

# It's Raise the Cash or Raze a Landmark

By ROBERTA R. GRATZ

The future of one of the city's oldest designated landmarks is in doubt.

The Friends Meeting House at the southeast corner of Gramercy Park is for sale at \$475,000 because the planned user of the 1850 building found it economically difficult to alter and up-

grade for modern use.

The building is owned by the Friends Meeting House Foundation Inc. and was supposed to be used by the United Federation of Teachers as an educational and cultural facility. But, according to Dr. Jules Kolodny, UFT secretary and member of the foundation board, the

price of renovation has become prohibitive.

The UFT had hoped to use the building for a teaching center where meetings, lectures and exploration of new programs would take place. The auditorium would have been available for other cultural uses.

Elaborate plans were studied, including one developed by Giorgio Cavaglieri, the city's foremost restoration architect who designed the conversion of the Jefferson Market Courthouse into a library and the Astor Library into the New York Shakespeare Festival Theater.

Estimates for the renovation plans are close to \$15 million. "We can't use it for the reason intended," says Kolodny. "It's more costly than anticipated."

The plain brownstone front meeting house with its tall arched windows, plain Quaker pews and long, curving stairways is in the Anglo-Italianate style that was popular here from 1845 to 1850. As the builders specified, it is bare of "excessive ornament so as not to wound the feelings of the most sensitive among us."

By the early 1960s, the severely simple building was used only sporadically. In 1963, the Quakers contracted to sell the property to a developer who had planned to raze the building to make way for an apartment house. That was the year the city's Landmarks Preservation Law went into effect. Threatened landmarks were protected from demolition for one year — the period provided by the law to find a buyer who would preserve a designated site.

The Meeting House was one of the first landmarks to be designated that year. **Developer Withdraws**

In its designation report of Oct. 26, 1963, the commission noted that "the Friends Meeting House is a worthy and distinctive example of the Anglo-Italianate style" and that "its clean-cut lines, sound construction and admirably restrained design provide a significant building which reflects the outlook of the important group which built it."

In 1967, the developer reluctantly withdrew from his contract to buy and the building was bought instead for \$165,000 by a group of Gramercy Park residents led by retired publicist Benjamin Saperstein. A non-profit foundation was formed and an appropriate user of the property was sought.

The availability of the building was brought to the attention of labor mediator Theodore Kheel who contacted UFT leaders. Although the building was not purchased by the UFT — ownership is retained by the foundation of which UFT repre-

sentatives are now on the board of directors — the teachers' union assumed maintenance and mortgage costs and would have paid for renovation.

"It was an exciting idea," says Kheel, "but upon analysis the economics got in the way."

The current \$475,000 price of the building covers the \$225,000 balance on the mortgage due in 1979 and costs incurred by the UFT in maintenance and other expenditures.

Several groups appear interested in buying the Meeting House, says Kolodny, including one religious, two cultural and a developer who wants to convert it into apartments. Although the UFT hopes to find a new user as soon as possible, Kolodny added, "we're still open to further interested parties."



Part Photo by Richard Gorman  
The 1850 Friends Meeting House on Gramercy Park, a designated landmark, now up for sale.