

Architecture

There But For the Grace...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

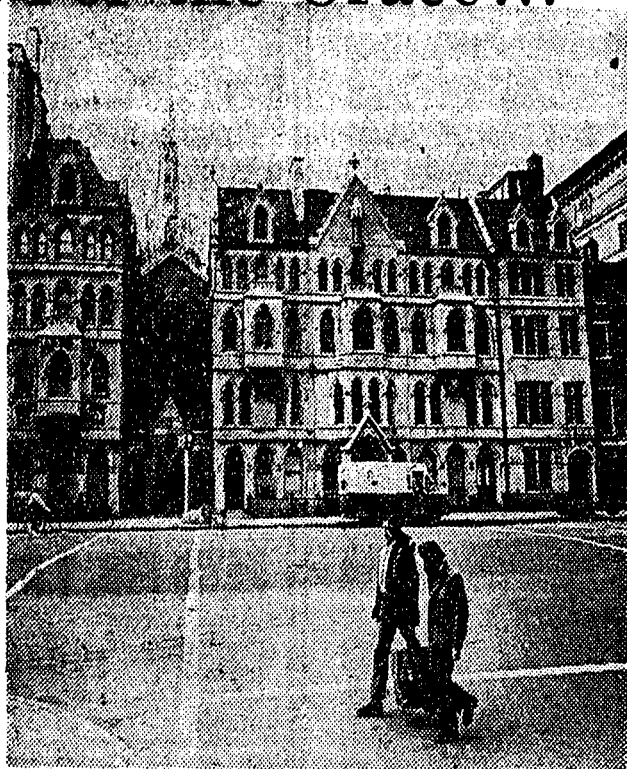
THIS is probably a sad or cautionary tale. Its outcome may have been decided before this appears in print. It concerns the decision by Grace Church to demolish the Gothic Revival houses on Fourth Avenue, directly behind and connected to the church, for a new building. On a deeper level, it is about the church's struggle for survival, in terms of community and economics, and complex and difficult issues of preservation and urban quality.

The judgment that one must make is inescapable: the destruction of these buildings would be a tragedy, and there are no villains to call to account. The decision to demolish came after many conscientious attempts to find other solutions. It could probably be called a failure of imagination, but primarily it is a failure of money, and if any demon is involved, it is the cost, in this inflationary society, of doing anything a little bit better, or more environmentally responsive, than bottom-line building for bottom-line needs.

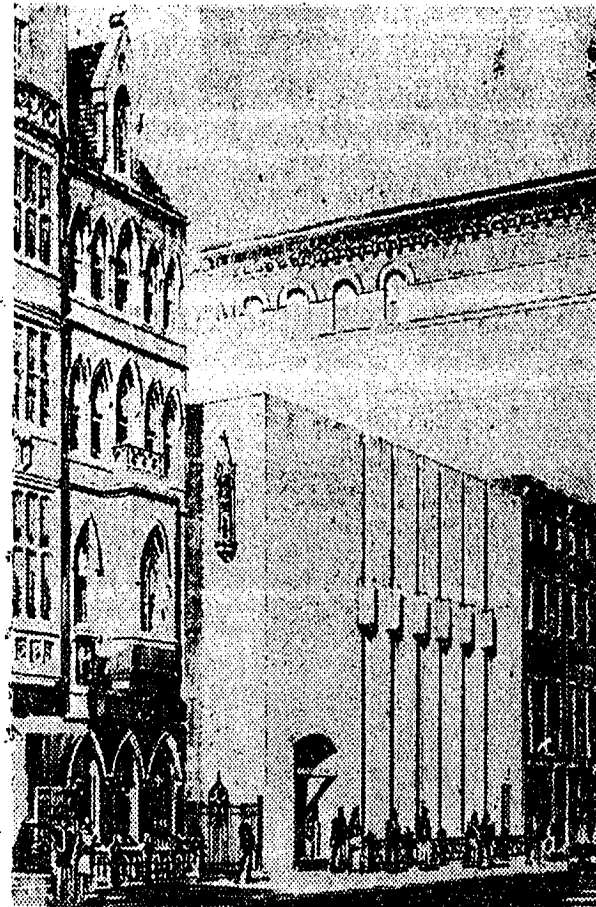
Grace Church, James Renwick Jr.'s lacy masterpiece built in 1843-46 at Broadway and 10th Street, is one of New York's official and most beautiful landmarks. The buildings in question are not landmarks, but that is partly because the idea of preservation, which began with the designation of individual structures of singular merit, has only recently progressed to an understanding that embraces more general, environmental values.

