

Nibbling Away at the Upper East Side

New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 26, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 13

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The proposed Metropolitan Museum Historic District, a beautiful and embattled section of Manhattan's Upper East Side, was recently the subject of designation hearings by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The neighborhood along Fifth Avenue from 78th to 86th Streets and along the side streets to Madison Avenue, including parts of Madison, is an area of great style, quality and elegance. The common denominator of these mansions, brownstones and apartment houses goes beyond their solid stone and fine detail to a singular amenity of scale and cohesive character.

Because some of the handsomest buildings near the museum are occupied by commercial or relatively poor institutions, their owners' prime concern is not preservation but profit. That means sale and demolition for incompatible new construction. Three town houses

have been destroyed opposite the museum, and a battle is raging now over the nature of the apartment house replacement. At best, it will be brutally out of scale.

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the need for protecting this area's uncommon character than the fact that among its chief opponents are an institution that has recently sold its landmark quality buildings to a developer, and a real-estate investor who has executed that time-honored New York ploy of assembling a block of brownstones for the bulldozer.

Too much of New York has gone that route. This irreplaceable neighborhood is an easy target for destructive spot development. The process is inevitable without historic district designation, and it can happen even with designation if opponents are allowed to nibble away at the district's boundaries. New York cannot afford it.

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