

## Landmark: City Moves Slowly on Old HQ

By ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

It took 10 years, seven public works commissioners, five police commissioners, two mayors, miles of bureaucratic red tape, countless studies, plans and revisions, street changes, zoning changes and heavy doses of pure governmental determination to get the new \$45 million Police Headquarters built.

Although comparable time and money would not be necessary, it may just take the same combination of civic powers to preserve the old Renaissance Revival headquarters at 240 Centre St.

So far, the basic ingredient for building the new headquarters — the heavy doses of governmental determination — has not been directed toward preserving the old.

Built in 1909, only a few years following the 1898 consolidation of the five boroughs, the Centre St. building is often assumed to be a Stanford White creation (its designers were Hoppin and Koen) because it is so characteristic of the grand turn-of-the-century elegance associated with the best known architect of 19th-century America.

"It dates from the period of great and grandiose pride in civic architecture," comments architect William Shopson, former



Old police headquarters on Centre St. Its turn-of-the-century elegance has an uncertain future. Post Photo by Terence McCarten

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chairman of this historic buildings committee of the American Institute of Architects.

In 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission considered its designation but has taken no action since. The Mayor has expressed private concern but no public commitment.

The police have expressed willingness to continue partial use of the building if a full interior renovation is forthcoming and additional tenants are found. Private groups have expressed willingness to help but no concerted city effort has been mobilized to come up with

a plan.

There are, however, many people who care about the domed and ornately detailed Centre St. building that has long been a neighborhood landmark in the primarily low-rise industrial area just south of the SoHo historic district. For the time being, they are gathering under the leadership of Donald Simon, director of historic parks and preservation for the Park Dept., who got involved because "no one seemed to be doing anything about saving the building."

Simon, Park Dept. liaison with the Landmarks Commission, has been involved in a number of projects involving reuse of old park structures, particularly rehabilitation of the Prospect Park Boathouse after years of abandonment and decay.

The boathouse, he points out, had been "closed up and left abandoned for years" and when the commitment to reuse it was finally made "it had to be rebuilt from the ground up. That's why time is of the essence for Police Headquarters. If it's left vacant, it will deteriorate and eventually wind up being demolished. The sooner some-

thing is started, the less that will have to be done."

Simon also recalls the lessons learned in the loss of the old Bronx County Courthouse — a designated landmark that had been left vacant and vulnerable and was eventually vandalized and destroyed by fire.

Deputy Insp. John Smith of the Police Department's administration service division says the department is at least several months away from totally vacating the old headquarters so that heat and security will be maintained through most of the winter.

"The old building does have significance to us," Smith says. "It has all our memorial tablets, many historical areas and is architecturally very stimulating. We definitely have a feeling for it and could use some of the space. But the interior is so antiquated that it's of no use if the city isn't committed to total rehabilitation."

A number of preservation and reuse proposals have been offered that would convert the headquarters into a combination of public and private spaces. It's been suggested as a logical location

for the city's archives now gathering dust in warehouses around the city. It's also been suggested for a branch library and neighborhood center for a number of municipal services needed by the growing residential community of SoHo. Combined in any such plans is the provision for private office space that would be income producing.

## Pedestrian Protection

No engineering or cost studies have been made yet, according to Simon, because a detailed proposal must be worked out first. However, previous police department studies estimate that it would cost at least \$4 million just to restore the facade. Several years ago, scaffolds were constructed around the building to protect pedestrians from falling stones.

"Normal exterior maintenance," Simon points out, "was abandoned years ago because of the new building. When that happens, as it did with the Prospect Park Boathouse, water gets into cracks, freezes in winter and expands, and loosens stone until it crumbles."

It could easily take a total of \$8 to \$10 million to restore and renovate, according to Simon. But, he adds, "that should be put in perspective.

The result would be a major building with great space, with the charm of the old and efficiency of the new. Now the city rents lots of office space in private buildings. They could use office space here and apply the equivalent rentals."