

Feature



by Karen Scordelis

Saving a church: The fight goes on to preserve architecture and heritage

The parishioners of the Oakland Church of the Assumption gathered for its consecration on the church steps in the 1920s.

For weeks the old Brush Street church in Oakland stood alone in its neighborhood, an eerie, temple-like remnant to some passers-by, but to the local Greek community a structure alive with the echoes of weddings, baptisms, and holy days past. For blocks the buildings and trees had been leveled into dust lots awaiting the renewal of this poor east Oakland neighborhood. State plans called for a new freeway to cut through the area, and only the old Greek church stood fast in its path.

Though the church held many memories for East Bay Greeks, the community had been settled since the early 60s in its award-winning Church of the Ascension in the Oakland hills. The Brush Street church had been sold to a black Baptist congregation, and most of the area's Greek-Americans had lost interest in the structure which once served as the focal point of Greek immigrant life in the region. When the Grove-Shaftner Freeway was approved, there was no outcry to save the doomed edifice.

None, that is, until Oakland parishioner Mary Mousalimas took up the cause. She first contacted CalTrans, the state highway department, three and a half years ago at the suggestion of State Senator Nicholas Petris, also a member of the Oakland church.

"When I called I was surprised to find that the CalTrans people were delighted to hear from me," Mrs. Mousalimas says. They wondered why it took so long for someone from the community to pop up to save the church. I told them I would have called sooner, but I had no idea they intended to pave the state with concrete."

CalTrans was anxious to give the community title to the property and escape the problems of demolishing the structure, engaging in a fight with preservationists, or paying to have the building moved if the preservationists got their way. Wary of their motives, Mrs. Mousalimas and a small group of supporters turned down their offer and began a battle to have

the structure declared an historic landmark.

A preliminary CalTrans architectural survey of the area had determined the church to have no historical value, but on closer examination by University of California professor of architecture Loren Partridge, the structure was seen to be the only

viated much of the trauma of uprooting most immigrant groups faced upon arrival in the United States, therefore making it easier for the Greek to become part of the mainstream of American life."

The proposal went on to say, "This building is a symbol of struggle and survival in America—it is the symbol

and 10th Streets in Oakland; the tab for moving the structure came to \$240,000, paid for by the State of California.

Mrs. Mousalimas says the next step is to raise funds for the community to purchase the building and then to find a suitable occupant. Several congregations have expressed interest in using the building for church services.

"We have become a thorn in the side of the state, I think, so the assessment of the purchase price of the building has been lowered from \$38,000 to \$30,000. We are hoping to work something out so that we can assume ownership for substantially less. The building will need a new foundation and stairs before it can be used by any group, so there will be additional expenses once it is purchased."

The church was moved in the spring of 1979, and a decision on purchase of the building is expected around the first of next year. During the past



The church as it looked on the day of its consecration.

building in the Bay Area which was designed both in the Beaux Arts manner and with clear examples of neo-Greek architectural influence. The distinction, combined with its traditional Byzantine floor plan, its ornamentation, its culturally unique interior features, and its place as the second oldest Greek Orthodox Church in California, went a long way toward achieving local, state and finally national landmark status for the structure.

But Mrs. Mousalimas' landmark proposal stressed more than architecture in her fight for preservation. Backed by a 1966 Congressional act calling for the preservation of our cultural heritage, Mrs. Mousalimas emphasized that the church had served as a meeting place and cultural center, as well as a place of worship, for the Greek immigrants who began arriving in the East Bay as early as 1890. The church, the proposal said, gave a sense of continuity to the transplanted Greek immigrant: "It alle-



of the struggle to fulfill the 'American Ideal.' The building's preservation is... a tangible reminder of the history of the United States... (and one of the) irreplaceable resources of this city."

Once the landmark status had been won, the state took over the responsibility for moving the church out of the path of the freeway. A suitable location was found only one block away from the original Brush Street site—a short enough distance away to prevent damage to the church in transit. The structure now stands empty at the corner of Castro



With the structure raised on blocks, building movers prepared the church for its one-block journey.

a temporary building, and they wanted to leave the past and concentrate on the future," Mrs. Mousalimas said.

"But as I see it, somebody had to do something for the early immigrants, for the real old-timers, to commemorate their suffering and their struggle to build a new life for us, their children, in this country.

"My purpose is not to push religion, but the church was the cornerstone of their community, and I had to do what I could to make sure that heritage survived."



summer the California State Assembly passed a bill stating that future use of the church must be for a "nonprofit purpose which provides access to the public and preserves the

historical condition, integrity, and dignity of the property." The bill also says that before selling the property it must first be offered to Mrs. Mousalimas' group, the Committee to Save the Brush Street Church.

The battle has been a long one for Mary Mousalimas, but she said it is a battle she had to take on. "That church building is a landmark in the lives of the Greek immigrants. It represents a continuity of their culture from the old world to the new. It was their foothold in the past and their stake in the future, and it gave a cohesion to their lives here."

Mrs. Mousalimas' son, Terry, a recent graduate of Holy Cross School of Theology, is beginning work on a history of the East Bay Greek Orthodox community, a work which should fully document the importance of the church in the lives of the immigrants.