

LAST LOOK

F.W. CAULKINS' BUILDING, 85 Genesee Street, Buffalo

John H. Conlin

Twenty years ago it was recommended that the City of Buffalo take special steps to protect the entire block of buildings on Genesee Street between Ellicott and Oak as an outstanding collection of historic buildings. The flagship building of that intact array of urban architecture was an artistic conceit, a tour de force of ambiguity designed by Frederick W. Caulkins circa. 1890.

On a small triangular corner lot, Caulkins' building presented a wide four-story high facade that gave the appearance of a much larger building. The prominent facade was like a billboard propped by the other two walls of the triangle. It came to an acute angle at the exposed corner, presenting a knife-point edge four stories high. At the top of the north-facing facade, a curved glass studio skylight cut into the middle of the building between a pair of ornamental chimneys, incorporating the whole functional ensemble into an abstractly ornamental equivalent of a broken pediment. It was a sort of post-modern ambiguity a century before its time.

The building was designed to house a ground floor jewelry store and a fourth floor photography studio. Frederick J. Dorn, jeweler, and Joseph Altenberg, photographer, were the long time occupants. Part of the "trope" of the building was its appearance of having three cast iron storefronts. The three bays were united under a wide leaded glass transom of "luxfer" glass prisms in a pattern designed by the young Frank Lloyd Wright for the Luxfer Glass Company. The bay at the acute angle was



The sharp edge of the facade makes it appear to be free-standing.
JOHN CONLIN PHOTO 1980

ingeniously used to house an exterior stairway and entrance to the upper floor. The intricate custom-designed cast iron components were cast in Buffalo, including an iron signature block proudly proclaiming: "F.W. Caulkins, Architect."



Detail of the skylight.
JOHN CONLIN PHOTO



Exterior stairway entrance under "luxfer" transom.
JOHN CONLIN PHOTO

This extraordinary piece of architecture came to an end in November, 2002, when neglect, incompetence and mother nature combined to topple it into the street. Ironically, a poorly designed attempt to save the building resulted in its collapse.



Interior of studio, 1997.
PAUL F. REDDING PHOTO

Another extraordinary skylight studio building still survives in the middle of the same block. It was designed by Caulkins' professional rival Richard A. Waite. The block remains an unrecognized architectural treasure in a city that claims to recognize the importance of its architecture. Preservation is making the best of what you already have, but first you need to recognize the value of what you already have.



Richard Waite's skylight studio building, then Charlie Baker Clothier. Note mansard roof on yellow brick building, 1980.
JOHN CONLIN PHOTO



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