

126-Year-Old B'klyn Church

Saved From Wrecker's Ball

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The Landmark Preservation Commission has denied the YMCA permission to demolish a historic Brooklyn church in order to build a community branch on the site.

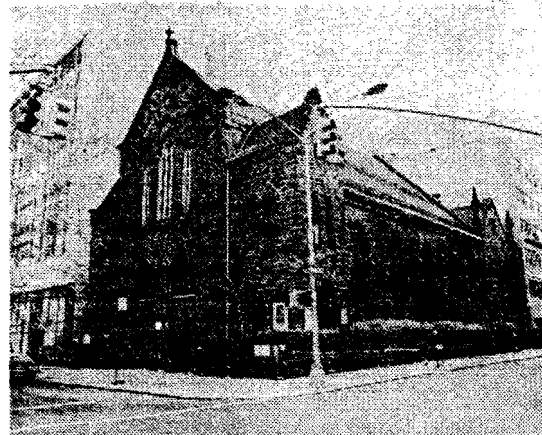
The church, the 1850 Spencer Memorial Church at the corner of Clinton and Remsen Sts., is in the Brooklyn Heights historic district, designated 11 years ago as the city's first landmark district.

The YMCA had sought permission to replace the church with a much-needed community facility for Brooklyn Heights and the neighboring business community.

Under the city's landmarks law, the commission must approve any application to demolish a designated building or any structure within a designated district.

Although the commission denied the demolition request, it left open the possibility that a plan could be worked out to preserve the facade of the church while erecting a new facility behind it.

That was the solution arrived at two years ago in a controversy over the Gothic facades of the Grace Church



The Spencer Memorial Church, Brooklyn Heights.

Post Photo by Nury Hernandez

Houses on Fourth Av. and 10th St. in Manhattan. That project, providing a new church school behind the architecturally significant facades, is nearing completion.

Arthur Trois, executive director of the YMCA Brooklyn Central branch, says that the YMCA has not decided whether to develop a combined preservation and new construction plan for the site or to look for a new place to build.

At a public hearing of the Landmarks Commission last

month, no one disputed the need for the new facility but opponents argued that one could be built without the loss of the inactive church.

The simple Gothic Revival brownstone church has been used by a theater group in the few years since its Presbyterian owners ceased using it for religious purposes.

The YMCA had agreed to purchase the property for \$125,000 on condition that demolition approval could be obtained.

The church had not formally been placed on the real estate market. But community activists expressed confidence that if the YMCA arrangement fell through the property would be an attractive one at that price.

See Precedent

At the commission hearing, more than a dozen community residents and citywide preservationists emphasized both the broad and narrow implications of the precedent that demolition of the church would set.

"This is by no means a local controversy," noted Prof. James Marston Fitch, director of the historic preservation program at Columbia and a leading preservation activist. "There are 15 to 20 churches of this vintage left in the city, and they are all in jeopardy."

Demolition opponents also claimed that the Spencer Church is an "important anchor" for the district whose boundaries were drawn specifically to include it, that it is an "integral part of the district's brownstone fabric" and that the alternatives to demolition had not been fully explored.

THEIR BEST BUYS