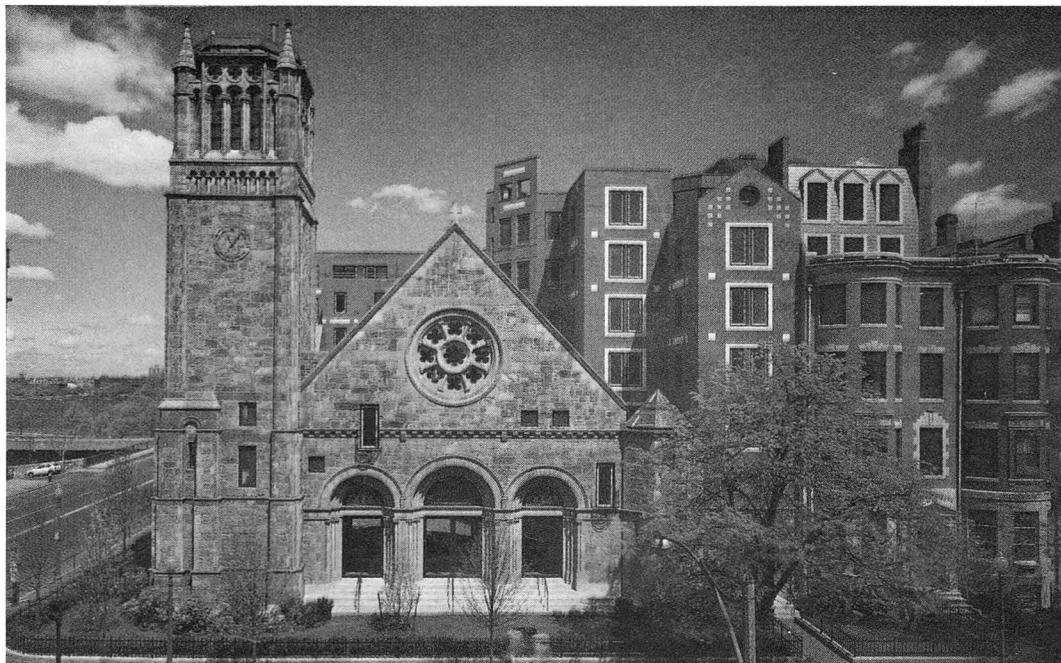
away. The old Nichols has been brought forward perceptually in what amounts to little more than a conspicuous restoration. As Riegl explains:

From man we expect accomplished artifacts as symbols of a necessary process of human production; on the other hand, from nature acting over time, we expect their disintegration as the symbol of an equally necessary passing . . . In the twentieth century we appreciate particularly the purely natural cycle of becoming and passing away. Every artifact is thereby perceived as a natural entity whose development should not be disturbed . . . Nature's reign claims equal right with man's creative power.¹⁰

Nichols' restoration goes against twentieth century notions of the proper treatment of artifacts. The result is a significantly less interesting building than similar examples where ruins have been not merely in-filled, but instead set in juxtaposition to new work. Coventry Cathedral's bombed out shell has been successfully appended by a church of bold and modern design. The ruins are preserved as a memorial to those who died in the war, presenting a more hauntingly powerful image than any reconstruction possibly could (Figure 1). Graham Gund's Church Court Condominiums



The Cathedral Church of Saint Michael, Coventry. Addition 1959.



Church Court Condominiums, Boston, Massachusetts. 1984.



Courtyard

in Boston integrate housing behind the ruined walls of a Back Bay church. Here, the ruins are used both as the exterior walls of housing units and as a screen between city streets and the resident's private courtyard. New construction takes its color, scale, and texture from the old, but playfully counters the ruins, separating itself from and penetrating them with new elements to enhance the juxtaposition (Figure 2). On a local level, a storefront building in Hutchinson,

Kansas suspends the remains of ruined upper stories above the sidewalk, opposing the old stonework with new glass and concrete elements (Figure 3).

In these works, the preservation process has yielded buildings whose value, as Riegl uses the term, lies not merely in the fact that they are commemorative, historic, or aged. Instead, commemoration, history, and the aging process are inextricably linked, each juxtaposed against and adding to the richness and meaning of the others. They are not unlike Roland Barthes' Society of the Friends of the Text where contradictions would be acknowledged (and the risks of ideological imposture thereby restricted), difference would be observed, and conflict rendered insignificant (being unproductive of pleasure)."¹¹

In the case of Nichols, the process of

preservation (through a solution that ignored the possibilities of age-value) has resulted in a loss of meaning—Barthes' pleasure. Instead of a ruin whose empty center stands full of significance, the opposite has been achieved: a ruin whose full center leaves a hollowness in ourselves.

NOTES

1. James Marston Fitch, pamphlet file, Paul Weigel Library, Kansas State University.
2. For a brief history of Nichols Gymnasium see *Dimensions* (supplement to the *Kansas State Collegian*), October 6, 1978, pp. 1-22; K-Stater, November-December, 1983, pp. 2-7; and "Outraged Students Protest Decision to Raze Nichols," *Kansas State Collegian*, April 5, 1979, pp. 1-2. The author would like to thank Castle Crusade and Elizabeth Freese for their assistance in locating these and other pertinent historical documents.
3. Kurt W. Forster. "Monument/Memory and the Mortality of Architecture," *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), p. 15.
4. Alois Riegl. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin,"

translated by Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), pp. 21-51.

5. *Op. cit.*, p. 15.
6. *Op. cit.*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
9. Kurt W. Forster. "Monument/Memory and the Mortality of Architecture," *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), p. 23.
10. *Op. cit.*, p. 32.
11. Roland Barthes. *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller.



Chamber of Commerce, Hutchinson, Kansas. Addition 1975.