

# 'Old Jeff's' Conversion

## *Preservation of 'Village' Courthouse Marks Triumph of Will Over Reality*

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Avenue of the Americas is a long way from the Grand Canal. The Jefferson Market Courthouse was built on the avenue as the 19th-century idea of what a 14th-century Venetian building looked like.

It has been called Venetian Gothic (or Victorian or Ruskinian Gothic),

An but about all it

Appraisal had in common with the Italianate

splendors of the city of San Marco were the pigeons. "Old Jeff" was a kind of building that came to New York by way of England and that eminent Victorian, John Ruskin, a Venetian buff whose taste-making writings were the most elegant esthetic hard-sell in history.

After its polychromed tower and gables were completed by Frederick C. Withers and Calvert Vaux in 1877 it was voted one of the 10 most beautiful buildings in the United States.

In the 20th century, dingy and neglected, it became, successively, odd city offices, Public Works Department storage space and surplus city real estate. Any popularity poll would have made it one of the 10 homeliest buildings in the United States. It also became a cause célèbre of architectural preservation.

The Jefferson Market Courthouse has now been saved, restored and remodeled in defiance of all credulity and all odds.

In New York, the odds against history are appalling. A jungle of building codes and agency requirements, cre-

ative inertia, political fears and pure red tape make the preservation of a building such as this a factual and physical impossibility.

How, then, does a plain, old relic become a stunning new branch library? How does a structure of awkward Victorian grotesquery survive the ruthless rule of the city's real estate economics? It is an architectural Horatio Alger story.

Essentially, enough stubborn, sentimental, highly articulate, politically shrewd people cared for its homely virtues. Greenwich Villagers wanted their courthouse. Experts recognized it as one of

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New York's best examples of High Victorian style.

Its champions used every bit of leverage, from the services of local planners and architects, student studies and professional surveys to the vote implications of petitions with thousands of signatures. They turned them all to the persuasion of top city officials and the defeat of a municipal obstacle course of bureaucracy and unconcern.

That this was done, even before landmarks legislation was passed, is proof of the triumph of will over "reality." It was a tour de force of intelligent obstinacy. The implied moral is that this may be the only way to make the city operate.

The architect of the conversion (appropriately Venetian before he became a New Yorker) is Giorgio Cavaglieri, who is also engaged in the preservation of the old Astor Library, now the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater.

## **Old and New Blended**

In the conversion, he has clearly defined new and old. The old has been copied only where it has been replaced. Everything that has been added—lights, doors and all new elements such as a railed catwalk across the main, 37-foot high room to make the required connection between staff quarters and new stairs—is clearly contemporary in material and style.

The entrance to the old circular stair tower is through a new, sleek glass door set into the old carved limestone. A wheel of ornamented

Victorian tie-rods is spotlighted at the top of the stair.

New lighting in the high main room, fluorescent by requirement, is suspended in articulated black boxes without violence to Gothic windows or General Grant doorways. (See, for contrast, the harm that insensitive fluorescent installations has done to the balcony level of Carrere and Hastings's classically magnificent 42d Street main library.) The basement reference room, one of the building's most delightful spaces, is a low, vaulted chamber of softly aged salmon-pink brick columns and arches sandblasted of layers of old gray paint.

The library, which came around to the idea of using Old Jeff slowly and reluctantly, has selected its own built-in furnishings. Someone, unfortunately, likes orange chairs.

The conversion of Old Jeff cost twice as much as the standardized warehouse type of construction currently favored by the New York Public Library for an equivalent number of books and seats. The building gives more than twice as much to its users and the city. It is a library and a landmark.

The atmosphere in which literature and knowledge are dispensed is part of a cultural package. Today is the fashion to offer a kind of statistical, book-counting culture in visually illiterate surroundings. At Old Jeff there is also the literature of architecture: cut stone faces and flowers, spiral stairs, soaring stained glass windows, the feeling, form and sensibility of another age. This, too, is the record of civilization.