

Historic House May Get New Life at Last

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

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In the more than 200 years that it has stood on the East River waterfront, the home of Capt. Joseph Rose has endured few periods as trying as the last decade, while New York City officials have tried and tried again to salvage what has become little more than a brick shell.

But there may be new hope for the four-story Captain Rose House at 273 Water Street, which is the third-oldest building in Manhattan, with one of the raciest histories of any of New York's structural antiquities.

It has been auctioned for \$325,000 to two Manhattan real-estate investors, Edmond Ohebshalom and Eli Sakhai. Mr. Ohebshalom said they hope to renovate it with a ground-floor store and offices above.

Under terms set by the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, which controls the house, they cannot complete the purchase until their plans are approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The house, between Peck Slip and Dover Street, is within the South Street Seaport Historic District. The building must be rehabilitated and cannot be enlarged.

Looking New, Feeling Old

"The key is to make this building look new but feel old," said the city's Housing Commissioner, Abraham Biderman. He said builders were "daunted" by the challenge of retaining the small structure's historic character while making it functional and economically attractive for the contemporary market.

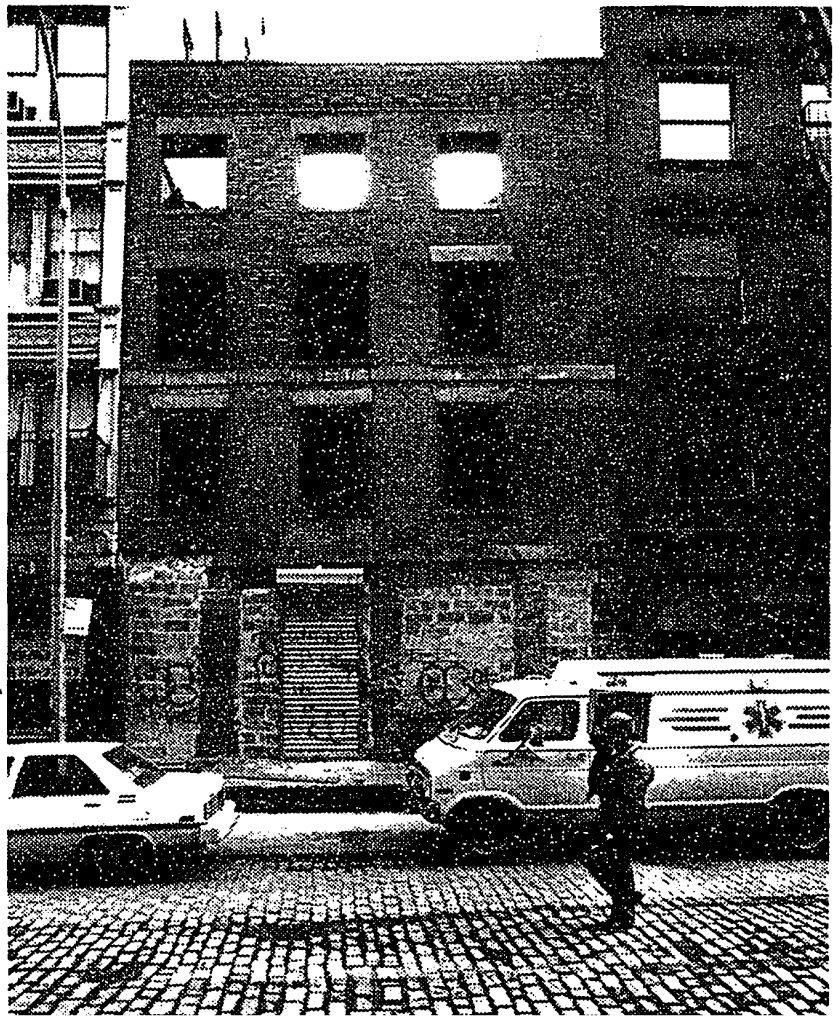
Although the house is in a state of near ruin, some of its facade — the second floor in particular — is a handsome testament to 18th-century building crafts, with Flemish-bond brickwork and splayed brownstone lintels and even some wooden window frames that are presumed to be original.

But from the street, the sky can be seen through the fourth-floor windows. Alarming large cracks run through the exterior walls. The interior is badly charred and appears to be close to collapse.

It is not known exactly when Captain Rose built his house, which is 25 feet wide and originally was two stories and an attic, but it was standing in the 1780's. In Manhattan, only St. Paul's Chapel on lower Broadway and the Morris-Jumel Mansion uptown predate it.

