A Few Signs of Spring and Other Good News
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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FOLLOW-UP on two items for those who tell us we leave our readers hanging on precipices: In New Orleans, the moratorium on destruction of old buildings in the central business district was passed by the City Council five to two, with a good saucing of lively local politics.

That gives the city nine months to develop special zoning, tax laws, or other devices or incentives to maintain a healthy mix of old and new by protecting small, historic buildings from the speculator's bulldozer. The battle will continue, split along two lines—those who want New Orleans to be New Orleans and those who want it to be Houston or Dallas.

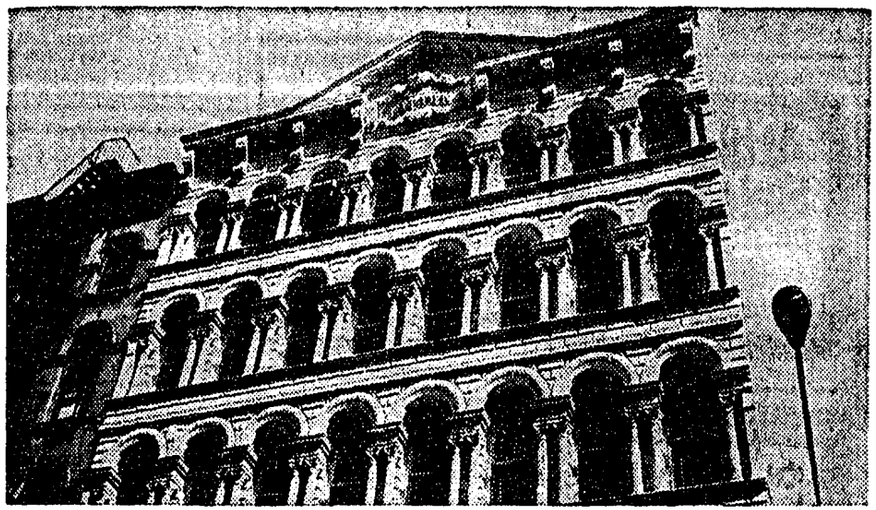
In New York, the local community and Grace Church have finally joined forces to raise the money to save the Gothic church houses on Fourth Avenue. Success or failure depends on another one of those dreadfully arbitrary deadlines set by the inexorable economic forces that dictate our lives and culture; funds must be in hand in early May. By the time this appears the rescue operation will very likely be on or off.

Opposite Grace Church, by one of those coincidences which New York produces about as artfully as Mrs. Lasker's tulips appear each year, a landmark building has been rescued. The tulips are a spring delight, and so is the news from the west side of Broadway and Eleventh Street. (We spare you the obvious comparative ironies.)

A family of real estate investors named Elghanayan, and an architect, Stephen B. Jacobs Associates, have joined forces to remodel one of New York's finest remaining cast-iron fronted buildings, at 67 East Eleventh Street, and restore it to the city's lifestream. It is a profit-making commercial venture, and the reincarnation takes the form of small, duplex, luxury apartments. As a unique feature of the apartments, the original interior cast-iron Corinthian columns pop up with a kind of wild abandon, almost as pieces of classical sculpture.

There are some details to quibble about — an ugly, prominent, box-like two-story roof extension that replaces a 19th-century mansard, which obviously figures just as prominently in the equation of economic viability, and questions about column treatment at the street level. But in the bigger equation of landmark-saved-by-creative - and - concerned - economic-recycling, or what preservationists call adaptive use, with the only real option demolition, who wants to quibble?

The cast-iron facade, one of the largest still standing in the city, is a superb one, with the arcaded rhythms characteristic of the material. A corner building, it is actually a double facade and bearing wall, rather than the more usual curtain wall; there are frontages of 75 feet on Broadway and 225 feet on Eleventh Street.



Garth Huxtable

Restored 1857 Cary Building, Church and Reade Streets
Making landmarks pay their way again

Its details were studied with exemplary care. On the Broadway front, for example, each bay is reduced by one inch, creating a false perspective to make that side of the building look longer. A round column skilfully articulates the corner, and each front is a dazzling display of colonnaded "Venetian" windows with the large glass areas that iron made possible.

