

Catch 22/23/24

It's a Catch-22 culture when novelists can command a \$1-million advance, as reported recently, but \$300,000 can't be found anywhere to save part of a city's architectural heritage. (The catch is that money is available where money isn't needed because it will make more money, as Private Yossarian would have known with ultimate certainty.) The decision of Grace Church to demolish its Gothic Revival houses cannot be anything but economically motivated. Unfortunately, the catch applies. There is no money for preservation.

The further catch is that the church is desperate for new school and community facilities; in fact, it equates them with survival. The Gothic buildings will come down for a new one, which might be described as Neuter, or Neutral, Modern. The new facilities could be provided in a less destructive way, either through reuse of church-owned adjacent properties or within the old house shells, but the church cannot pay the higher cost of conversion. It can only afford to do the wrong thing.

It is inconceivable that anyone would consider demolition better than preservation in the case of this Renwick-designed and inspired grouping of church and subsidiary buildings. It is equally inconceivable that no grant exists, through historic trusts, public agencies or private foundations, to bridge the cost gap and enable church and city to retain a feature of genuine environmental value.

The irony is that this should happen just when the virtues and advantages of conversion and reuse have been proved in such structures as the Graduate Center of the City University, the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater and the public library in the old Jefferson Market Courthouse. There are conversions going on now of the old Cooper Union and the cast-iron McCreery department store, just opposite Grace Church—another irony, or Catch-23. When building costs go up for the new construction, that will be Catch-24.

The loss in the Grace Church issue is more than two houses and the money no one can find. It is the opportunity to demonstrate the right way to rebuild a city.