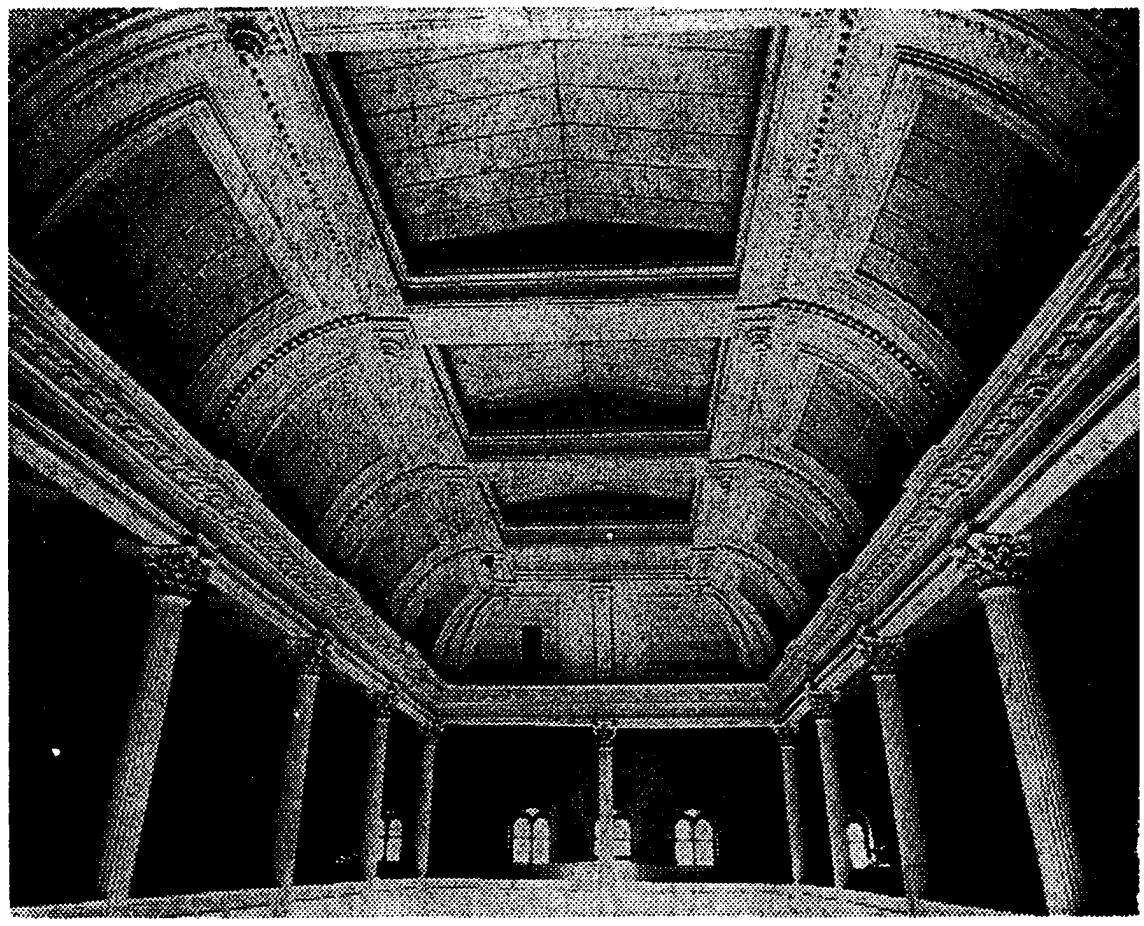
