

A Plan for Landmark in Doubt

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

A five-year effort by a Flatbush group to turn an unused landmark building into a community center is being undermined by a City Hall policy aimed at raising funds.

Flatbush residents and merchants had been counting on using the historic 1875 Flatbush Town Hall at 35 Snyder Av. for a variety of civic and cultural activities that they felt would "bolster the spirit" of the area which, they argue, is in a "life-death struggle to revive itself."

The little-known City Hall policy change was initiated last spring during the beginning of the current fiscal crisis. A letter from the Mayor's office directed city agencies, primarily the Dept. of Real Estate, to auction off city-owned property that wasn't actively used for official city business.

Because of this policy, the city is now considering selling the Town Hall at auction.

A spokesman for the Dept. of Real Estate could not estimate how many other buildings might similarly be affected but it was thought

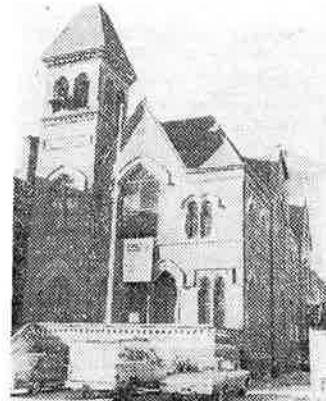
that not many had been the focus of community efforts comparable to that of the Flatbush group.

The handsome red brick Victorian hall was designated a landmark two years ago, four years after it had been scheduled for demolition to make way for a 40-car parking lot. The designation followed an energetic grassroots effort to save the 1875 symbol of colorful Flatbush history and convert it, without use of city funds, into a "living landmark" with opera, theater and music performances, a Flatbush museum and library, meeting rooms for local groups and income-producing shops and a restaurant.

After the designation, the city leased the structure on a month-to-month, \$1 basis to the Town of Flatbush Civic and Cultural Assn. That lease is now jeopardized by the new city policy.

Also jeopardized is a commitment of \$250,000 over 10 years in matching state historic preservation funds which would go to refurbishing the building.

The state was all set to



Historic Flatbush Town Hall may be sold, despite efforts to make it a community center.

give \$20,000 of those funds this fall for repairing the roof, which has gaping holes causing steady deterioration of the building.

But a legal technicality required the city to grant a long-term lease to the sponsoring community group and to assume responsibility for maintenance, a responsibility the community has been carrying. This state requirement is meant to insure against one community group restoring the building and the city then selling or leasing it to someone else.

When the city commitment was asked for in recent weeks, it was not forthcoming because of the new policy and the state funds had to be diverted to another area. (The State Council on the Arts has also promised future funding for staff, equipment and programming—once the building is in usable shape.)

"We've already spent close to \$5000 to secure the building from vandals and make urgent repairs," said Irving Choban, who has been the leader of the rescue effort. While the structure was vacant and the city still had custody, it was heavily vandalized and now has no heating, plumbing or electricity, Choban said. Choban is a Flatbush lawyer who has lived in the community for more than 50 years.

The Town Hall is the only one remaining in Brooklyn and has long been listed as a state and national historic site. It was the center of civic and cultural life for

the Town of Flatbush until 1894 when Flatbush was absorbed by the City of Brooklyn and the hall became a police station. It remained a station house until 1972 when the 67th Precinct force moved to a new facility two blocks away.

The community preservation effort involved 8000 petition signatures, work by the Boy Scouts, church groups, block associations, teachers and students from neighboring Erasmus Hall High School and services donated by local contractors and merchants.

Already \$25,000 has been raised locally to put the building in minimal usable shape. Local banks, Choban added, have contributed almost \$3000 and a nearby McDonald's has committed three hours' profits from a Saturday afternoon.

"The new policy is not to grant any more long-term leases," said a spokesman for the Dept. of Real Estate. Three options, he added, are now open to the Flatbush group.

They can appeal to the Board of Estimate which, he predicted, would probably not be responsive in view of the fiscal crisis.

No Funds

The building can be auctioned under special conditions limiting it for special use but this would not guarantee the civic group would be the only bidder.

Or a long-term lease could be granted if the group insured payment of the \$30,000 yearly real estate taxes it would presumably bring if sold to a private owner.

"We don't have the funds for any of those options," Choban said in exasperation. "You know if the city turns its back on us now, Flatbush residents and merchants will figure City Hall already considers this community dead."

"What's so frustrating is that we never asked for one penny from the city. We said we'd take care of everything ourselves, just give us the building."

"Why is it," he continued, "when we need a building like this so desperately we can't get some little cooperation? From the beginning the city has created one obstacle after another for our effort to revive the area."