In its restoration, the building is painted the proper pristine white with which proper Victorians made their structurally innovative, prefab, precast palazzi suggest marble European models. What better way to import the "Renaissance" than through American industrial ingenuity? Foundries cast classical and Italianate and Gothic sections by the mile. The results, among the more significant technological and esthetic contributions to American architectural history, are extraordinarily handsome. They are also being plowed under with alarming regularity by cities that should know better.

The Eleventh Street building was the work of one of New York's most prominent 19th-century architects, John Kellum, who was also the designer of the famous old Wanamaker's store, the beautiful block-square cast-iron monument nearby that was destroyed by fire some years ago.

This example, which is similar in style, was constructed in 1868, and was occupied by James McCreery and Company, the noted dry goods emporium that later became McCreery's department store. King's 1892 New York Handbook lavished praise on the structure and the firm, noting the daylit, 20-foot high street floor, and the fact that "a peculiarity of the management of the house is that employees are assured of practically permanent positions, dependent only on good behavior."

Today, that 20-foot floor has been divided into two levels, and the lesser, but still lofty floors above have been turned into double-height rooms with sleeping lofts or balconies. The old arched windows virtually make window walls. The imaginative plan expands the tight dimensions to which housing is reduced by today's necessary investment formulas, and all that is required of the tenant is the agility to climb the loft stairs and the ability to pay the rent.

But kudos all around — whatever reservations one may hold about details or investment economics. An unusually fine landmark has been made to pay its way again by people who cared enough to try, enriching the neighborhood and city.

Still another important New York cast-iron landmark, the Cary Building at Church and Reade Streets, has been recently recycled. It is also a commercial investment. A long-time favorite of ours, this early, elaborate, block-through "Venetian palazzo" was built in 1857, with matching front and back facades. "Cut stonework" and delicately fluted double colonnettes hold dentilled courses from which round-arched windows "spring." All ironwork sleight - of - machine - and - eye, courtesy of D.D. Badger.

When Church Street was widened not too long ago, the building just escaped, with its shorn masonry wall left facing the Church Street side. That wall has now been painted white, like the ironwork, and given windows. A fine, vertical supergraphic slash from top to bottom announces "The Marketplace" in color.

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The name is borne out by a series of small shops inserted at the ground floor to run around the three sides of the building, from a stationer's and fruit store to gifts and graphics, with a continuous awning of bright abstract designs. The remodeling has been done by Kroger and Perfido for Charles Noyes. You could not get this particular happy blend of historic style and contemporary urbanism for art or money today. Not the least of the delightful surprises are a couple of aluminum painted Corinthian columns in a quick lunch place.

In New York, the Cast-Iron Age has survived in rare concentration, largely through the vagaries of investment economics and dumb luck. In other cities, such as St. Louis, entire cast-iron districts have been destroyed for urban renewal or routine development. New York's richest enclave, just south of Houston Street, is now a designated historic district that has acquired the name of SoHo. But we still remember with anguish the pointless 1960's bulldozing of the incomparable, block-long, perfect Griffith Thomas cast-iron rows of Worth and Thomas Streets. That was barbarism.

Such structures as the old McCreery Store and the Cary Building are outside of the protected area. Survival is much riskier. Another gem, the Haughwout Store at Broadway and Broome Streets, disguises its exceptional quality with coats of shabby black paint.

Meanwhile, over at City Hall, another restoration drama is unfolding. Will they or won't they save the old Tweed Courthouse? After announcing its impending demolition, the Beame administration is now studying the feasibility of restoring it for new executive offices. Nobody at City Hall really likes the old reprobate in spite of art historians' praises, and there are apt to be a lot of cold feet under the conference table.

However, tulips make spring, surprises make life interesting, and a few recycled landmarks could make a trend. It couldn't happen to a nicer city.