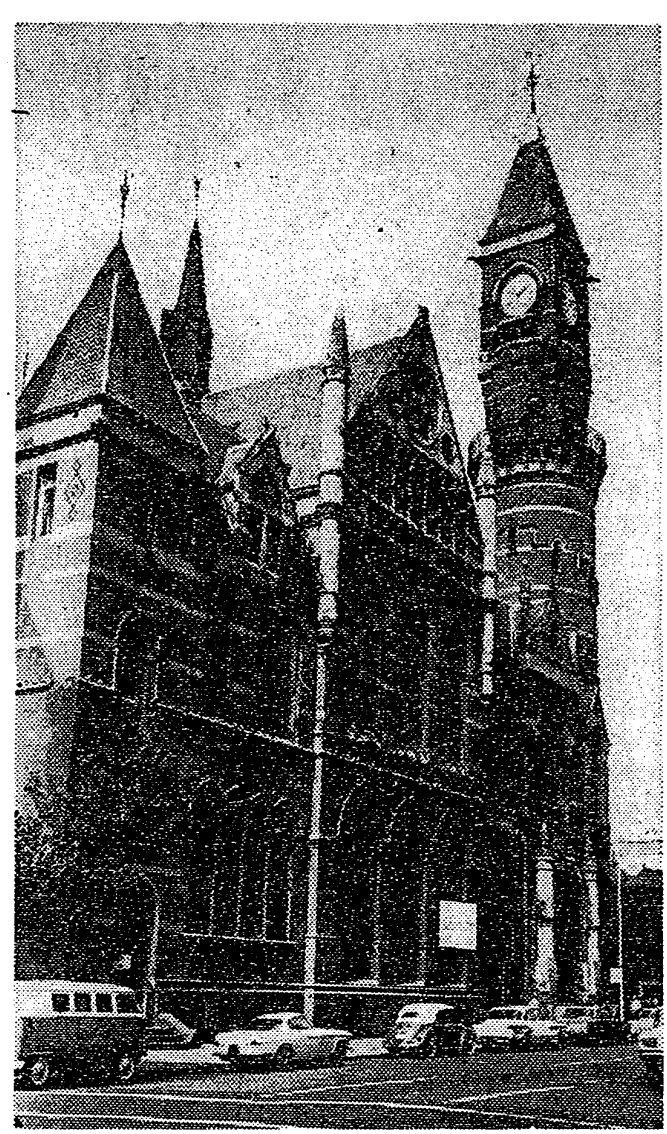
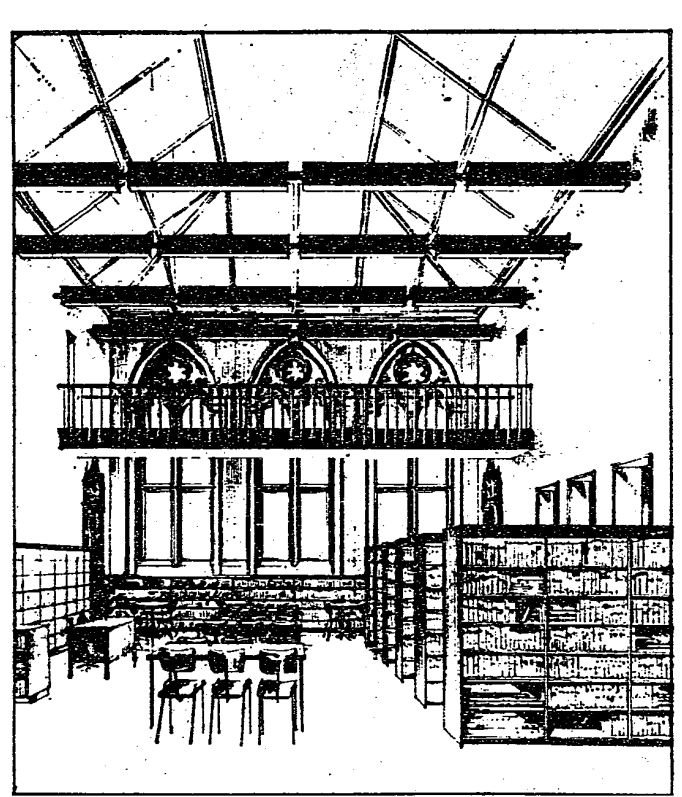


Victorian Landmark in Greenwich Village Is to Be Library Branch



Jefferson Market Courthouse is to be converted to library



Plan of main reading room designed by Giorgio Cavaglieri

The Salvage of Old Jeff

Determination of 'Villagers' to Save Historic Courthouse Proves Effective

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Work is about to begin to convert the Jefferson Market Courthouse, one of New York's gaudiest and most controversial landmarks, into the principal Greenwich Village branch of the New York Public Library.

If the Department of Public Works sign that proclaims the news were graven in gold letters it could not more appropriately honor the efforts of the dedicated band of New Yorkers who have devoted six years to saving a notable, but particularly awkward monument, in a city that saves nothing.

