

Limestone Remnant of Fifth Avenue's Chateau Days

Ukrainian Institute plans a modest restoration.

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

BIG mansion, limited budget. That's what the Ukrainian Institute of America has with its magnificent but slightly dog-eared 1898 chateau at 2 East 79th Street. Now the owners are beginning a modest restoration campaign for this refreshingly unrestored house.

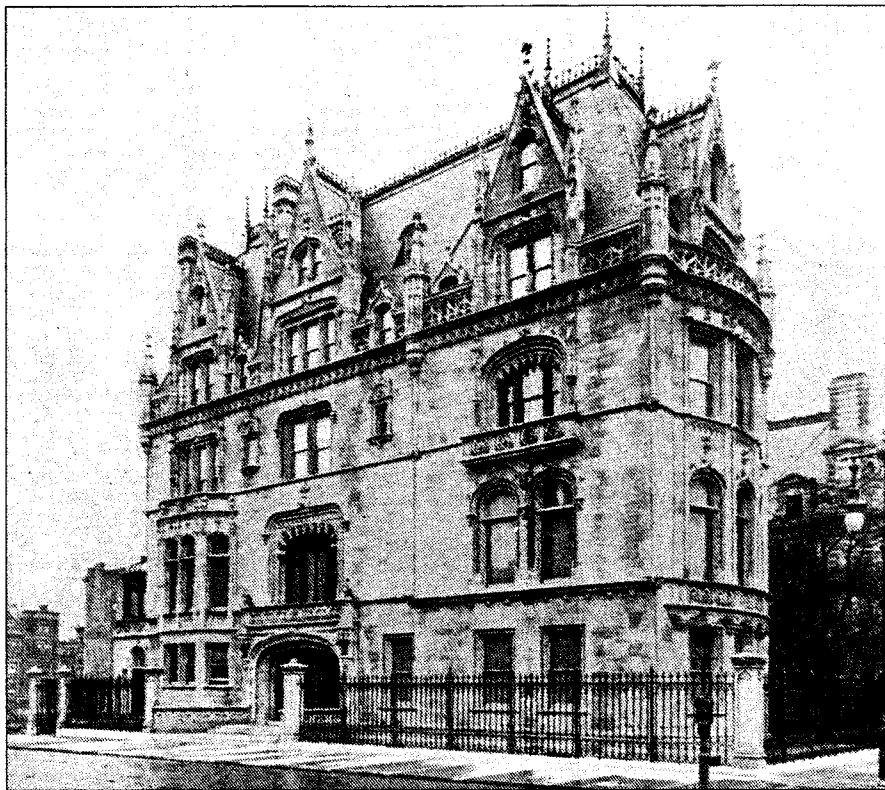
In 1897 Isaac D. Fletcher, a banker and broker, retained the architect C. P. H. Gilbert for a new house at the southeast corner of 79th and Fifth, and Gilbert delivered a design in limestone of the French Gothic style so characteristic of his work. The Fletcher house is marked by a profusion of crockets, pinnacles, moldings and other details that make Gilbert's elaborate Warburg house of 1907 (at 92d Street and Fifth Avenue, now the Jewish Museum) seem relatively chaste.

In an article in the Real Estate Record & Guide in 1899, an anonymous critic generally praised the design (especially the rather plain east wall) but noted that much of the ornament was ecclesiastical rather than domestic in origin. The writer closed with the observation that the Fletcher mansion had "too much the air of an archeological reproduction to be accepted as an appropriate New York City house of 1898."

The 1905 census recorded Fletcher in the house with his wife, Mary, and eight staff, mostly of Scandinavian origin. It is of interest that Fletcher chose the side-street address instead of a Fifth Avenue one, just as Isaac Brokaw had with his 1891 house across the street on the northeast corner, at 1 East 79th.

Fletcher died in 1917 and left the house and his art collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Met sold the house to Harry F. Sinclair, a self-made oil prospector who had founded the Sinclair Oil Company in 1916. Sinclair was occupying the house in the 1920's when the Teapot Dome scandals of the Harding Administration broke over him. Sinclair was accused, with Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall, of conspiring to defraud the government in a lease of oil reserves owned by the Navy in Teapot Dome, Wyo. Fall served time for related offenses; Sinclair was acquitted, although his lease of the reserve was canceled.

In 1930 Sinclair sold the house to Augustus



Office for Metropolitan History

Van Horne Stuyvesant Jr. Stuyvesant and his sister, Anne, descendants of Gov. Peter Stuyvesant and rich with inherited real estate, had been driven by commerce from their house at 3 East 57th Street, where they lived together; both were unmarried.