At the time of its construction, before land was filled, the Rose property was on the riverfront and the captain kept his brig, industry, moored behind his house. When he was not in New York, Captain Rose sailed as far as the Bay of Honduras, trading in sugar, mahogany, indigo, rice and tobacco.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the house was an apothecary shop, rooming house, hotel and brothel. Its most notorious incarnation was as Kit Burns's Sportsman's Hall, a saloon that kept its patrons entertained by staging bloody fights among dogs or between dogs and rats. In 1869, it was converted into a



The New York Times/Ruby Washington

The brick shell that is all that is left of the Captain Rose House, the third oldest building in Manhattan, at 273 Water Street. A proposed sale of the house cannot be completed until the buyers' plans are approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

From captain's house to brothel to a store and offices?

"home for fallen women."

More conventionally in the 20th century, the building was a loft and storehouse. In 1904, after a fire in the upper floors, it was expanded to four stories. It was abandoned by 1976, when squatters started a fire which consumed the roof and caused severe interior damage.

City officials took the building from its owner in 1976 for failure to pay taxes. In 1983, the housing agency tried to dispose of the house under a 30-year lease to a development team that included the architectural firm of Beyer Blinder Belle, specialists in restoration work. But that arrangement fell apart. A second attempt in 1985 failed.

Commissioner Biderman said

housing officials finally determined that leasing the building would not work but selling it might, "as long as we could maintain restrictions so that the building could retain its historic context."

"Obviously, it would be more financially attractive to a buyer," Mr. Biderman said. "That's why we got someone to bite this time."

Mr. Ohebshalom said he became aware of the Rose house while looking through a catalogue of city properties for a Sept. 27 auction. He was attracted to the property, he said, because of his love for the South Street area. There were no other bidders, and \$325,000 was the minimum price.

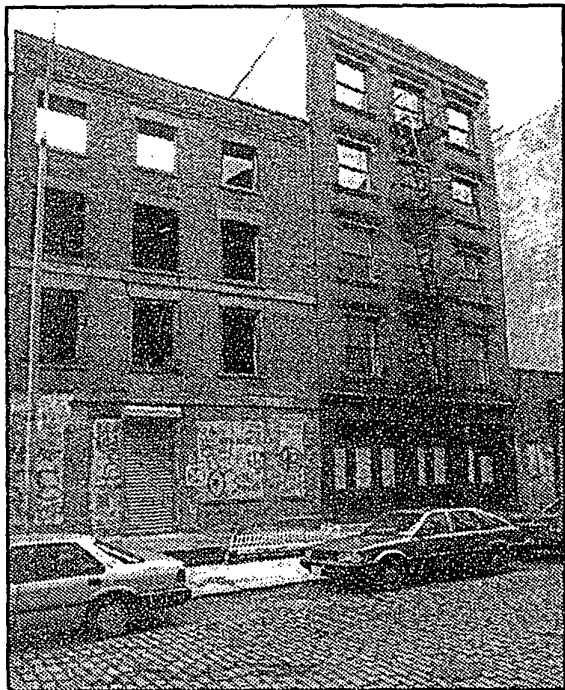
This would be the first major construction project Mr. Ohebshalom has undertaken, although he described himself as being "in the real-estate business for the past five years." He said Mr. Sakhai was also involved in real estate.

Mr. Ohebshalom said a housing official "gave me some hope that it will be much easier to do" than it appears. But, he conceded, "when you look at the building, you get scared."

Hard Times For Old House

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POSTINGS



Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

Vacant 273 Water Street.

A Shell of a Saloon

Hard Times For Old House

Manhattan's third oldest structure, a brick house at 273 Water Street, has not had an easy couple of centuries. And things are not getting any easier.

Built in the 1770's by Capt. Joseph Rose, the building was a notorious saloon in the mid-19th century where dog fights were staged. The city seized it in 1976 for failure to pay taxes. Today, it is a shell.

Rehabilitation efforts fizzled in 1983 and 1985. But in 1989 the property was auctioned for \$325,000 to Edmond Ohebshalom and Ely Sakhai, who planned to turn it into a store, with offices upstairs.

Now that plan has dissolved in a contract dispute. A month ago, Justice Martin Schoenfeld of State Supreme Court ruled that the contract was illusory because it allowed the city to withdraw from the deal for any reason. A lawyer for the buyers, Stewart E. Rothman, said his clients could get back their \$65,000 down payment, "as if the transaction never occurred." But the city's Law Department is planning to appeal.