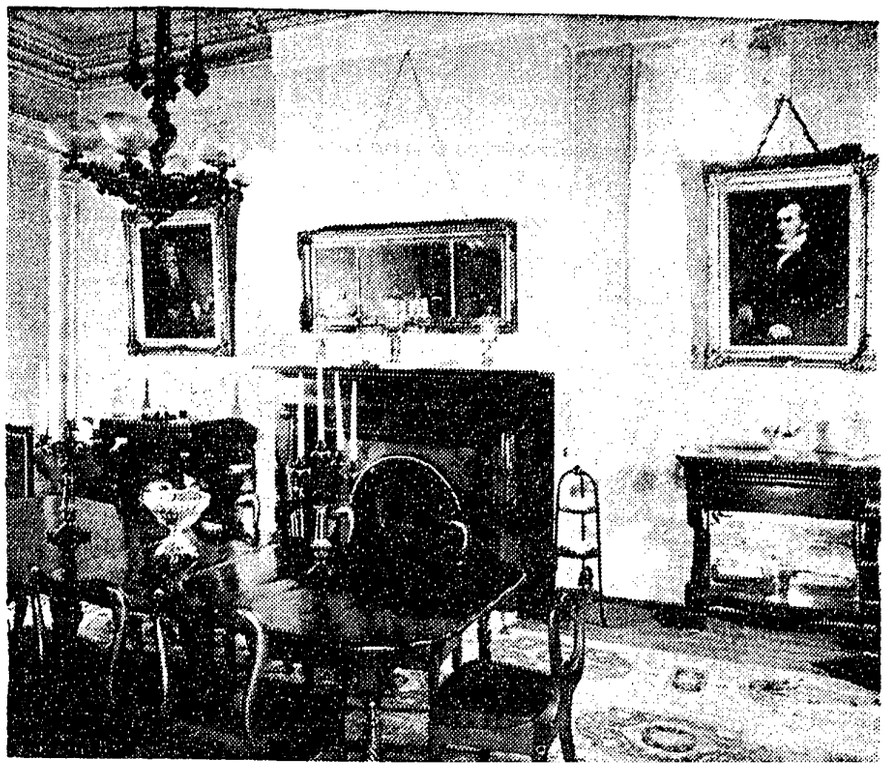
The Old Lady of 29 East Fourth St.
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 18, 1972; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D22

Architecture

The Old Lady of 29 East Fourth St.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



Dining room of Old Merchant's House, New York, with water-damaged wall, right
"Help came when things were close to the bottom line"

THE scaffolding is up at the Old Merchant's House. It is not destruction, but victory of a sort. The roof is about to be repaired and loose bricks are being replaced.

It has been touch and go for several years whether the Greek Revival Seabury Tredwell House of 1832 at 29 East Fourth Street was simply going to be allowed to tumble down. An officially designated national and city landmark, it has been slowly disintegrating on a casually grubby street littered with the cheap wine bottles of easy oblivion, its original furnishings, unspoiled by later decorating vanities, ready to crumble at a touch.

Since 1936, after the death of the last Tredwell daughter in 1933, the Old Merchant's House has been owned and operated as a museum by the private, nonprofit Historic Landmark Society. Valiant attempts to meet preservation costs by the Decorators Club, whose dedicated members have been giving money and raising funds for the past eight years, have failed to produce much more than was needed for minimum maintenance, much less major repairs.

*

The tragedy of New York is not that nobody cares—New Yorkers care intensely—but that nobody notices. There is just too much high-decibel disaster competing for attention. That bland heedlessness is the ultimate cruelty of the big city—for people and things.

With a little gentle prodding and publicity, the sad plight of the Old Merchant's House finally was noticed, when things were close to the bottom line. Last year, the New York State Historic Trust gave the house $30,000 from the yearly lump sum allocated for preservation to New York State by the Department of the Interior. It had to be matched, and this was done by $20,000 from the Mable Brady Garvin Foundation, $5,000 from the Fund for the City of New York, $3,000 from a generous and caring New York couple, Mr. and Mrs. Robert W. Wilson, $1,500 raised by the Village Homeowners Association, and another $1,500 raised by the Decorators Club.

