

SAVING THE POE HOUSE

NYU fights Rev. Billy, 'Raven' by JIM DWYER

Published by DAILY NEWS, Sunday, September 10, 2000

We know not the hour, warns the Bible, so here was the Right Reverend Billy Talen preaching from the demolition scaffolding around one of Edgar Allan Poe's homes.

"Nevermore!" he shouted to 100 people cheering him from below.

The Poe residence is one of several 19th-century buildings that New York University wants to tear down on W. Third St. for a new high-rise law school building. The matter is still in court, but Rev. Billy takes no chances.

A guerilla performance artist who is the founding angel of The Church of Stop Shopping, Talen and confederates sneaked onto the demolition site shortly after 6 PM yesterday. He preached to the crowd spilling out of bars and walking along W. Third St. who stopped to laugh and listen.

The police scrambled and sealed off the street and carefully climbed onto the scaffold and surrounded Talen.

"Shame! Shame!" called the people on the streets as he was led off the scaffold.

In 1845, while living at 85 W. Third St., Poe wrote "The Raven." Or maybe not. A banner floated over the sidewalk: Reverend Billy and the Ravenettes Say No to NYU Expansion.

An officer unstrung it from the scaffold and tossed it to the sidewalk.

"Vandals!" someone hollered.

Next to go was the giant black vinyl raven, which was unceremoniously tossed over.

Before police arrived, on the scaffold was an actual Poe relative -- or, at least, a possible actual one.

"When I was a small child, I was told about a family member's deathbed confession that we were somehow related to Poe," says Tony Torn, the son of actors Rip Torn and Geraldine Page. He read to the crowd from "The Raven."

At that moment, a small colossus stopped to watch the action. David Margolis, 90, an artist whose prominent mural adorns the entry to Bellevue Hospital, instantly linked history to those very sidewalks.

"I knew Eugene O'Neill when he lived right where the law school is now," Margolis said, "Mark Twain lived right where the law school is now," Margolis said. "Mark Twain lived at Ninth Street and 5th Avenue, and we raised \$17,000 to try to save that place. How many Edgar Allan Poe's does a country get?"

Why would a great University tear down a literary landmark? The official answer is that the law school needs the space. It's not much of a Poe landmark since he only lived there for short periods in 1844 and 1845, and Poe wouldn't recognize the place with all the changes. The true answer is this: NYU has become one of the hottest schools in the country, the law faculty among the most prestigious, and it wants the space.

Demolishing the house where Poe lived for a few months is easy to name as a bad thing; it's much more difficult to put your finger on the poor cultural and civic hygiene of dropping a high-rise tower into a neighborhood that, at

its most endearing, is no more than three or four stories. Hop on the carousel of history for a minute.

After World War II, the GI bill put college education within the reach of millions. NYU, then a backwater, was expanding and needed faculty housing. The school was obliged through the efforts of Robert Moses, the building czar of New York, who used "slum-clearing" powers to clear out a commercial section of Greenwich Village.

Developers erected and NYU bought slab apartment towers near LaGuardia place. The AIA Guide to New York says these are the "antithesis of Village scale and charm." These buildings, among other events, aroused a brilliant thinker named Jane Jacobs, who wrote "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," and people started to think about preserving old neighborhoods, rather than bulldozing them.

Since 1973, when NYU shut down its main undergraduate campus in University Heights in the Bronx, its growth around Washington Square has been spectacular. "Felicity," the teen melodrama TV show, is set around NYU's campus.

The university got more than 30,000 applications last year, and in its promotional material packages a good education with the opportunity to live in "Greenwich Village, one of New York City's most creative and energetic communities and a historic mecca for renowned artists, writers, and scholars." Among these, NYU boasts, was Edgar Allan Poe.

Lynne Brown of NYU says that saving the Poe residence would be expensive because it doesn't meet modern building codes, and for the law school to straddle it would require, in effect, erecting two buildings.

The ground in Manhattan is expensive, so the new tower will go up, rising to 169 feet, the equivalent of 17 stories. It will involve destroying not only the Poe building, but also Judson House, a gathering place for modern artists in the mid-20th century.

None of this seems to be inspired planning or thinking by NYU. West Third is pleasant because of its human scale. The sky is worth something, too, even if the debt to a specific moment is easier to rally around than any obligation to unknown people walking down a city street in shadows.

"If the house where Poe lived and wrote can't give out an unearthly shriek as it's dragged into whatever hole it's going, then we're going to do it," Torn says.