ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Our 'Expendable' Churches Are Too Good to Expend

The British call them redundant churches—redundant in the dictionary meaning of superfluous. They are churches that have lost their congregations, vitality, finances and functions. They are clearly marked for the bulldozer. And they are redundant, or superfluous, in the larger sense of no longer serving traditional community and spiritual values in a time of radical social and economic flux.

And yet, are they always expendable? Do they still have values that are important to people and cities? Are they more than the source of a welcome slice of sky or a picturesque silhouette amid the massed, impersonal construction that blots out both sky and spirit in the modern city?

The answer is obviously complex. These buildings can be beautiful or ugly, architectural treasures or replaceable mediocrities. Certainly not all are immortal. But they embody periods of history and crystallizations of style that are essential to urban quality, references that may paradoxically gain strength as the original purpose weakens. They provide a kind of anchor to the past, an identity of place and testament to human endeavor without which cities are increasingly amorphous and alienating.

This fact is being recognized as the problem of preservation worsens. The news is full of examples of redundant churches. In this country, they are called underused church property. Last week, in New York, there was an announcement that the Presbytery of New York plans to dissolve the remaining congregation of the Village Church, a particularly lovely Greek Revival temple on West 13th Street, and will consider options for the use of the building. An 18th-century fieldstone church in Mt. Vernon, kept alive by a commuting Bronx congregation, is faced with the alternatives of irretrievable deterioration or being turned into a museum instead of a house of worship—a Pyrrhic victory, at best. But the prospect for most underused churches is that of becoming a parking lot.

The Cheswick Center, a non-profit group in Cambridge, Mass., whose purpose is the improvement of institutional service to the public, has specifically set out to find answers to the problem. A just-published report called "Underused Church Properties: A Variety of Solutions" summarizes the proceedings of the First International Conference on Alternate Uses of Church Property held last May at Trinity Church in New York under the sponsorship of the Center, with partial funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Some encouraging examples of salvation of the architectural variety are given, but what comes out of reading the report is an almost searing awareness of the difficulties involved and the depth of the concern being expressed.

The dimensions of the dilemma were made clear by Beverly Moss Spatt, chairman of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, who stated that 80 percent of nearly 150 ecclesiastical structures designated as landmarks in New York are in trouble. The Reverend George H. Woodard of Trinity Parish noted that Trinity, which has the joyful or dubious distinction, depending on one's point of view, of having all six of the Parish's churches designated, must pay maintenance costs of close to $1 million a year. Virtually no churches, anywhere, are self-supporting in terms of use versus land values and upkeep and operation; endowments are as shrunken by inflation as membership is by attrition and change.

Recognition of the ways in which the church's role is changing can give hope as well as despair. Its increasingly activist role in the community reflects the complex social problems of today's world. The church has moved into areas of service such as day care centers, drug and delinquency rehabilitation and job training; it is a refuge for disturbed youth and the lonely old and the disaffected of all ages, a place to communicate and find a sense of self and peace.

But none of this, alas, produces any money; in fact, it requires money far beyond the means of most religious groups to run these programs. And so, while the ample and frequently beautiful churches of tradition are often saved from obsolescence by these contemporary activities, the cost of the elaborate structures are one more insupportable burden.

In New York, underused church properties are threatened in every neighborhood and at every level. All Angels' Episcopal Church at 80th Street and West End Avenue, a fine structure by one of New York's most distinguished 19th-century architects, John B. Snook, is looking for a new user who will appreciate Tiffany glass and Karl Bitter sculpture. One of the city's most impressive architectural white elephants, St. Paul the Apostle on Ninth Avenue, with a galaxy of ecclesiastical arts, has been kept out of the hands of developers only by the building recession.

There are constant rumors that handsome, historic St. George's, an integral part of Stuyvesant Square, is flirting with the fiscal brink. St. Mark's in the Bowery, one of the city's most revered landmarks with a remarkably active community program, needs approximately $700,000 in rehabilitation funds. The Villard Houses, owned by the Catholic Archbishopric of New York, are embroiled in controversial development plans. Examples are endless. And a devastating blow has been dealt to church property in New York by the court's reversal of the landmark designation of the Lutheran Church House (the old Morgan Mansion) on Madison Avenue.

But there are also successes. The Brotherhood Synagogue has sensitively reclaimed the unused Friends' Meeting House on Gramercy Park. Frederick Withers' empty and abandoned Church of the Good Shepherd on Roosevelt Island has been restored for multi-denominational use by the new community being developed there now. The Grace Church houses on Fourth Avenue, after an epochal struggle, are being saved as part of a new school. St. Pauls' Lutheran Church on Lexington Avenue negotiated its old building for a replacement geared to the needs of the 1970's, as a remarkable part of Citicorp's package of massive new construction. Numerous smaller churches are serving as off-off Broadway theaters.

Surveys of the state of church properties are being made by the private, non-profit New York Landmarks Conservancy and the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. John Zuccotti, the new First Deputy Mayor and former chairman of the City Planning Commission, has suggested a task force of city agencies, community boards and religious institutions. The matter is clearly moving into the area of public policy as well as private action.

There is no lack of agreement on the need to try to keep many of these structures as part of the city fabric. But there is an understandable attitude among the clergy that they are more concerned with the salvation of souls than of property. One finds a constant theme of "people, not buildings" running through the discussion from those actually saddled with the financial burdens.

However, the issue is not that simple. Those things that nurture the spirit, beyond essential faith and basic survival, are rooted in values of community, environment and identity. Not least is the perception and effect of history and beauty that adds so immeasurably to the human sense of worth.