

A Plan of Taste

Design for Wing at Gracie Mansion Overcomes Some Awkward Problems

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

After the proposal last year for an addition to Gracie Mansion that had all the charm and suitability of a suburban garage, this year's revised design is notable for its scholarly and appropriate good taste.

The new wing will be a studiously detailed 18th century reproduction—one of the few

An
Appraisal

cases where instant-18th century can be justified because enlarging Gracie Mansion poses some partic-

ularly sensitive and awkward design problems.

This house, one of the city's scant handful of Georgian treasures, has been a particularly felicitous, if increasingly cramped, residence for New York's Mayors, whose official life and functions have long since outgrown its dainty domestic elegance. The new wing will move those functions out of the old house, which will serve only as the Mayor's home, with its landmark character carefully maintained.

A Modest Mansion

Gracie is a small house, modest as Georgian mansions go. Almost anything would dwarf or belittle it.

Larger, more ornate buildings, like baroque monuments, take extensions well. They gain by carefully related contemporary additions. The new and the old complement each other esthetically and historically with far greater richness than would be achieved by dry imitation of the past. Gracie's unpretentiousness might well have resisted a radical contemporary solution.

Nevertheless, it would have been instructive to see what might have been done in today's terms. One New York archi-

tect, Edgar Tafel, has made some satisfactory new additions to older and landmark structures in the city. Another, Ulrich Frazen, has executed a prize-winning modern enlargement of a traditional building.

A notable Georgian-style house that has solved a similar problem with distinction is the later and larger Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington. Its modern glass exhibition pavilion has been added by Philip Johnson with exemplary style and finesse. But the main house is a monumental brick structure, and the new wing, shielded by shrubbery, is a small, glittering grace note.

Not Large Enough

New York's diminutive 18th-century frame dwelling is not large enough, or imposing enough, to take this treatment except in the most skilled hands.

Certainly the safest answer is the 18th century reproduction proposed. It will be carried out by a specialist in this kind of work, Mott B. Schmidt, associated with Edward Coe Embury and F. Burrall Hoffman, under the watchful eye of the Landmarks Preservation Commission and a public-spirited citizens committee.

For any other purpose, the new wing's careful copying of the Ticknor House doorway in Boston and a McIntyre ballroom in Waltham would be sterile and meaningless. The insertion of a genuine 18th century mantel removed from a room demolished during the current reconstruction of New York's landmark Watson House at 7 State Street would be ironic. The purchase of a superb antique Bristol chandelier and the modern manufacture of matching wall sconces would be questionable.

But the aim here is harmony and the most discreetly complementary extension of an 18th century landmark that can be devised.

It leads, of course, to more imitations—reproduction 18th century furniture to take the punishment of constant official use. At the same time, donations of genuine 18th century examples will be sought for other furnishings, as at the White House.

The distinction that must be made scrupulously clear, however, is that this is not a White House, although comparisons will be frequent. This fact does not make the campaign to carry out its construction and furnishing any less worthy of support.

But Gracie Mansion will be an 18th century house with a 20th century addition furnished with a mixture of modern copies and antiques. This difference is something that everyone is likely to forget very quickly on completion because the "period" flavor of the new wing will be tasteful, elegant and appropriate, and in terms of real vs. reproduction, attractively confusing.

Confusion Exists

Such confusion is distressingly common. Frances Tavern, for example, constantly referred to as an 18th century landmark, is a 20th century building. This 1907 reconstruction is only a scholarly guess at what the original tavern was like, guided by the site, some original framing and an old roofline on an adjoining building.

The Gracie Mansion proposal is an eminently well considered solution to a special problem. But to those who view with alarm the increasing confusion in the public mind of real with reproduction—by proper definition an "authentic" copy cannot be anything authentic at all—some dangers are involved.

In some of the sponsors' minds a good copy, as long as it is 18th century, seems to rank just about as high as an original work of art.