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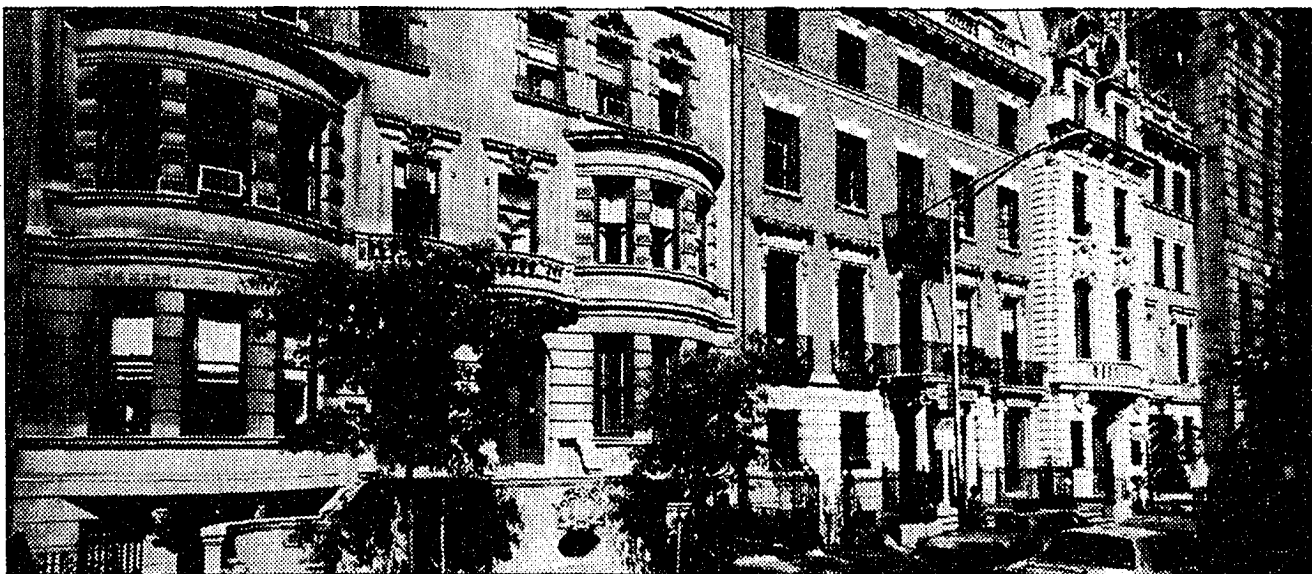
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The 'Side Street Spoilers'



The New York Times/Marilynn K. Yee

The small, "elegant" buildings under threat on West 54th Street

Rodchenko in point of fact is not as well known as his colleagues. Thanks to the pioneering enthusiasm of Alfred H. Barr Jr., the Museum of Modern Art in New York has a large holding of his work. The antiquarian bookstore called Ex Libris at 160 East 70th Street usually has some of his pub-

lications in stock. But he and his work have not the almost universal currency that can now be ascribed to Tatlin's "Monument to the Third International" and to the no less famous painting by Malevich that is called "White on White." Yet Rodchenko, unlike most of his colleagues, was active at

strictions that is the big-city building game, which constantly tests the power of the city's planners against the power of the real estate community, the city is steadily losing ground. And the process is irreversible.

The name of the development game in New York is outrageous overreaching, with the builders submitting overblown plans and then settling for giveaway compromises. As the current crop of prime site blockbusters has been announced, the public has been made aware of the kind of overbuilding that it is possible to negotiate under the present zoning. There are calls for reform.

But the greatest danger, and the most subtle and insidious destruction, has not been adequately recognized, although it has already begun. With the increasing scarcity of those large avenue sites that every builder wants, they are turning to the side streets, many of which are islands of delight and excellence, and which have been zoned for smaller buildings in recognition of their special nature. It is in these midblocks, with their architecturally superior structures, that much of the city's character and charm, its special beauty and variety, reside. The developers' technique is to attack the zoning to make larger buildings possible, citing "hardship" and requesting variances, doing everything they can to destroy the limited protection that exists. Call them the Side Street Spoilers.

It has already been necessary to fight the battle of East 62d Street twice; for the present, at least, the threat to the style and continuity of one of the handsomer rows of turn-of-the-century townhouses between Fifth and Madison Avenues has been averted. A plan for an apartment house, which involved an increasingly typical set of legal maneuvers based on intricate manipulations of such things as air rights and zoning lot mergers, plus a few requests for height and setback variations, was turned down by the City Planning Commission as a dangerous precedent for similar sites. Possibly because the proposal received a great deal of negative publicity, its promoters did not follow the usual procedure of then going to the Board of Standards and Appeals.