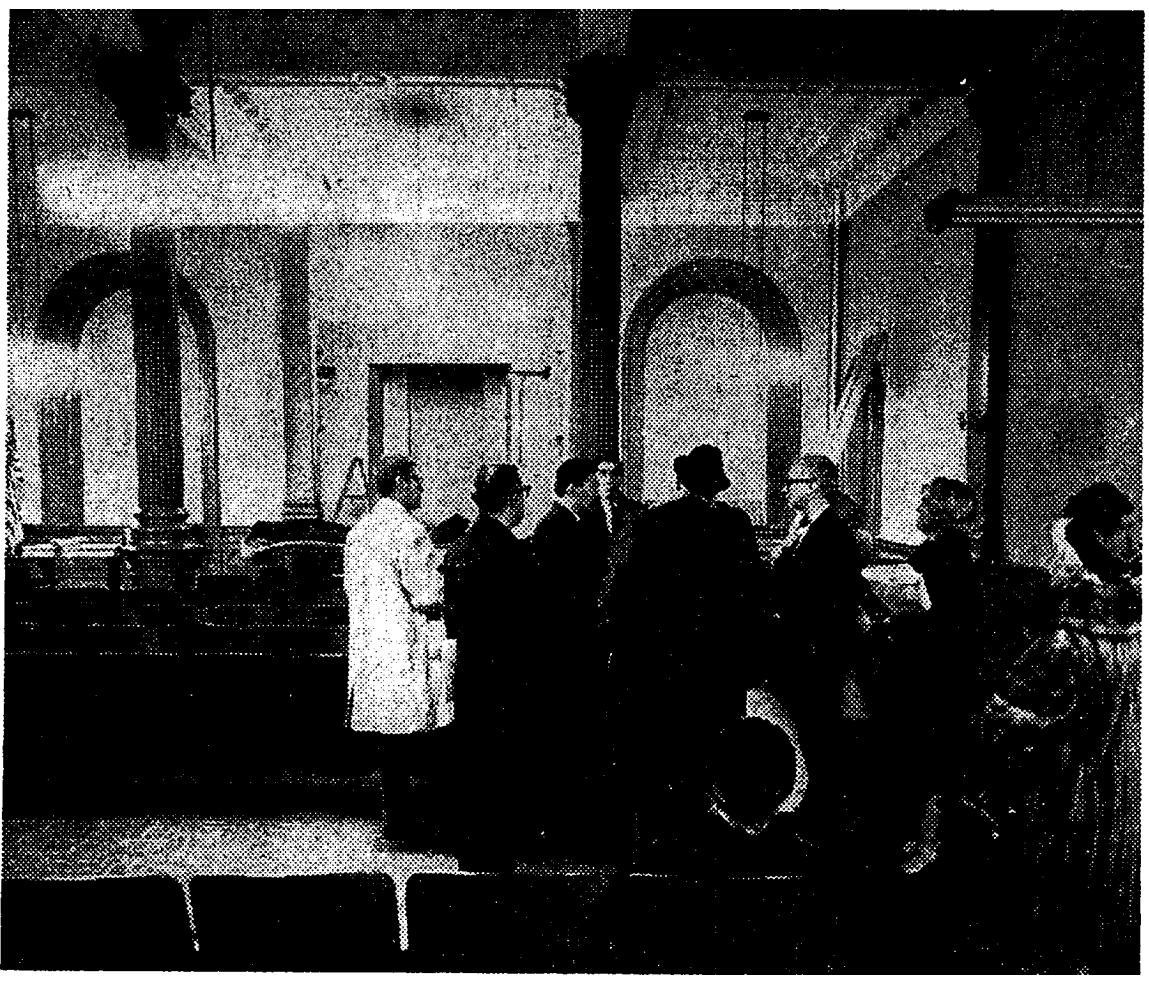


