

Old Jeff

The new life of Old Jeff has begun with the reopening of the Greenwich Village landmark as a branch public library. The Jefferson Market Courthouse has been Old Jeff to Villagers for a long time—a hulking, “picturesque” Victorian pile of red brick and limestone, its corner clock tower marking one of the city’s curious diagonal intersections with stylish, if sooty, bravado since 1877.

The rescue of Old Jeff from demolition and oblivion is a lesson in citizen and community spirit and how that spirit became power. When the city no longer wanted the old building, its neighbors did. What “couldn’t be done” in New York was found to be possible. Sentiment, used shrewdly, became strength.

But the real lesson of Old Jeff is not only in intelligent citizen action. There is also the lesson that the city can give cooperation when the effort merits it. Most important of all, a clear demonstration is here offered of what valid preservation is all about: the retention of a historic structure for a living function. This is also the hardest way to do the job.

The museum technique, the velvet rope approach, the era-under-glass or history in quarantine, is an easier dodge that denies the real challenge and meaning of a living heritage. That challenge is to use the past to serve the present. The meaning is the enrichment of the eye and heart and the urban scene.

Old Jeff’s solid Victorian eccentricity serves its new purpose well and is welcome counterpoint to the increasing, impersonal blandness of the modern city. We hope there are ghosts in the spiral stair.