

Saving Graces

Historic Churches Desperately in Need of Funds Share Financial Woes as Well as Leaky Roofs

By Lana Bortolot
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In recent years, the stretch of Sixth Avenue running through the heart of Chelsea has been one of the city's hottest construction corridors. Towering apartment buildings have shot up here — particularly in the blocks between 23rd and 27th Streets — creating a supercharged housing market and changing the scale of this genteel neighborhood.

It's typical of this city that while so many buildings rise, others fall. Such is the case of one landmark building in this neighborhood, the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of Santa Sava.

Tucked away on West 26th Street, nearly lost in the shadow of modern towers such as the Vanguard and the Capitol at Chelsea, the 150-year-old Early English Gothic cathedral literally struggles to keep the roof over its head, despite its impressive pedigree. Designed by Richard Upjohn, it was built as a northern outpost of Trinity Church in one of Manhattan's then most stylish neighborhoods. Edith Wharton married here the year it was completed, 1855.

When the Serbian parish bought the brownstone church 60 years ago, it was in a sorry state. Chronic lack of care over the decades, including abandonment for many years, resulted in significant water damage to the supporting structure, particularly to the slate roof.

"The roof is amazingly high and takes an enormous amount of wind load," said preservationist William Stivale, the church's architect. "If everything is in great shape, the [roof's] truss system works fine. But water had been pouring into the top of the walls for years, weakening the structure.

"What's very special about this cathedral is that it's made of caen, a French stone. It's a very respected material, but it's not supposed to get wet. It's almost the consistency of talc, and when it gets wet, it literally disintegrates," he said.

Parish president Mira Luna recalls the enormity of the restoration, which is being executed in stages with the technical guidance of the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

"When we began, pieces of the roof were flying all over Sixth Avenue," she said.

But before the roof could be repaired, the entire building had to be stabilized and the walls repointed. Since 1999, approximately \$2 million has been raised, but a total of \$3.5 million is needed to complete the roof and for ongoing projects

such as restoring the 16 stained-glass windows (\$20-\$30K each) and updating the electricity. Upjohn's rose window was restored in 1998 through an anonymous donation.

The New York Landmarks Conservancy has provided some relief with funds through the Booth Ferris Foundation and the Robert A. Wilson Sacred Sites program. And the church has relied on grass-roots fundraising — through flea markets, private donations, and an anniversary gala each fall. However, Santa Sava's fourth request for a grant from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation was recently rejected, and now the Rev. Father Djokan Majstorovic, cathedral dean, and Luna must appeal to parishioners for more donations.

One challenge, says Father Majstorovic, is reaching out to a small community that doesn't have a legacy of giving to its church.

"[Our parishioners] come from a country where faith was forbidden," he said. "So people aren't used to practicing religion and financially supporting it." Moreover, he is pressing a congregation already tapped out from sending funds home to a country still restoring itself after the war.

The efforts to date have included direct mailings, which cost \$900 to execute and result in few returns. So Santa Sava hired a professional fundraiser who has already initiated a community outreach program. Father Majstorovic and 16 volunteers will visit parishioners in the 5 boroughs, Long Island, and Westchester, personally appealing for restoration funds.

"With a letter, they read it, think about it, and put it away," said Father Majstorovic. "But people are more likely to do something with a visit. Being in front of them is the most efficient way. Our mission of the church is to maintain its meaning in [parishioners'] lives ... If we have people in the church, then the money will be there."

Father Majstorovic and his team have a formidable task. Though there are 1,600 names on the church's mailing list, fewer than 700 have contributed money. And with Sunday attendance at anywhere from 75 to 175 people, the regular donor pool is small. So finding the donors and convincing them to give is not as easy as preaching to the converted.

"We're like Ellis Island: People come through us, get stabilized, meeting their spouses, then they move on," Luna said. "But I keep thinking someone's going to hear our cry."