View of upper part of center hall, which will house main theater. Larger of two theaters in the building, with 800 seats, it will not be ready when structure opens in October.



The New York Times (by Jack Manning)

Visitors inspect first floor of building. It will be remodeled and this part will be made into a 200-seat theater. Admissions of $2.50 to $3 a seat are planned for performances.

A Landmark Is Saved

Historic Building Scheduled for Razing Is Rescued With Aid of City's New Law

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York City has scored its first major preservation success under its 18-month old landmarks law with the dramatic announcement of Joseph Papp's plans to purchase the old Astor Library on Lafayette Street as the Shakespeare Festival's new home. Scheduled for the wrecker's ball six months ago, the miraculous last-ditch rescue of the Victorian red brick and brownstone structure is a bit of appropriate 19th-century melodrama calculated to make any 20th-century cynic's heart melt. On a less emotional level, it may also indicate the power of the New York landmarks law to turn the tide in the fortunes of the city's historic heritage.

An Appraisal

The Astor Library was New York's most celebrated cultural and architectural monument when it was constructed in the 1850's. A century of urban change turned it into one of the city's more notable white elephants, fated to go the way of Penn Station and the Brokaw mansion since last July.

At that time it was sold by its most recent owners, United HIAS Service, the Hebrew Immigrant Air Society, to a real-estate development group called Lithos Properties, Inc., after a fruitless search for a preservation-minded buyer. A 14-page contract stipulated that the building must be torn down for an apartment house, and the deal was sealed with a deposit.

"If ever a building looked cooked, this was it," a spokesman for the Landmarks Preservation Commission said. All of the conventional strikes were against it—age, awkwardness, unfashionable Victorian style, expense and technical problems of remodeling, and a neighborhood teetering between improvement and further deterioration. It was a familiar episode to New Yorkers grown accustomed to seeing the city's history systematically reduced to rubble. Only the ending of the story was different.

For the first time, the delaying action made possible by the legal machinery of landmark designation held off demolition long enough to seek arrangements for the building's preservation and re-use. With the authority of the new law behind it, and the building listed for public hearing on its landmark designation in September, the Landmarks Commission was able to bring the buyer and seller together in its offices to try to find a way out.

Stalled for Time

Actually, the commission was using the law to stall and maneuver, since it is still possible for an owner to raze a building any time during hearings, before official designation. This is one of the weaknesses of the landmarks law.

"We didn't have the faintest idea what would happen," said a commission staff member. "Everyone was very cooperative, but the buyers were pretty confident we couldn't find anybody. We were still playing for time."

Both HIAS and the purchasers testified against designation at the September hearing. In October, the building was declared a landmark. In October, also, Mr. Papp came to the

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commission to look for a landmark building for his theater. He suggested one or two that might be suitable; the commission countered with the Astor Library.

Restored and remodeled, the theater will bring glamour back to what was once the most stylish area of New York. The building was the height of fashion when it opened in 1854; listed as "Italianate" by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, it was described as "Byzantine" in accounts of the day.

A Cultural Showpiece

"The exterior is graceful, the interior is light as a house of glass," one guidebook boasted. "As it has no artificial light, the building must be closed at sunset." All distinguished visitors toured the library, which was the city's cultural showpiece, presumably before dark.

Three architects built its matching sections as the library expanded. The south wing, by Alexander Saeltzer, went up from 1849 to 1853; the central section was the work of Griffith Thomas, from 1856 to 1859; the north wing was completed by Thomas Stent from 1879 to 1881.

Inside, from south to north, the chronology of construction is a fascinating record of mid-century progress from solid stone to light iron, demonstrating the switch from masonry to metal that eventually made the skyscraper possible.

Even more important than the act of architectural preservation, however, is the effect of this kind of "spot renewal" on the city's physical health. Many planners believe that dispersal of cultural facilities can do more to revitalize ailing neighborhoods than the concentration of a monolithic performing arts center in one place.

The lessons are therefore threefold. First, there is the potential demonstration of the community renewal value of historic preservation.

Second, there is the clear fact that without the hard-won preservation law there would have been no time to explore solutions and no official civic body empowered to do so in the public interest.

Third, without clients with the practical imagination and sense of historic and esthetic values to work with a landmark structure for contemporary use, the law would be meaningles.

The result of the fortuitous combination of these three factors is the miracle on Lafayette Street, and new hope for the New York scene.