

A Reprieve at Grace Church

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The leaders of Grace Church have agreed to postpone until Feb. 14 their decision to demolish two Gothic Revival buildings that form an integral part of the 1813 church complex.

The rector of the church, Rev. Benjamin Minifie, said he was "extremely skeptical" that a workable alternative would be developed.

Preservation architects and neighborhood representatives concerned over the imminent loss of such historically important structures sought the delay. They are preparing alternative proposals that would provide needed new facilities for the church without sacrificing the landmark quality buildings.

Current church plans call for the demolition of the two buildings facing Fourth Av. at 10th St. known as Clergy House and Huntington House and built for residential use; the buildings have been vacant since 1938. They would be replaced by a two-story building providing a gym and classrooms. The facilities have long been needed for the Grace Church school, an 80-year-old elementary school with 245 students primarily drawn from non-church affiliated families.

Eclectic Architect

Alternative designs being drawn were initiated by Prof. James Marston Fitch of Columbia University, a leading architectural historian. Fitch maintains that "the facades of those buildings represent three quarters of a century of Gothic Revival architecture by the most distinguished eclectic architect." He also points out that "urbanistically" they are important to the "neighborhood and for the context of the church itself." And, he adds, it is "ironic" that in the immediate area there are taking place important restorations, like Cooper Union.

Fitch's plan calls for retention of the Gothic facades with a new structure behind them — a preservation approach he says is commonly used in Europe.

Another plan being worked out by Milton Newman of the Urban Design Group — the design arm of the Planning Commission — calls for construction of a gym on an adjacent empty lot that cur-

rently serves as a school playground. The threatened buildings would then be renovated to provide additional classroom and office space. Newman is working out his plan independently and without official sanction from the Planning Commission.

Although the church itself and the Rectory which face Broadway are officially designated landmarks, the Fourth Av. buildings are not. Only designated landmarks may not be torn down or externally altered without approval of the Landmarks Commission.

Sparked Renaissance

The entire grouping, however, was designed by James Renwick, credited with sparking this country's 19th century Gothic renaissance. Grace Church was Renwick's first major work and following its completion, Renwick was selected to design St. Patrick's Cathedral.

The Landmarks Commission first considered the Grace Church designation following passage of the 1963 landmarks law. A former staff member responsible for drawing up calendars for public hearings at the time says that the entire church complex was originally scheduled for landmark consideration.

"At the last minute," says the former staff member who prefers to remain anonymous, "the Fourth Av. buildings were removed from the calendar. Supposedly that was the only way the church would agree to designation without a fight. Even at that time, the church informed commission members it would probably have to demolish those buildings for future use."

Frank Gilbert, the current executive director of the commission who was on the commission staff at the time, denies the Fourth Av. buildings were initially considered. "People remember things differently," he says.

The conflict between church and community representatives flared last week at a neighborhood meeting in which church spokesmen argued that their plans were published in local papers many months ago and that it was too late and costly now to reconsider. Community leaders maintain,

however, that they thought the new building would only require the demolition of two brick houses adjacent but not architecturally related to the Gothic grouping.

"The church has been very conscious of its stewardship of these buildings," says Rev. Benjamin Minifie, church rector since 1960. Several preservation plans were explored, he said, but were found to be "impractical and inconvenient."

Ironically, a senior vestryman of the church is Whitney North Seymour Sr., one of the early leaders of the battle to establish the city's landmarks preservation law. In the late 1960s, Seymour led a fund-raising drive to preserve the Renwick build-

ings and to build the gym where the two brick buildings stand.

The effort failed, Seymour says, for lack of money. Only \$400,000 of a needed \$1 million was raised. "We're not vandals down there," Seymour says, "but our view is that unless the school can be preserved — and every good school has a gym — then the church will just wither away."

Seymour added, however, that "if the Fitch plan is feasible, we still want to consider it."

The final decision, says Dr. Minifie, "will be up to the church vestry. He predicts however, the alternative proposals will be "too far fetched and costly to be practical."



The Grace Church enclave.

Post Photo by Richard Gorman