

STREETSCAPES/171 Macdougall Street

Uncovering the Past, a Church Shapes Its Future

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THE recent stripping of the daringly modern facade at the 10th Church of Christ, Scientist, on Macdougall Street, to expose the decaying face of its 19th-century precursor seems almost evocative of Dorian Gray. And, eeriness aside, it also poses a curious question in preservation: If destroying the past in favor of the future is sometimes unacceptable, what about destroying the future in favor of the present?

In 1891, Archibald D. Russell, a banker and investor involved in real estate development, built a factory on Macdougall Street just north of Washington Square.

Used as a printing plant, the six-story red brick structure at No. 171 was designed by Renwick, Aspinwall & Russell. With high ceilings and three broad bays across the front, it was almost unornamented, except for sophisticated arrangements of bricks set slightly inside and outside of the building plane, as well as a rich terra-cotta cornice. Businesses in the book industry occupied the building. One, the Caxton Press, printed "Christianity and Infallibility: Both or Neither" by Daniel Lyons in 1891.

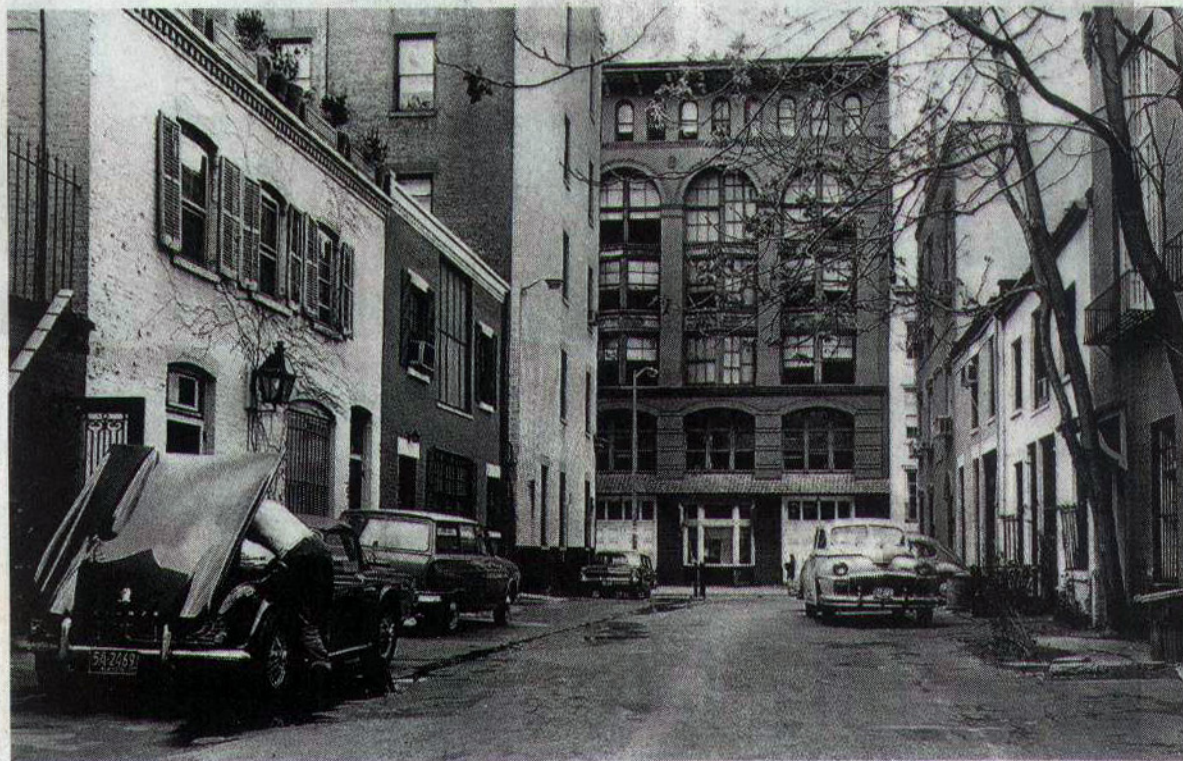
In 1927, in an unusual transaction, the 10th Church of Christ, Scientist, bought the aging structure and moved in, using the lower part for worship and apparently leaving the upper section empty.

In 1966, the church retained the modernist Victor Christ-Janer for one of the most striking ecclesiastical works in the history of New York.