This year the Historic Trust has given an additional $12,000, which is also in the process of being matched. Of these total funds, about $40,000 is currently committed to structural work—roof, exterior walls, windows, etc.—all emergency repairs. The building is closed to the public while the work is being done.

In all, it is estimated that the house, inside and out, can use $250,000 worth of work. In the interiors, the first task will be to rehang and restore the elegant, leak-soaked, ornamental plaster ceilings before they fall. Painting is essential. The furniture needs cabinet work and upholstery. The original carpet must be matched by special weaving, and the curtains must be replaced.

*

The man in charge of structural restoration is Joseph Roberto, New York University architect, who has lavished years of extracurricular care and concern on the building's problems. He is cooperating closely with the Landmarks Preservation Commission, because under the New York City landmarks law, the Commission must approve whatever is done to the outside. The inside is another matter.

Although exterior restoration is treated as an exacting art and science, interiors are often left to the ladies—no female chauvinism intended—who are apt to be more enthusiastic than knowledgeable, or when knowledgeable, more interested in charming and rich effects suitable to contemporary sensibilities than a less appealing authenticity. They make it tasteful—according to today's decorator taste.

The result is that most restored houses look as if they'd had the same decorator. They are all, if you will pardon the expression, Williamsburged. The furnishings tend to be "traded up" to museum caliber. "Improvements" are irresistible. Almost inevitably, they are over-Scalamandréd; the generosity of that fine fabric house in reproducing silks for stylish draperies has probably overswagged more old windows than you could shake a valance at. Erudite guesswork ranges from gentle fudging to outright fakery, but the result is the loss, or perversion, of something real.

And so, although this is counting one's eggs prematurely because a lot of money remains to be raised, one trembles a bit for the Old Merchant's House. I, for one, would almost rather see the original interiors turn gently to dust than see a chic "restoration."

*

The Decorators Club, a fine professional group which has literally kept this landmark together with not much more than love and spit, is not immune to this disease. The house has already been given an entrance floor of black and white marble—a fashionable decorator cliché that is totally inaccurate here—and one prays that this is not an augury of things to come.

Stylistically, the Old Merchant's House crosses the border between Federal and Greek Revival, tipping well toward Greek Revival. But it is referred to by the Decorators Club, in its fund-raising literature, as Federal. "Federalizing" the Greek Revival is still one of this country's more pernicious preservation sins. One devoutly hopes that the handwriting is not on the parlor wall, or the entrance floor.

The problem, essentially, is that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has jurisdiction over exteriors, but not over interiors of landmark buildings. Inside, anything goes. There is no way, unless it is done in enlightened self-interest by those in charge of the building, of even insuring that an expert advisory group is set up.

For the Old Merchant's House, New York is rich in proper authorities, from scholars to the curatorial talent of the Metropolitan's American Wing. Such a group should be put together without delay. This is too fine and fragile a relic to be entrusted to anything less than the most skilled and informed expertise based on authentic records and remains.

*

For some time, the Landmarks Commission has had, in the Corporation Counsel's office, an amendment to the landmarks law that would extend reasonable controls to landmark interiors. By now, the Corporation Counsel must have worn the ink off the paper studying it. Since the original law is in the process of being challenged by a developer's suit, everyone is probably just lying low.

But the crises continue. The Sea and Land Church of 1817-19, at Henry and Market Streets, is one of New York's few fine vernacular Georgian churches with exterior and interior of the period virtually intact. What is happening now is that the congregation, faced with changing needs and financial strictures, is planning extensive remodeling—read destruction—of the Georgian interior. Suffice it to say that one hand has too many fingers to count the remaining Georgian churches in New York.

*

The congregation's needs are real, and they may not include early box pews or the 1844 Henry Erben organ, and the financial problems of restoration and maintenance are real, as well. But who is advising the church about this? Who is helping?

The Landmarks Commission, when pressed, can only say coyly that "if the officials of the church wish to consult us on methods of renovating the interior, we will be delighted to give unofficially any assistance we can." In other words, we won't call you; you call us. Preferably before the damage is done.

Who, then, sensitive to the congregation's problems and the building's value, will advise on available grants, loans and other assistance? Who will work out its plans in terms of an irreplaceable part of our cultural heritage?

No one, according to the present rules. You win some, you lose some, and when these are the schizoid rules you play by, it's got to be a no-win game.