

Architecture

Missing the Point (and Boat) at City Hall

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

FOR New Yorkers, this has been a holiday season of some bad cheer. The power or fate that orders things giveth and taketh away.

The old Astor Library on Lafayette Street, in the process of conversion by the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater, got its official landmark seal of approval as a national monument for Christmas. It was entered into the National Register of Historic Places maintained by the Federal Government.

At approximately the same time it had the rug pulled out from under it by the city. The Board of Estimate, with the usual pressures of municipal poverty and painful priorities, decided not to purchase the partially restored landmark and budding cultural center and lease it back to the theater.

Joseph Papp's familiar cries of help rang out with the Christmas bells. In spite of the fact that they have been repeated often enough to sound suspiciously like wolf, they are usually real. This time, they are very real indeed. There is nothing more real than money. Without money, he will lose the building. Mr. Papp is a plunger, and plungers often get into trouble. He has plowed every available cent into restoration and remodeling and gotten caught short with no funds and \$1-million in debts. He has proceeded to do this on the basis of a city promise, or at least an expressed city interest in supporting his cultural, creative and urban efforts as an undertaking obviously for the public good.

It is axiomatic that no one believes the city anymore. I'm not sure that Mr. Papp does either, but his path was clear enough; once committed, he never looked back. Indiscretion, in New York, is the greater part of valor.

What are we about to lose on Lafayette Street? Not just a city landmark being turned into a model of adaptive reuse, but a prime creative force in New York that is at the same time a significant

factor in the rebuilding of a neighborhood. That's not exactly a low priority item, as the Board of Estimate seems to think. It is the kind of thing that goes very deep into the fabric and health of the city.

Physically, we have a sturdy Victorian building of brick and brownstone that was constructed by three Astors in three sections at three dates, 1851, 1855 and 1881. Extravagantly admired in its own time as a "Renaissance" palace "bright as a house of glass," the Astor Library was one of New York's leading architectural and cultural glories for many years. It is full of handsome arches, cast-iron columns and ornate ceilings, and that greatest of all luxuries in this era of ludicrous building costs—profligate and magnificent space. It was scheduled for demolition by a commercial builder.

Mr. Papp, plunging as usual, made the first substantial landmark purchase in New York when he bought it for \$575,000 in 1966. A group of us celebrated the event in the chill of a dismal winter day, standing in the freezing, grimy, glorious, two-story, galleried, dingily skylit central hall.

Today, that hall is the Anspacher Theater. The skylights are cleaned and softly illuminated, the architectural detailing is restored, repainted and retouched with gold leaf (it had to be real gold leaf, Joe Papp said, even in the tightest budget crunch), and a theater in the round has been inserted into the galleried space. It is an architectural and theatrical enchantment.

The transformation is the result of dedicated professional teamwork on the part of Mr. Papp and his artists, stage designer Ming Cho Lee, the architect, Giorgio Cavaglieri, and the contractor, the Yorke Construction Company.

In the south wing, the Newman Theater opened this fall. It occupies the former basement and ground floor level that served as kitchen and



New York Shakespeare Festival's Anspacher Theater
You can't live without love and money

dining room for the tenant that came between the library and theater, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. (Parts of the building are still as HIAS left it, with long rows of standard, suspended fluorescent fixtures hung well below the lofty ceilings, illuminating capital tops and elaborate pierced plaster moldings.)

The Newman Theater was literally scooped out of the old structure, with steel girders inserted to span the space and support the upper floors. It is a completely contemporary installation with full sup-

porting services. Above it, another skylit, galleried space awaits "conversion" into a Chamber Music Room.

In the north wing, a new, small cinema has steeply tiered, boxed-in seats, walls and floors covered in soft, plush black. There are offices and a modest film library. An experimental theater and an art gallery are in temporary spaces, and workshops and rehearsal rooms are in full swing.

"A theater may not be a building," says Mr. Papp, "but theater needs a place, and that place in the hands of

artists becomes inseparable from the work performed in it."

The Public Theater is much more than a place. It is an urban catalyst. Here is a downtown neighborhood being slowly brought back to life after a long slide downhill, receiving a critical infusion of creative and environmental quality.

Between Cooper Union and New York University there are now signs of physical and social revitalization where it is desperately needed, in a city unable to stem decay and despair. The Public Theater is a key piece. This is how culture and creativity should be used as a life-giving force to rebuild the city. How odd that we should put out \$200-million for static, symbolic show in Lincoln Center, with debatable cultural and environmental results, and lack \$5-million for something that is simply and obviously right.

The price for this highly successful kind of urban renewal is \$5.1-million for the building with the full renovation and restoration program completed, or \$2.6-million for it with work done to date, as it stands now. An appraisal for the Real Estate Department by an independent architect, John J. McNamara, calls the work good and the costs "fair and equitable."

Any competent investor can see that this is a bargain in terms of cash outlay and value received and forthcoming. The job is well along and returns are already visible on the city scene. Asked what it would cost to duplicate the facilities, Roger Stevens, who was a real estate king before he became a culture king, has given a reproduction figure, including land and building, four times the \$2.6-million asking price. Costs are rising constantly. And how to put a price on art, history and regeneration?

This outstanding landmark conversion has been a labor of love with a profound and important urban impact. The Victorians who built the Astor Library believed you could die without love. So can a city.