

Cast Iron Treasure in Peril

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

New York City's oldest existing cast iron building facade is in jeopardy.

The 1848 Bogardus Building was, according to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, "the first complete cast-iron front constructed in New York" and until 1971 stood at Washington and Murray Streets. In February 1970, the cast-iron facade was designated an official landmark.

Threatened with demolition because of the Washington Street Urban Renewal Project—a 25-acre-block area parallel to the West Side Drive and just north of the World Trade Center—the landmark was dismantled and its pieces were stored on the urban re-

newal site. Plans called for it to be reassembled and incorporated into the design of the new CUNY Manhattan Community College campus that is part of that urban renewal plan.

Cast iron refers as much to a method of construction as an actual architectural style. It was an early form of modular construction with intricate ornamental detail that could be easily taken apart and reassembled.

According to landmark officials, the Bogardus facade is so highly valued by experts that the Smithsonian Institution wanted to take it when it appeared the facade was doomed for destruction and before the preservation plan was worked out.

Now there is a serious question whether the landmark will ever be reused as a building facade at all or even whether it will remain in the vicinity of its birth.

The Bogardus Building was one of the first designated city landmarks to qualify for federal urban renewal preservation funds. Several years ago, \$400,000 in federal funds was committed to its reuse. Plans for the campus are nearly complete and construction could be only months away, but there is still no definite provision for using the Bogardus facade.

CUNY representatives and their architects claim it is technically and financially not feasible for the facade to be part of a campus building. The Housing Development Administration and the Landmarks Commission say that's what it was originally conceived to be and what it really must be.

CUNY architects maintain that it would be feasible and not inappropriate, however, to consider using the facade as a freestanding sculptural structure on the campus plaza or relocating it in SoHo—the officially designated cast-iron historic district—as the facade of a reconstructed building.

Will Fight

"It was never intended to be reassembled as a screen or freestanding structure," says Landmark Chairman Harmon Goldstone, "but as the front of a modern building and I will fight for that."

Peter S. Sprodon, CUNY's dean for campus planning and development, says he's not "sure that it was spelled out that way in the original contracts with the city" and that "\$400,000 isn't enough to cover that."

Jay Neyland, project manager for the architectural firm of Cassill Bowlett Scott, says "we've been thinking about this since we started the master plan in 1968, but the feasible uses of the building just don't come up to par with what was envisioned by design-oriented groups who had preconceived notions."

Now that construction may

be only months away, Neyland adds, "our buildings are planned so that they cover the entire site." But, he notes, there are two places on the site that it could be a freestanding piece, or, if "a total restoration and reconstruction job is that desirable then I would recommend it go on a vacant lot in Soho where it wouldn't be out of scale with our 40 story buildings."

John Boogarts, HDA's principle urban designer, likens the use of the Bogardus facade as a freestanding piece to taking the facade of Lever House, the first modern curtain wall structure, and letting it stand alone as a landmark. "We've informed them," he adds, "that we expect it to be treated as a facade, not as an openwork trellis."

Through all the confusion, the historical importance of the Bogardus Building remains unquestioned—it marks the beginning of a line of architectural and technical development that led to the contemporary skyscraper.

Bolted Together

James Bogardus, an engraver and watchmaker intrigued by the idea of building in iron, developed and patented the cast-iron method of construction—a method of bolting together pre-cast parts to form the whole facade. He then formulated a building design to utilize it. And probably because he was also an engraver, his design incorporated ornate decoration.

In 1848, Edward H. Laing, a wealthy city merchant, persuaded Bogardus to use this design for his stores on Washington Street, which is why the Bogardus Building is also known as the Laing Stores—five separate buildings behind one facade.

Now the future of that landmark is still to be determined. Commission Chairman Goldstone says everyone involved will be gathering in further exploratory meetings, and a public hearing is tentatively scheduled for November 20.

"It's top priority," Goldstone says. "Historically, it's the most important thing we've got."



The Bogardus Building, also known as The Laing Stores, as it remained before dismantling in 1971.