Recycling
A Landmark
For Today

A
fter a series of vicissitudes, the Brotherhood Synagogue, formerly located on West 13th Street, and the Church's Meeting House, on Gramercy Square, have found each other. The result is an admirable demonstration of appropriate
contemporary reuse of a historic structure
through sensitive rehabilitation, and the preservation of a
building that is as lovely, architecturally, as it is important
to the New York scene.

The Brotherhood Synagogue is no stranger to historic
buildings. For a number of years, its members shared the
Village Presbyterian Church, a Greek Revival example in
the West Village built in 1846. When an ideological falling
out in 1973 led to a diminution of Brotherhood, the Syna-
gogue found itself looking for a new home.

Meanwhile, back on Gramercy Square, the Meeting
House was on a course of self-destruction. The Society of
Friends transferred some of their activities to their meeting
house on Stuyvesant Square in 1958, and maintenance all
but ceased. That was actually one year short of the hundredth
anniversary of the church's construction in 1856 by New
York architects Gamael King and John W. Kellum.

In 1965, an option was given by the Friends to a
developer who planned to demolish the church for a
30-story apartment house. In an effort to protect it, the
building was designated a New York landmark. Neighborhood
alarm led to the creation of a foundation for the purchase
of the church, with the ambitious but uncertain goal of
using it as a center for the performing arts. When that
idea failed, the building was sold to the United Federation
of Teachers, which hoped to utilize it for meetings and
offices.

This, too, did not work out. The UFT, in turn, decided
to sell. All through these maneuvers the church continued
to deteriorate. It was structurally sound, but a bad roof
and open joints in the solid masonry walls led to leaks and
water damage that left the interior ankle-deep in fallen
plaster and debris.

The building is in what the Victorians called the
Italianate style—a melange of near-Renaissance motifs
strong on cornices, pediments and round-headed windows
It was a style that both King and Kellum, as fashionable
architects, favored. They had, together and separately, a
large commercial practice which included those "newest"
of palaces in cast-iron, the pair's Cary Building of 1856
and Kellum's A. T. Stewart store (later the Wanamaker's)
of 1862, both on Broadway. The Cary Building was made of the
stylish architectural prefabs of Daniel Badger's Architectural

But the meeting house was far less wordly and
ornate. In "History Preserved" by Harmon Goldstone (a
former chairman of New York's Landmarks Preservation
Commission) and Martha Dalrymple, the Gramercy Park
church is described as "austerely, almost Quaker-like,
with a dignity that was the contrast between plain wall surfaces and the arched pediment that is
supported on consoles over the wide central doorway. A
beautifully proportioned triangular pediment crowns the
building as a whole."

Mr. Polshek notes that the architect dealing with an old
building becomes involved with the minutiae of preservation
—how to replace exterior lights that were somehow
disposed of; how to provide fire code exits without cutting
into the sanctuary; whether to strip, regrain or repaint
wood. There were considerations of historical accuracy,
functional needs (relatively simple), structural soundness
(fine, except for the need to repoint the masonry), and
building code requirements (a technicality made it possible
to file under the old code, which helps). There were also
questions of the functional and esthetic aspects of
mechanical equipment. New plumbing, wiring and lighting
had to be installed; windows were carefully cleaned and
painted and glass replaced.

The aim of the architect has been to respect what he
calls, perceptively, "the conceptual unity of the space," an
approach at once subtle and aware and amenable to the
necessary adjustments of conversion. There is no attempt
to restore everything "back" to a real or imagined period
accuracy; it would be both foolish and costly. The objective
is a working building, not a stage-set reproduction.

The choice of a color that was not used originally
(1850's favored shades of putte) does no design or
structural damage. The use of architectural rather than
period lighting—Paul Marantz was lighting consultant—
enhances the building's greatest beauty, its simple,
expressive spatial quality, with both understanding and
taste. The original fabric is dealt with in a spirit of
sensitive realism. There is no architectural violation. The
result demonstrates that most desirable and least achieved
of all preservation objectives: the skilful recycling of an older
structure for contemporary purposes with those delicate and
difficult compromises that are essential to its continued life.

The restored building meets the congregation's religious,
secular, administrative and educational needs. Mr. Polshek
says he and the client are two-thirds of the way home. The
$75,000 still needed is a modest sum, but it must be raised
in difficult times. Everyone on the job is totally involved; the
construction workers came to the first Friday night services.

The building also meets a universal need to touch
base with the past, to savor timeless esthetic excellence,
to enjoy an essential and enriching aspect of New York
life. In art and amenity, it is beyond price.

The New York Times
Published: June 15, 1975
Copyright © The New York Times