The signs are everywhere that the century has grown old—literally almost four score—and in many respects disen- chanted with the more violent passions of its youth. This is certainly true of the contemporary arts in general, among which none questioned the faiths of modernism and the avant-garde earlier than did architecture. Yet unlike some of its more worried sister disciplines, such as painting and sculpture, architecture has gained new life from the very doubts it has cast upon modernism, as well as from its reawakened admiration of the past.

Even the title of Barbara Lee Diamonstein’s timely, well-documented new book about recycled architecture—Buildings Reborn—suggests as much, catching, as Congressman John Brademas observes in his preface, “the redemptive quality associated with a religious commitment.” Brademas goes on to speak of the “irreplaceable” quality of the earlier American heritage, while Diamonstein devotes her own energies to presenting a wide variety of buildings all over the country—95 examples—which have been not only recently saved from demolition but transformed into essentially new and handsome structures with new functions. All this follows a long and highly readable introduction in which she discusses the chief issues pertinent to recycling: its history, its increased urgency in today’s society, its relationship with current thought in architecture and social planning.

Here we touch upon several of the factors that have given architecture a sense of revitalized purpose at a time when so much of the rest of contemporary creativity is in doubt about itself. Through “adaptive reuse,” architecture has begun to find a way of saving its legacy that is far more effective than what Diamondstein calls the old-time “letter-writing campaigns [and] polite protest meetings.” The discovery, as it were, is potentially as important to the art and history of architecture as was the invention of the museum to the art and history of painting. It is the public aspect and utilitarianism of architecture that are saving and reinvigorating it today. (The relatively hermetic elitism of contemporary painting would seem to forestall any comparable development within that art.)

The building “treasures” salvaged by recycling are numerous, as the author recounts through such examples as the Ames-Webster House in Boston, changed from an elaborate Renaissance Revival residence designed by Peabody & Stearns in 1872 to an ensemble of crisp but richly decorated offices, and the 64-room mansion which Babh, Cook & Willard built in 1901-2 for Andrew Carnegie on Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue, more recently the splendid Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design.

Yet Diamonstein makes a point of including some “quite ordinary” examples of historic styles and periods as well, justifying her decision to do so with a quote from Michael Middleton, director of Britain’s Civic Trust: “A town is more than a collection of important buildings. Preserving a limited number of outstanding buildings, while failing to retain and enhance the most modest streets and space that form their proper setting, has been likened to keeping the cherries out of the cake and throwing the cake away.”

Thus we find here the Rainbow Garage in San Francisco, an anonymous and unprepossessing creation of 1922, remade into an addition to a high school, which, though now carefully refined, still manages to communicate in the local vernacular. We also meet an extraordinary, at times implausible (funny, if you will), variety of use changes: from a torpedo factory to an art center (Alexandria, Virginia); from a dairy barn to a shopping center (Ballwin, Missouri); from a residence to an Off-Track Betting parlor (New York City).

When does transformation become transmogrification and the whole issue of recycling a barbarism in its own right? According to the author, when “boutiquefication” sets in, that is, when the simply old is turned into the obviously coy, or into plain kitsch. (The National Trust’s James Biddle notes: “We have to fight constantly against the desire to make a lovely 1890s town look like a 17th-century New England village.”)

Or when “museumization” takes over, which Diamonstein defines as overpreserving or overrecycling. “Do we,” she asks, “a generation from now, save the moldering burger stand because it is an artifact, a reminder of how we once lived?”

She is too respectful of the subject of Buildings Reborn, and too careful a student of it, to answer that one hastily. But she answers a lot, with passion as well as sobriety and an abundance of facts.

—Franz Schulze