Mr. Christ-Janer, who died in March, was a modernist with a mystical streak. He refaced the structure with a plain veneer of warm orange brick, blocking the upper-story windows, removing the old cornice and leaving a slot in the middle of the facade to permit a shaft of light to fall dramatically in the sanctuary.

Although the lack of windows would appear to create a dark interior, a posting on the blog newyorkdailyphoto.com reveals that, according to Mr. Christ-Janer's daughter Katherine, "the windows he was most concerned with were windows that would open inside us," and that the simple wall was meant to be protective, so the church would "be a place of nurture, retreat, meditation, contemplation." (Other discussion, both pro and con, has been posted at newyorkdailyphoto.blogspot.com/2006/12/re-creation.html.)

In a 1966 article in *The New York*



DON HOGAN CHARLES/THE NEW YORK TIMES (ABOVE); SUZANNE DECHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES (RIGHT TOP)

Times, an unidentified church leader criticized the existing structure as "this dreary dull building." Nate White, chairman of the building committee, said, "We are trying to keep God right down on Macdougall Street, where the people are."

The AIA Guide to New York City, by Norval White and Elliot Willensky, praised the renovated building's "great corbeled brick openings in an austere facade."

Mr. Christ-Janer's building application in 1966 noted that the veneer "may be removed at any time." That time came in 2006, leaving one of the most unusual sights of New York.

The church has sold the upper floors to a developer for conversion to condominiums but is retaining the lower section for an entirely new sanctuary.

With the permission of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Mr. Christ-Janer's brick has been stripped off, exposing the original facade — or what's left of it. Any projecting brickwork was hammered off in the 1960s, but the rest of the front is eerily intact.

The church, working with the Property Markets Group, the developer of the condominiums, is going to restore the facade, mutilated masonry and all, with a few twists. The firm TRA Studio is the architect for the upper floors; Hanrahan Meyers Architects has been commissioned by the church.



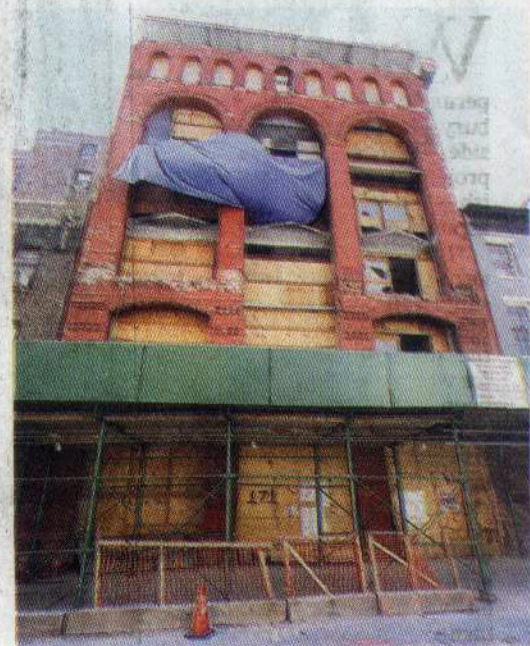
BRIAN DUBÉ/NEW YORK DAILY PHOTO

The design for the church interior is sophisticated, with a curved sanctuary wall, openings admitting light from the outside in patterns, and a view through a glass wall to a rear garden. (Photographs are posted at hanrahanmeyers.com.)

TRA Studio, for its part, has cleverly reinterpreted the original design of the windows and cornice. Its window mullions are trim and lithe, far different from the original heavy framing, and the cornice is a projecting skylight of

FACE-LIFT

The 10th Church of Christ, Scientist, in 1966, above, before it got a modernist facade, and as it looks today, top right. The 1891 facade has decayed but is mostly intact after the removal of the plain veneer of orange brick of 1967, left. The original facade is being reconstructed, to the design at right.



TRA STUDIO

glass. (Designs can be found at trastudio.com.)

Another facet of this unusual project is that the elimination of the 1967 facade has generated no objection, even in contentious Greenwich Village. Both the Historic Districts Council and the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation are supporting the reinterpretation of the 1891 building.

Similarly, neither organization has called for the preservation of the St. Vincent's Hospital building at 12th Street and Seventh Avenue, another

modernist structure, which the hospital is seeking to demolish.

The 1967 version of the 10th Church seems to be without friends — at least in the current day.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission said in its approval letter, issued in 2006, that Mr. Christ-Janer's "severe modern brick facade detracts from the scale and architectural character of the streetscape." It did not mention that in its own designation report, in 1969, the spare, moody work was described as "handsome."