

## SEISMIC STABILIZATION PROCEEDS AT ST. DOMINIC'S

JUN 10 1988

San Francisco newspapers reported in March 1985 that St. Dominic's Church in the Western Addition was in danger of being demolished and replaced. The reports were somewhat misleading. Engineers had indeed become concerned over the structure's seismic safety. However, there was never a question of saving the church but of finding a way to save it that would respect its architectural and aesthetic integrity. Today, that way has been found, and the structural solution comes right out of the Middle Ages.

The history of the church goes back to 1863 when Dominican Fathers were authorized to establish a priory in the farther reaches of the Western Addition. For \$6,000, the Fathers purchased a square block of sand dunes now bounded by Bush, Steiner, Pierce and Pine Streets. There they built the first St. Dominic's, a "pure Gothic" structure "free from extravagant ornamentation," and dedicated it in 1873.

Ten years later, the population of the Western Addition had grown tremendously, and Father Raymond Johns, a Dominican who had designed the Order's church in Benicia, sketched out plans for a new St. Dominic's. Architect T.J. Welsh completed the drawings and the first church moved to the middle of the block on Pine Street to serve as a parish hall.

On October 7, 1883, the cornerstone for the new church was laid, but construction proceeded slowly as the Dominicans had trouble raising the necessary funds. By 1893, however, the church was substantially completed.

The *Monitor*, the archdiocesan newspaper, described the new church with its

178-foot twin towers as a "substantial brick structure of Basilican form in the style of the 16th century." Its interior was completely free of columns or pillars and could seat over 2,000 people. In 1898, an organ was added, but plans for fresco interior walls were

feel of the great Gothic churches of Europe more clearly than in other structures in San Francisco.

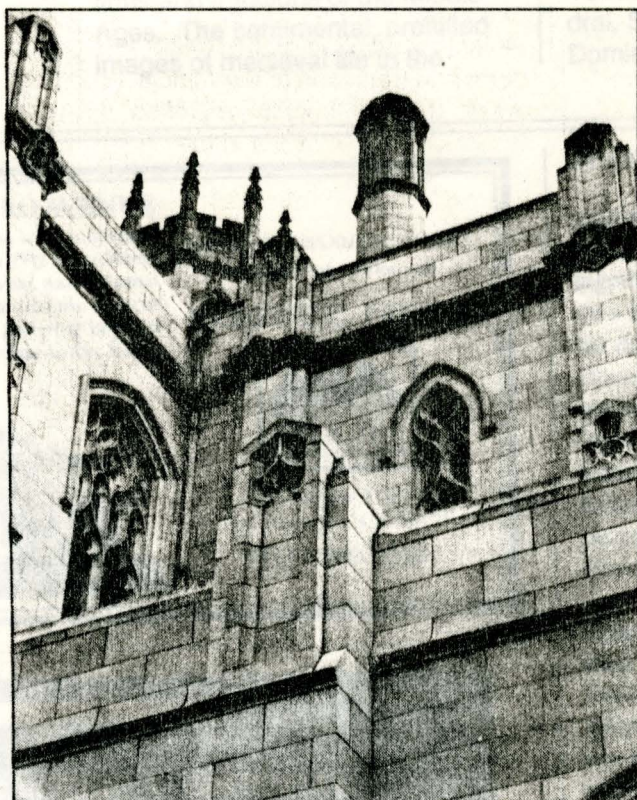
Built on a more modest scale than the church it replaced, the new St.

Dominic's seats 1,200 people. Its single, richly ornamented tower rises 120 feet into the air, a clear landmark in an otherwise low-rise neighborhood. The stone and wood carvings both interior and exterior, particularly in the confessionals and choir stalls, and the stained-glass windows exhibit excellent craftsmanship. Among the decorative elements on the interior, salvaged from the church destroyed in 1906, are sculpture groups depicting the Stations of the Cross.

In 1984, the Dominican Fathers considered making alterations to the sanctuary of the church. The engineers hired to do the structural study determined there was a good chance that the swaying motion set off by an earthquake could cause the walls to separate and the roof to collapse. The architectural firm of Esherick, Homsey, Dodge and Davis, working with engineers

Rutherford and Chekene, considered and rejected means of seismic upgrading that would coarsen the appearance of the church and require interior bracing or blocking of windows. Instead, they hit upon a solution, announced in May 1987, that reached back to the Middle Ages. Flying buttresses would reinforce the structure and carry the thrust of an earthquake outside and away from the walls down into the ground.