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The Board can, and often does, overrule the Commission in such controversies.

Another side street case that has attracted a great deal of attention is the Museum of Modern Art's plan for a midblock condominium tower on West 53d Street, now going ahead. There has been general agreement that such a tower — this one a real blockbuster — on such a street is unfortunate; again, because it destroys a continuous run of four- and five-story townhouses and brownstones of another era, containing restaurants, shops and galleries that have created an unreproducible ambience and an extremely pleasant kind of street use. The scheme has, in fact, required special legislation and a number of variances. The reason for official and public forbearance, or at least very mixed feelings about the undertaking, is that it is billed as the financially troubled museum's ticket to survival, through new income sources and tax benefits. Even so, immense care has been taken in the siting of the tower by the museum's architects because of the awareness of its inevitable deleterious effect. Particular attention has been paid to the shadow to be cast on the Museum of Modern Art garden, one of the city's most popular amenities.

Does it surprise anyone that another Side Street Spoiler is waiting in the wings to spoil what has been rescued from this questionable enterprise? This one offers an ineluctible lesson in the futility of the kind of elaborate compromise in which nobody wins.

Just across from the Museum of Modern Art on 54th Street is one of the loveliest midblock stretches remaining in midtown. These small, elegant buildings between the Rockefeller Apart-

ments (built long before such houses became a rare commodity) and the University Club at the Fifth Avenue corner, now accommodate miscellaneous functions. But their restricted height and architectural quality also protect the light and ambience of the museum and its garden. Two of these handsome townhouses, Nos. 13 and 15 West 54th Street, and two more backing them at Nos. 20 and 22 West 55th Street, have recently been sold by Laurence S. Rockefeller to Bernard Mendik, of the Mendik Realty Company. To add a touch of catch-22, it is the Rockefeller family that has figured so conspicuously in the efforts to "save" the museum.

In the routine announcement of the sale appear the ominous words, "to eventually improve site." There is only one translation of this real estate language: demolition and construction of a new building as big as the city can be bullied into allowing.

Improving the site here will do three things, none good. It will wreak immediate and irreparable esthetic and environmental damage on 54th and 55th Streets. It will further evade and

erode the intent and purpose of the zoning. And it will cast a dandy shadow on the museum garden.

There are fewer and fewer of these fine, older blocks in midtown Manhattan. They have virtually disappeared because those wonderful people who brought you the 1960 zoning doomed them by allowing big buildings on the side streets as well as the avenues of the central business district. Above 60th Street, and in more residential neighborhoods, the side streets were zoned much lower, with the clear intention of keeping down density and retaining light and air. One odd little pocket of low side-street zoning was left below 60th Street, just west of Fifth Avenue, from the Museum of Modern Art on 53rd through 56th Street. The breaking of that zoning by the museum tower gives any optimistic developer the notion of doing the same with the precedent once set — particularly since he can cite the higher zoning all around him.

Which brings us to another Side Street Spoiler. This one is a builder named Len Zeigelbaum, who, with his architect, Anthony Salvati, is about to "improve" the site at 127-29 East 55th Street. A 15-story office building will

replace a small parking lot that is the only blemish on one of the very few streets of this type left in the 50s. Of course, the cards were stacked against the street and the community (protesting now through a unanimously opposed community planning board) by the over-generous midtown side-street zoning. And true to form, the developer pushed for an even bigger building. In another one of those marvelous compromises, the City Planning Commission brought the size back down within the legal limit (big deal), instead of opposing the scheme on the basis of the principle involved — the need to protect these small midblock sites from inappropriate development.

To build within the permissible limits, the proposed structure still had to get waivers of the zoning requirements for a setback from the street and space for a rear yard, which the Board of Standards and Appeals has given. If those setback and yard requirements would have made it impossible to construct the building, that is exactly what they were meant to do, for very clear environmental reasons. The zoning was written that way, not through oversight or lack of foresight, but for the purpose of control.

Only the Board of Estimate can undo the damage now. Otherwise, an appalling precedent has been set for the city. With the zoning restrictions eased or nullified, every small side-street site, any pair of brownstones lucky enough to have survived, is now "ripe for redevelopment," to use another favorite real-estate phrase. That is bad news for one of the city's most uniquely valuable assets, as well as for the essential balance between the city's massive commercialism and its more intimate charms. It is bad news, in fact, for what makes New York, New York. ■