



Firehouse Engine Co. 31 at 87 Lafayette St. built in 1895, is a city-owned landmark coming up for auction in February. Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

## 2 Firehouses Among Landmarks for Sale

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

It's a firehouse that looks like a French chateau.

In February, the city is putting the 19th century lower Manhattan structure on the auction block. But preservationists think the city ought to keep the landmark building.

Two other city-owned landmarks will also be auctioned off next month — the first time the city has auctioned landmark civic structures.

The real estate auction is the traditional method used by the city to dispose of surplus property it cannot use. Most of it is slum properties that come to the city because of tax defaults.

One of the three properties involves a case of defaulted taxes—a four-story simple brick-front row house in Hunters Point, Queens, part of a historic district that contains examples of almost every architectural style popular between 1870 and 1890. There is not much concern about the sale of this property since it will be limited to residential use and is considered quite desirable.

### Concern Over 2 Firehouses

There is concern, however, for the two firehouses, which are considered among the more substantial public buildings ever built here and until a few years ago were in use.

With its steep roof, corner tower, well-proportioned dormer windows and lacy details, the 1895 firehouse of Engine Co. 31 at 87 Lafayette St. looks more like a French Renaissance chateau than anything else. "That was a time of great civic pride in public buildings," notes architect William Shopsis, "and it is the same French Renaissance style that was used for many of the first mansions along Fifth Avenue, such as the Felix M. Warburg House which is now the Jewish Museum."

The old Brooklyn Fire Headquarters at 365 Jay St. is an 1892 Romanesque Revival structure with an arched entranceway for the horse-drawn engines and adjacent tower originally used for

spotting distant fires. A combination of granite, red sandstone, brown brick and terracotta detailing, it was designed by Frank Freeman, considered Brooklyn's most creative architect.

All three properties are being auctioned with the stipulation that the provisions of the city's landmarks preservation law will apply. Under that law, a landmark may not be torn down or externally altered without the approval of the Landmarks Commission.

However, under that law an owner can obtain permission for demolition if it is proved that the property is not economically feasible for use. A 1970 architectural study of the Engine Co. 31 building showed that it would cost \$1 million to make it usable, due mostly to foundation problems.

Several civic groups that had expressed interest in using the firehouse found the cost prohibitive. "The city has allowed that building to deteriorate," says Shopsis, "and now expects a private purchaser to pay for restoring it."

Some landmark preservationists consider the city's handling of the Engine Co. 31 firehouse a clear reflection of official indifference to landmark preservation.

"It is hypocritical to make private owners carry the burden just so the city can unload its landmarks," says Kent Barwick, executive director of the Municipal Art Society. "Instead of putting it on the real estate laundry list," he said, "there should be a policy that city agencies use landmark buildings."

### Office for Landmark Panel?

Some observers argue that the firehouse, not far from City Hall, would be appropriate space for a small agency like the Landmarks Commission which pays rent to a private owner for its crowded offices at 305 Broadway.

"If the city is serious about its architectural treasures," says Barwick, "it

has to go to the extra trouble of using them."

Concern for the Jay Street firehouse is of a different nature. That property is being auctioned with the additional limitation that it may only be used for "non-profit educational purposes." A Brooklyn educational institution has been trying to gain use of the structure for several years.

The Fire Dept. was reportedly ready to turn over the building to the organization when it became vacant but it was placed instead on the auction list. "Maybe in most cases," Barwick says, "the city must dispose of property through auction but these are landmarks, not slum properties, and there should be more imaginative solutions. If the building and user are important enough, a 99-year lease at nominal cost could be arranged."

The Hunters Point row house and the Jay Street Firehouse are scheduled for the January 28 auction. The Engine Co. 31 building is scheduled for the Feb. 27 auction.

## Brando's Gift To the Indians

AGOURA, Cal. (AP)—Amid Indian chants and the pounding of tom-toms, Marlon Brando stood on a muddy, windswept hilltop and handed over to Indian representatives the deed to 40 rolling acres he owned in the Santa Monica mountains.

"I give you my deed and title to this land for your keeping and relinquish my claims forever," the actor said yesterday to medicine man Semu Huaurte of the 23-tribe Redwind Assn. "I also give you my sentiments—and apologies for being 400 years late."

The document was then given to Hank Adams, of the Survival of American Indians Assn. The property is next to a rural Los Angeles suburb named Liberty Canyon.