Anne Stuyvesant died in 1938, and the article "Death and Taxes" in Fortune magazine of July 1939 remarked that the Fifth Avenue mansions had become "symbols not of power but of decay" — of the 72 private houses then left on Fifth Avenue, 33 were closed. The article reported that even a moderate-sized house required 10 servants at a yearly payroll of \$14,000, with \$4,000 alone in food for the staff. The bare minimum for keeping a house open was \$30,000 a year. According to Joel Honig, a New York City historian, consumer price index and other information indicates that the \$30,000 would be about \$325,000 today.

The magazine reported that Stuyvesant

"eats utterly alone at the big dining room table ... served by Vernon, the butler, and an assisting footman."

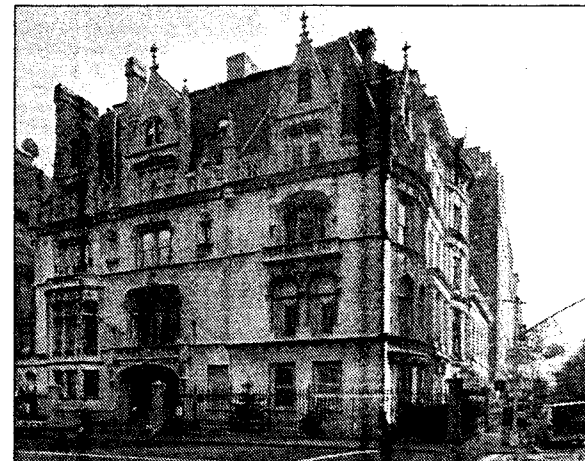
Stuyvesant died in 1953 and was buried in the family vault after services at St. Mark's in-the-Bouwerie, at Second Avenue and 10th Street. The New York Times reported that in the front left pew, "Ernest Vernon, Mr. Stuyvesant's white-haired, ruddy-faced butler, dressed in formal black, sat alone, weeping into a handkerchief."

IN 1955 the Ukrainian Institute of America bought the house. Founded in 1948 by William Dzus, an inventor, the institute is dedicated to the culture, history, art and music of Ukraine, now an independent nation but at the time part of the Soviet Union. Walter Baranetsky, president of the institute since 1990, remembers the elation of buying the elegant house. "Coming from postwar Europe, we felt we had reached the

highest level," he said. "You could hear the muses flying."

Since that time the institute has offered concerts, lectures, conferences and exhibits, although it is relatively unknown compared to most of the public institutions along Museum Mile. And caring for its elaborate building is a burden for the organization; it is "our glory and our problem," says Mr. Baranetsky, a retired vice president of Morgan Guaranty who came to the United States from Lvov after World War II. He estimates it now takes \$150,000 a year just to keep the building open.

This fall, at a projected cost of \$250,000, the 400-member institute will begin a limited roof repair project. According to Joseph Levine, the institute's architect, about 25 percent of the slate will be removed and replaced, and the valleys and gutters around the dormers — where leaks have been developing — will be repaired. The



Jack Manning/The New York Times

The Isaac D. Fletcher mansion in 1898, left, shortly after its completion. Bought in 1955 by the Ukrainian Institute of America, the building, above in current photo, is to undergo repairs.

elaborate cresting on the roof — long gone — cannot be restored in this budget. Andrew Paschuk, a Ukraine-born engineer on the board of directors, said the \$250,000 is "just a Band-Aid," as the institute faces the replacement of its ventilation and plumbing system and a troublesome complex of internal drainpipes from the roof.

A walk through the Fletcher house is a dual time trip. On the one hand, the house is astonishingly intact, even down to the woodwork in the servants' areas; the occasional modernization so often seen in big old houses is entirely absent, as if the Stuyvesant butler had locked up for the last time just yesterday.

But it is not only the modernizer but also the restorer who has remained at bay, and so the Fletcher house also recalls the early 1960's, before the full swing of the preservation movement, when there seemed no hope at all for the Fifth Avenue mansions and historic buildings in general. The scruffy roof, the peeling paint on the windows, the rusting stains from the flagpoles, the slightly empty look all evoke the New York mansion of a time when such buildings were just dinosaurs on their way to extinction.

Indeed Mr. Baranetsky clearly recalls the Brokaw house across the street, which was demolished in 1964 for an apartment building amid growing cries for a landmarks preservation law. "We wanted to cry to see that building going down — it was like our twin," he said, looking out the window to the plain, bare tower across the way, whose residents have benefited ever since from the fact that the Fletcher house has survived. ■