

Dutch Reformed Church: 'A conspicuous and characteristic landmark'

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"What a beautiful building! And what a sorry state it's in!"

That is what people think about the former Dutch Reformed Church in Newburgh. Like royalty fallen on hard times, the DRC has great bones, a lofty bearing and a wider frame of reference that shines through the forlorn shabbiness of its present circumstances.

But what is so special about the building anyway? Newburgh has thousands of historic houses and dozens of old churches - why is this one such a big deal? For three reasons: aesthetic, historical and symbolic.

Aesthetic quality

Quite simply, the former DRC is a beautiful work of architecture. The monumental exterior, scrupulously modeled on ancient Greek sources, stands like a majestic beacon overlooking the Hudson River. With columns over 30 feet tall, the structure aspires to a grandeur quite "over the top" for the modest community it served.

The interior is even more impressive, with a soaring, sparsely decorated space - roughly a double cube - that provokes gasps of astonishment in most first-time visitors. The size, proportions, light and decor combine to create a powerful effect.

According to the landmark application, "Few extant Greek Revival buildings in America can rival the Dutch Reformed Church in its distinguished pedigree, bold design and striking siting."

Historical significance

The DRC is historically significant on several counts. It is an outstanding example of the Greek Revival, nearly a national style in the early 19th century. It is also an early, rare and well preserved example of the work of architect Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-92).

The DRC is "the greatest surviving ecclesiastical commission of America's greatest architect of the era," according to J. Winthrop Aldrich, the state's former deputy commissioner of historic preservation.

In 2001, the DRC was designated a National Historic Landmark - the highest national recognition possible.

Symbolic value

Finally, the DRC has symbolic value. When asked his intentions, Davis declared: "The edifice ... will henceforth serve as a conspicuous and characteristic landmark, indicative of the taste, discrimination, and sense of classical beauty, of the inhabitants of Newburgh."

These flattering words were intended to help with fund-raising, but they were true enough - the temple-like building became a landmark for passing steamers and remained an object of civic pride for generations.

From the 1960s, the once-prosperous and prestigious city of Newburgh was abandoned by the mainstream, pillaged by urban renewal, torn apart by strife and exploited by corruption. Thirty-five years of neglect turned the DRC into a symbol of the city's decline, a heartbreaking reminder of what has been lost.

Today, however, there is sense of a tide having turned, the area's fortunes finally rising again. Now is the time to restore this jewel and give the building a new role in community and economic life. Once restored and operational for some purpose (as yet undefined), the building can once again take on a positive symbolic value as a "conspicuous and characteristic landmark."