Set down at Broadway and 10th Street just 11 years earlier and 16 blocks south, Grace Church is anything but obscure. Part European cathedral, part fairy-tale confection, the elegant church has anchored its neighborhood as both a visual and cultural landmark. Like Santa Sava, Grace boasts an architectural pedigree. It was designed by James Renwick Jr., who later designed St. Patrick's Cathedral and the Smithsonian Institution's castle in Washington, DC. Built in 1844 in the Gothic Revival style, its 230-foot spire commands the sky, uninterrupted by surrounding buildings.



Grace Church: In better days back in the 1880s

Scaffolding, however, now obscures the church's spindly beauty. A major restoration project was launched when architects discovered that a rusted anchor plate was causing the spire to lean six inches off its vertical. The plate holds the rod that runs through the connecting stones of the spire. Now a complex scaffolding holds the spire in place.

And the spire is just the tip of the architectural iceberg: The decorative stonework around it is cracked, and the marble is deteriorating around the parapet, crockets, and other structural elements. Repairs to the spire, bell tower, and roof will cost an estimated \$2.5 million — work that must be done to prevent further water damage to the church interior.

"The history of architecture is 5,000 years of trying to keep the water out," said Laurie Hammel, director of finance and development at Grace and herself a historic preservationist. Water leaks have disintegrated the plaster in the north- and southwest aisles, each segment requiring \$25,000 of restoration. It's costly to repair because water runs laterally, and the visible damage may be far from the source, says Hammel, who notes that past efforts at repair have largely involved "chasing the water down."

"You tend to repair what you can see," she added.

Even though the Municipal Art Society has designated the church as one of eight "structures to be protected at all cost," Hammel says the church is not without its fundraising challenges.

"It's very difficult to separate the sacred from the secular," Hammel said. "There is a view that public money ought not be spent on a sacred site.

But this is an architecturally historic building that has been judged across the borders as a landmark and as a cultural resource."

But having the prestigious National Historic Landmark designation can also foster false impressions about the financial health of a site's owners and their ability to maintain it.

"Grace is in a unique position because of its landmark status, which now qualifies it for funding programs it previously was not eligible for," said Ann Friedman, director of the New York Landmarks Conservancy's Sacred Sites Program. "But because it's an older, larger church with a large endowment, people assume the endowment will take care of restoration projects, and that's not always true.

"Though Santa Sava and Grace have different congregations and endowments, they both have good fundraising track records," she continued. "And they both have great respect for the architectural history of their buildings. They are committed and are tackling their restorations by phases." The conservancy has been assisting both churches since the 1990s.

Fortunately, Grace Church is no stranger to innovative fundraising tactics. To help pay for the scaffolding and protective sidewalk covering — a \$150,000 cost — the church gave businesses an opportunity to be real angels by leasing advertising space on the sidewalk shed. Leveraging its landmark status and fortuitous location, Grace could charge a premium for space on the novel billboard. Citigroup was the first to take the leap of faith with its "Live Richly" campaign.

Even with assistance from the Robert A. Wilson endowment, Grace was still pressed for funds, so outgoing priest-in-charge, the Rev. David Rider, decided to put chunks of the church on the auction block. Ninety stones were removed from the top 25 feet of the spire during restoration, and those too damaged to be replaced were put up for auction. The carving from the very top of the spire fetched \$6,500, and other small, grayish clumps sold in the \$400s. The auction, organized by the church's men's group, netted \$47,000 — less than what it costs to repair one bell tower wall.

Grace's new rector came on board July 1 and will be working with Hammel on new fundraising campaigns, which Hammel says will include reaching out to the local business community. One of the challenges, she said, is to emphasize the separation of church and state.

"My sense is there's a lot of unity in maintaining this as a New York City landmark," she said. "It's healthy to have people coming in and out of a church, even if they don't go to church. And our approach is to not confuse mission with artifact." ■

More information about Santa Sava can be found at 212-242-9240 and stsavanyc.org. More on Grace Church can be found at 212-254-2000 and gracechurchnyc.org. E-mail responses to editor in chief Mark Rifkin at markr@resident.com.