



Post Photo by Nury Hernandez

The Spencer Memorial Church, at Remsen and Clinton Sts. in Brooklyn Heights.

'Y' May Raze Historic Church

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The YMCA is seeking permission from the city to demolish a Brooklyn church to build a community branch.

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

At a public hearing of the Landmarks Preservation Commission yesterday, representatives of the YMCA and a group of community supporters appealed for commission approval to replace the church with a new building of comparable size in order to provide a much-needed facility for the Brooklyn Heights and neighboring business community.

No one disputed the

desirability of such a facility but opponents argued that one could be built without the loss of the church.

"We have no major facility in downtown Brooklyn," Arthur Trois, executive director of the YMCA Brooklyn Central branch, told the hearing; held at the old Tweed Courthouse behind City Hall — itself threatened with demolition. "We have been exploring alter-

native sites since 1967," he added, indicating this was their best option.

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 has agreed to purchase the property for \$125,000 on condition that the commission approves the demolition plan.

The commission must, according to law, make its determination on the basis of the building's architectural, aesthetic and historic merits and its importance to the designated district as a whole.

Opponents argued that the interior of the church could be demolished and the shell reused to house the new facility. More than a dozen community residents and citywide preservationists emphasized both the broad and narrow implications of the precedent such demolition would establish.

Vintage Church

"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," Fitch added, "and they are all in jeopardy."

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

Outside the hearing, Trois said the YMCA would probably "not go ahead with the proposal if it was going to be so divisive for the community. We didn't expect it to be this bad," he said, "and it's bad enough already."