ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Recycling A Landmark For Today

After a series of vicissitudes, the Brotherhood Synagogue, formerly located on West 13th Street, and the Friends' Meeting House, on Gramercy Square, have found each other. The result is an admirable demonstration of appropriate contemporary reuse of a historic structure through sensitive rehabilitation, and the preservation of a building that is as lovely, architecturally, as it is important to the New York scene.

The Brotherhood Synagogue is no stranger to historic buildings. For a number of years, its members shared the Village Presbyterian Church, a Greek Revival temple in the West Village built in 1846. When an ideological falling out in 1973 led to a diminution of brotherhood, the Synagogue found itself looking for a new home.

Meanwhile, back on Gramercy Square, the Meeting House was on a course of self-destruction. The Society of Friends transferred some of their activities to their meeting house on Stuyvesant Square in 1958, and maintenance all but ceased. That was actually one year short of the hundredth anniversary of the church's construction in 1859 by New York architects Gamaliel King and John W. Kellum.

In 1965, an option was given by the Friends to a developer who planned to demolish the church for a 30-story apartment house. In an effort to protect it, the building was designated a New York landmark. Neighborhood alarm led to the creation of a foundation for the purchase of the church, with the ambitious but uncertain goal of using it as a center for the performing arts. When that idea failed, the building was sold to the United Federation of Teachers, which hoped to utilize it for meetings and offices.

This, too, did not work out. The UFT, in turn, decided to sell. All through these maneuvers the church continued to deteriorate. It was structurally sound, but a bad roof and open joints in the solid masonry walls led to leaks and water damage that left the interior ankle-deep in fallen plaster and debris.

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This year, the Brotherhood Synagogue bought the building. The price was $420,000 and the terms were generous, with all parties clearly concerned about preservation. To date, the Synagogue has spent about $180,000 on careful, basic-essentials-only restoration; even air conditioning has been deferred, although provisions have been made for it in the reconstruction.

Both the architect, James Polshek, and the contractor, Lawrence Held and Son, have worked without fee. Money is a continuing problem, with about $25,000 in workmens' bills still to be paid, and another $20,000 needed to clean and point the olive limestone walls, so that the open joints will not threaten the painstaking restoration inside.

The interior is a particularly lovely thing to see. This is a space of classical, formal elegance and spare simplicity. It is also a superb space, just one foot short of square, two generous stories high, scaled by the tall, clear windows that run nearly full building height. The plain wooden pews were brought from an older church at the time of construction. The architect has painted the walls a delicate tint of blue (*pace*, preservation purists) with creamy-white trim; the pews are a dark walnut tone.

This is, in fact, truly a beautiful building—beautiful both in that sense of space and in the justness of proportion and detail that any good architect knows are the basics of design. And King and Kellum were good architects. It is interesting to see how one architect takes another's esthetic pulse, even with a century between; Mr. Polshek pays generous tribute to the talents of the original designers.

The building is in what the Victorians called the Italianate style—a melange of near-Renaissance motifs strong on cornices, pediments and round-headed windows. It was a style that both King and Kellum, as fashionable architects, favored. They had, together and separately, a large commercial practice which included those "newest" of palaces in cast-iron, the pair's Cary Building of 1856 and Kellum's A. T. Stewart store (later Wanamaker's) of 1862, both on Broadway. The Cary Building was made of the stylish architectural prefabs of Daniel Badger's Architectural Iron Works of New York.

But the meeting house was far less wordly and ornate. In "History Preserved" by Harmon Goldstone (a former chairman of New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission) and Martha Dalrymple, the Gramercy Park church is described as "austere, as are all Quaker meeting houses, [with] a dignified richness from the contrast between plain wall surfaces and the arched pediment that is supported on consoles over the wide central doorway. A beautifully proportioned triangular pediment crowns the building as a whole."

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Mr. Polshek notes that the architect dealing with an old building becomes involved with the minutiae of preservation —how to replace exterior lights that were somehow disposed of; how to provide fire code exits without cutting into the sanctuary; whether to strip, regrain or repaint wood. There were considerations of historical accuracy, functional needs (relatively simple), structural soundness (fine, except for the need to repoint the masonry), and building code requirements (a technicality made it possible to file under the old code, which helps). There were also questions of the functional and esthetic aspects of mechanical equipment. New plumbing, wiring and lighting had to be installed; windows were carefully cleaned and painted and glass replaced.

The aim of the architect has been to respect what he calls, perceptively, "the conceptual unity of the space," an approach at once subtle and aware and amenable to the necessary adjustments of conversion. There is no attempt to restore everything "back" to a real or imagined period accuracy; it would be both foolish and costly. The objective is a working building, not a stage-set reproduction.

The choice of a color that was not used originally (the 1850's favored shades of puce) does no design or structural damage. The use of architectural rather than period lighting—Paul Marantz was lighting consultant—enhances the building's greatest beauty, its simple, expressive spatial quality, with both understanding and taste. The original fabric is dealt with in a spirit of sensitive realism. There is no architectural violation. The result demonstrates that most desirable and least achieved of all preservation objectives: the skillful recycling of an older structure for contemporary purposes with those delicate and difficult compromises that are essential to its continued life.

The restored building meets the congregation's religious, secular, administrative and educational needs. Mr. Polshek says he and the client are two-thirds of the way home. The $75,000 still needed is a modest sum, but it must be raised in difficult times. Everyone on the job is totally involved; the construction workers came to the first Friday night services.

The building also meets a universal need to touch base with the past, to savor timeless esthetic excellence, to enjoy an essential and enriching aspect of New York life. In art and amenity, it is beyond price.