Specifically, plans call for the contractors to rebuild the upper part of the walls to install a "ring beam" of



*Buttresses will "fly" from the top of twenty-foot piers to the point of stress on the exterior wall at the ring beam along the roof line.*

never realized. Then in 1906, the second St. Dominic's was virtually destroyed by the earthquake.

The congregation of St. Dominic's moved in October of 1906 into a frame structure that was to serve as temporary quarters until the present St. Dominic's could be built. Designed by English-born architect Arnold Constable, in cooperation with the Seattle firm of Beezer Brothers, the present Gothic Revival church captures the look and

*Please see ST. DOMINIC'S, page 8*



## Gothic and Gothic Revival

In the 12th and 13th centuries, after more than 1500 years of the dominance of classical modes in architecture, builders in Europe evolved a "modern" style. New techniques of vault construction; the use of pointed arches, probably derived from Moslem influences in Spain and Sicily; and the innovation of exterior, "flying" buttresses made possible the great volume of space and the walls of stained glass typical of cathedrals from this period.

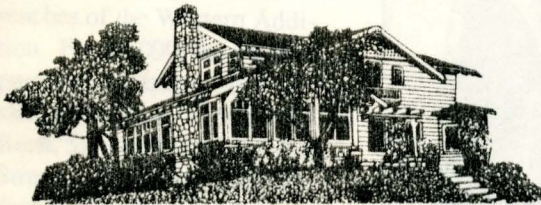
It was Giorgio Vasari in the 16th century who tagged this style "Gothic" to imply the barbarism of a style that deviated from the classical principles of design favored by the Renaissance. The Gothic regained favor only in a general medieval revival of the late 18th and the 19th centuries that was in part a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and to the French Revolution's violent repudiation of the institutions and traditions of the Middle Ages. The sentimental, prettified images of medieval life in the

Romantic novels of Walter Scott and the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti were expressions of a movement that encompassed the construction of "new Gothic" buildings in Europe.

Until well into the 20th century in America, Gothic Revival architecture was favored in the construction of some noteworthy churches, including St. Patrick's and St. John the Divine in New York and, locally, Grace Cathedral, St. Paul's Lutheran, and St. Dominic's.

### OFFERED FOR SALE - 90 CEDRO AVENUE

Spacious and elegant brown shingled home with panoramic ocean views. Designed and constructed in 1912 by architect Joseph Leonard as his own residence. Living room, formal dining room and entry hall have extraordinary details: burl-cut redwood panelling, beams, cabinetry and glittering beveled glass doors. Four bedrooms plus sunroom, three baths, family room, garden and garage.



SHOWN BY APPOINTMENT ONLY  
For further information call:

**DORENE C. GOULD**



2001 Lombard Street  
San Francisco, CA 94123  
(415) 929-1500

*Providing the ultimate in responsive,  
personalized service and competitive financing  
to the Bay Area's luxury home market...*

*Please call James H. Herbert II,  
Gordon R. Taubenheim, or Katherine August  
for a personal consultation.*

**FIRST REPUBLIC**  
BANCORP INC.

221 Pine Street, San Francisco, CA 94104 (415) 392-1400

ST. DOMINIC'S, *continued from page 7*

reinforced concrete at the roof line. This will, in effect, bind the structure together. Twenty-foot high piers will then be installed to line the outside of the nave, transept and apse of the church. A buttress will "fly" from the top of each pier 30 feet to the point of stress on the exterior wall at the ring beam. Each of the reinforced concrete buttresses will be clad in silvery gray facing to blend with the existing structure.

Apart from giving St. Dominic's an even more authentic Gothic appearance, one of the main advantages of the proposed seismic upgrade is that it will not alter or obstruct the interior of the church in any way.

Costing \$8 million, this project is the most expensive undertaking in the history of the ten-state Western Dominican Province. Already \$1 million has been raised from St. Dominic's ethnically and economically diverse parishioners. Now the parish is engaged in a full-scale fundraising effort aimed at collecting the necessary balance from individuals, foundations and corporations interested in helping to preserve this excellent piece of San Francisco's Gothic Revival architectural heritage.