

TOWN CENTER SINCE 1981

Viewpoints

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Section AA

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Guest column

Old school deserves creative reuse

By Judith Doolin Spikes

At our October meeting, the board of trustees of the Larchmont Historical Society unanimously adopted a resolution calling upon the Mamaroneck Board of Education to exhaust all possibilities for adaptive reuse of the building currently housing the School-Town Center, before entertaining proposals for disposition in any other way.

The building has considerable architectural merit and great historical importance to all three municipalities served by the board of education. There was no Village of Larchmont, no Village of Mamaroneck, but only the Town of Mamaroneck, when this fine Romanesque Revival building was erected in 1888. Frank Sanchis, author of *Westchester Architecture*, points out that the Mamaroneck Union Free and High School was a pace-setter in education at its time as one of the first union school buildings in Westchester County — that is, one of the first school buildings designed to divide students into separate rooms by

age groups rather than following the one-room schoolhouse concept.

A source of great pride in the community, the beauty and modernity of the structure were frequently featured and editorialized in the *Mamaroneck Paragraph*. In 1891, editor Rice wrote that "the \$50,000 school building elevated on the hill which can be seen for miles around is a proclamation of the character and intelligence of our citizens," and this outstanding physical plant and the high level of education offered within were widely credited as a prominent cause of the rapid growth of the area in the 1890s.

Civic pride in the building was intensified by the knowledge that it was the result of local talent and effort. The building was designed by David Jardine, a distinguished New York City architect who owned one of the first summer homes in Larchmont Manor, and the oak stairway and balustrade were carved by George Burger of Mamaroneck. The brick, brownstone and terracotta masonry

work was carried out by W.A. Thomas of Rye Neck, and Mamaroneck tradesmen A.M. Perrin and J.H. McLoughlin had charge of the painting and plumbing, while Charles Anthes supervised the landscaping.

Throughout the 1890s, the pages of the *Paragraph* proclaimed the community's pride in amenities like the "very fine piece of workmanship in terra-cotta over the entrance, showing the globe, the charts, the compass, and the open books," and the "delightful location of the school on a prominent hill, commanding a beautiful view of the harbor and bay, while in the far distance may be seen the blue hills of Long Island."

Innovative builders and developers realize today that adaptive reuse of sound, well designed older buildings like this one can be highly profitable. Privately financed conversion to apartments, shops or professional offices would have the virtue of returning the property to the tax rolls, but preservation for public use would also be an economical way of providing

needed municipal and community services — a town hall and senior citizen housing are only the most obvious of the needs of the trimunicipal area which could be admirably served by this building.

The Mamaroneck Board of Education has been a pioneer in Westchester County in the concept of adaptive reuse of excess school buildings. When this building was converted to office space for public agencies in 1968-9, a model was created which other Westchester communities have imitated. We urge the current board to continue this tradition so that this tangible reminder of the dreams, achievements and civic pride of those who built the communities we now hold in trust may remain to serve future generations.

JUDITH DOOLIN SPIKES, who holds a doctorate in literature and is a member of the faculty at Iona College, serves as Larchmont historian and president of the recently formed Larchmont Historical Society.

Nov. 15, 1890,
Paragraph says

Mamaroneck High School

Mamaroneck, N. Y.