

Auctioning of a Firehouse Sets Landmark Precedent

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The sale of the city's most beautiful firehouse to a Chinatown civic group closes a thorny chapter in the long story of how New York should handle landmark properties.

Engine Co. 31 at 87 Lafayette St.—a French Renaissance chateau built in 1895 to be the "finest firehouse in the world"—was purchased last week at the city's real estate auction for \$45,000 by the Chinatown Service Center.

The property was first put up for auction last year but withdrawn under pressure by Borough President Sutton and architectural preservation groups. The feeling then was for the city to set an example in finding new uses for landmarks or at least restrict sales with provisions to guarantee preservation.

With its corner tower, dormer windows and lacy details, the department's showplace was vacated in the mid-'60s and designated a landmark in 1970. It has been vacant and deteriorating ever since.

City officials argued that it was too expensive for city use so protective restrictions were worked out to auction the property. A designated landmark may not be externally altered without approval of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

This was the first case in which protective restrictions were worked out for the sale of a city-owned landmark, thus establishing a precedent for the auctioning of other landmarks and landmark-quality properties.

Thomas K. Wang, board chairman of the non-profit Chinatown Service Center, estimates that it will take "a minimum of \$400,000 to begin using the building for a senior citizens center." He hopes to have it in shape within a year.

Wang said he has cooperated with many city agencies to arrange the purchase, made with privately-raised funds. Eventually, he says, he expects public funds to help support the program.

The three-story structure, a popular attraction on

Lower Manhattan tours, was designed by the firm of Napoleon Le Brun with Stanford White as consultant.

"That was a time of great civic pride in public buildings," notes architect William Shopsis, "and it is the same French Renaissance style that was used for many of the first mansions along Fifth Avenue, such as the Felix M. Warburg House, which is now the Jewish Museum."

The civic group's plans also call for having a library, social service offices and educational programs in the building.



The firehouse at 87 Lafayette St.

Post Photo by Frank Leonarde

The call