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The two structures to be demolished are Clergy House and Huntington House, older Federal buildings refaced by Renwick's office beginning in 1880. The intention then, belatedly appreciated now, was to create a stylistic grouping, in which the Gothic Revival theme was carried through on an east-west axis. The view of the spire and church beyond is climax and complement to their more modest, but blending facades. The group also provides a felicitous Fourth Avenue front—a



Replacement, right, for the Old Grace Church Buildings
Questions of art and survival



street that has increasingly succumbed to the commercial and the nondescript.

Growing urbanistic sophistication has made it obvious to both preservationists and planners that a small group of buildings, or a simple streetscape, may have a reinforcing and extending value of style and period, without which an individual building would be considerably weakened. The whole is at least equal to the sum of its parts. It goes without saying that the Grace Church group can never be built again.

The Rector of Grace Church, Dr. Benjamin Minifie, has had the serious problem of the continued existence of the congregation in a community with a decimated church population—in the 1890's this was the second richest congregation after Trinity. Now most of the downtown churches share a common economic struggle for simple survival.

It has not helped Dr. Minifie's state of mind to sit and look at old buildings in increasing deterioration and disuse; the two houses had long outlived their original purposes. There was, how-

ever, a tendency to equate cosmetic disrepair with structural soundness and potential usefulness. And the congregation was trying desperately to find a way to stay alive.

About 10 years ago it was decided that the church's greatest strength and only hope was its school, directly south of the old Gothic structures. To keep the school functioning and to provide what is called community "outreach," new facilities were needed—a gymnasium and common meeting rooms which would also serve as a neighborhood center.

The firm of Moore and Hutchins, now Hutchins, Evans and Lefferts, was called in. Given the church's program, the architects felt that demolition for new construction was the answer. Ten years ago the idea of adaptive re-use had not been proven, as it has today. Conventional wisdom seemed safer than a more creative approach.

Not everyone in the congregation agreed. There were those who hoped the old buildings could be renovated for the purpose. With Moore and Hutchins's approval, an-

other firm, Oppenheimer and Brady, was called in to study the possibilities. A scheme was developed that would have saved and remodeled the Gothic houses.

As the church added requirements, the costs grew from about \$500,000 to \$900,000. A fund-raising campaign undertaken in 1968 for the work was a disaster. With \$235,000 in hand, the church sadly called it quits. In 1972 it went back to the original architects for an economy job, and they, in turn, went back to the demolition plan.

The result is a design for a bland and rather characterless "modern" structure that, ironically, will now cost \$865,000 to build. It will fragment the Gothic group, disrupt what remains of a unified style, and add a negatively discordant element of less than landmark design to the increasingly mutilated street. The city is constantly diminished by just this kind of attrition.

Recently, a letter of intent was signed with the builder and an announcement of the plans was made. The church said that preservation had "proved to be architect-

turally and financially impossible."

Community sentiment, now that the chips are down, is opposing demolition. There is understanding of the church's needs, but the local community board has asked for a stay. Preservationist James Marston Fitch of Columbia University is exploring alternative possibilities with the help of a Kaplan Foundation grant. At this writing, the church and the architects are desperately reconsidering.

It is all going right down to the wire, when the builder's agreement must be signed. Deadlines have already been extended. A particular tragedy, in the light of Grace church's good neighbor intentions, is that its image is taking a beating, in a kind of cultural and community backlash. Even sadder, the church is risking its finances and its future on the plan.

It should not have to happen this way, but perhaps it is a measure of our society that we destroy our values while trying to maintain them. A subject for a sermon, no doubt.