Drawings are now in the Mayor's office for final approval of conversion plans. Specifications will be complete by Friday to be checked by the Bureau of the Budget. Even cautious city officials allow that the effort to save Old Jeff may be on the home stretch.

At a time when New York is considering the passage of landmarks legislation, the saga of Greenwich Village's historic courthouse is a case history of how to go about preserving a building when there isn't any official way to do it.

Study in Achievement

It is also a study in organized public interest, dogged persistence, practical sentimentality and civic savvy—or how to make a determined group of citizens an effective force for the achievement of an objective generally considered hopeless.

They could not have worked with a landmark more widely regarded by the general public as a monster. If New Yorkers saved this one, they can save anything.

Voted one of the 10 most beautiful buildings in the United States when it was constructed in 1876, it has plummeted to the nadir of esteem in the intervening 88 years. An overpowering pile of turrets and gables in polychromed brick, its spiral-staired tower still dominates the Greenwich Village scene. High ceilings, heavy stone walls and unknown structural conditions have presented big problems of conversion.

Actually, the Jefferson Market Courthouse is an exceptionally fine example of the most "picturesque" (an "in" word in the eighteen-seventies) phase of the High Victorian style, which was very stylish; indeed. Called High Victorian Gothic, or Venetian or Ruskinian Gothic, after John Ruskin, one of the greatest tastemakers of all time, its aggressive, colorful bulk bears windows and doors pointed and gazed in the confectionary manner of late 14th-century Gothic buildings in Venice.

Massive Amalgam

The resulting massive amalgam is a major work of two of New York's most important 19th-century architects, Frederick C. Withers and Calvert Vaux. Vaux was also co-designer, with Frederick Law Olmstead, designer of Central Park, of many of the park's original structures.

To transform this chic bit of Victoriana into a workable branch library has been a four-year campaign including more than two years of design study by the consulting architect, Giorgio Cavaglieri, the New York Public Library, which has approved plans after initially resisting the conversion, and the Department of Public Works.

It is being done under a 1964-65 capital budget appropriation of \$868,500, which represents an increase of almost \$200,000 over original estimates, and a higher cost than for a new building on the site. Factors figuring in the cost are 18-to-20-foot ceilings, unpredictable wall conditions and unknown structural details, since no complete record of the building exists.

City officials, including the Department of Public Works, are philosophical about the expense. "There are amazing amounts of really beautiful stone and granite in that building," a spokesman for the department said. "And it's of ex-

trema importance to many people in the area."

A group of interested Greenwich Village citizens had been watching the courthouse since 1952, when they were alerted to its merit by Alan Burnham, an architectural historian. Its shabby condition suggested that its years were numbered.

Spurred by Margot Gayle, a long-time Village resident and a leader of concern in the community, the Committee of Neighbors to Get the Clock on the Jefferson Market Courthouse Started was formed in 1958, as a shrewdly sentimental gesture designed to focus attention on the building. It took two years to raise \$3,000, but in 1960 the clock was electrified and became a beacon for the preservation campaign.

Also by 1960, the city-owned structure had become what might be called a sooty red elephant and the Department of Real Estate was seeking means of disposing it. In accordance with municipal custom, all city departments were checked for a possible user before putting the building up for auction. No one wanted it.

However, private interest was not lacking. Because the site is superb—a central Village location and one of the few odd-shaped, focal lots formed by the crossing of New York's gridiron street pattern with earlier thoroughfares — investment institutions eyed it favorably.

Possibilities Studied

With the assistance of professionals, including Stanley Tinkel of the Regional Plan Association, the Village committee had been studying preservation possibilities and was convinced that the courthouse would make an excellent branch library. It re-formed in 1961 as the Committee for a Library in the Jefferson Market Courthouse. The new committee was headed by a lawyer, Philip Wittenberg, and membership ranged from representatives of the American Institute of Architects to the Gotham Kennel Club.

As the start of a presentation and pleading route that led from official to official and department to department, a promise of a hold on the property was obtained from Borough President Edward R. Dudley. "He was our first hero," Mrs. Gayle said.

From there, the committee carried its presentation to James Felt, then chairman of the City Planning Commission; Abraham Beame, who was Budget Director; to the City Council and Board of Estimate meetings, and finally, to the Mayor. All reacted in approved heroic fashion. Approval of the project and the necessary appropriation followed this year.

When work is completed, the outside will look much as it did when the courthouse was acclaimed as one of America's beauties—cleaned and restored, or "refreshed," in the words of the architect, Mr. Cavaglieri. The emphasis inside will also be on authenticity.

Modern library facilities will be set into the period shell in the most functional and contemporary fashion—there will be no fake Victorian or "antiqued touches." Only functional changes will be made, such as a simple bridge across the 37-foot high reading room to connect staff lounges with a stairway and elevators.

It looks like a happy ending for Old Jeff. What started in a front room in a private Village house has apparently ended as the successful salvaging of a major Victorian monument, an effort that the city has yet to meet or match.