

Bad Try on Gracie Mansion

Inspired by Mrs. Kennedy's refurbishing of the White House, New York is about to operate on Gracie Mansion. The design just published for an extension to the Mayor's official residence might be described most charitably as a combination garage and laundry wing for a suburban colonial home of the 1920's, ennobled by a dubious horseshoe stairway and chinoiserie balustrade.

The need for more space and expanded facilities for official functions is unchallengeable; the method of providing it could scarcely be worse. It is not worthy of the building, a fine house, circa 1799, that must be handled with knowledgeable sensitivity. Nor is it worthy of New York, which should match its stature with the best in architecture, but seldom does.

It is time that a city with unparalleled resources in architectural expertise stopped ignoring these resources with such studied consistency. The new wing is appallingly unattractive and unsuitable for a building of prime civic importance. The Committee to Preserve Gracie Mansion, which will seek to finance the reconstruction out of private funds, is long on civic-minded citizens but regrettably short on architectural historians or experts in landmark preservation. Most shocking of all, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission was not consulted for the advice it could, and should, have given.

In a city that too often confuses progress with size, Gracie Mansion is an intimate, civilized delight, as well as an architectural treasure. Let us respect it, preserve it, and, in recognition of expanding needs, enlarge it. But let us not ruin it in the process.