

Compatibility Called Key to Building Plan

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A bigger battle than the Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight may be shaping up in Greenwich Village, where the city's best urban gladiators live. It is also where a hole on West 11th Street has become a landmark of sorts, and the urban fight is about what will fill the hole. Be-

cause the "town house explosion," as it is already known in instant revolutionary mythology, destroyed

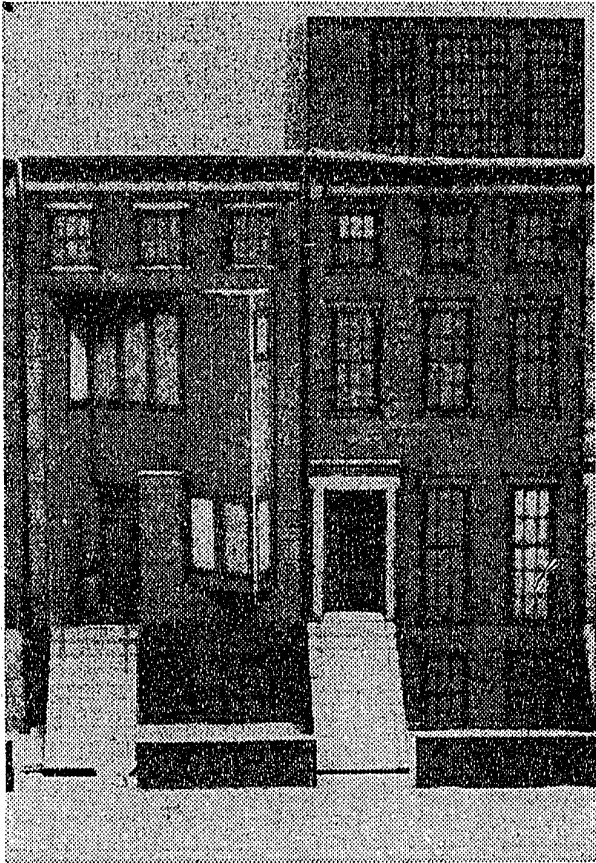
one house of a handsome mid-19th century row officially designated as a city landmark, the Landmarks Preservation Commission must pass on the "appropriateness" of the replacement.

The design submitted to the commission yesterday by the architect, Hugh Hardy, is about to become a new Battle of the Bulge. The house will apparently stand or fall, or be built or not built, on the basis of 24 inches of projecting brick on the building's front.

A Diagonal Plan Inside

What Mr. Hardy has proposed is a skillful, extremely sophisticated and highly controversial blend of old and new. The controversy revolves almost totally around a section of angled facade between the attic story and the basement, recessed about three feet at one side and projecting two feet on the other.

This reflects a diagonal plan on the inside, and indicates clearly that Mr. Hardy does not believe that a house built in 1971 should look like a house built in 1844.



The New York Times
In this model, house at left is Mr. Hardy's proposed replacement for old townhouse destroyed last March.

"I cannot accept the thought of badly reproducing a house of 1844," he said at the hearing. "I have tried to knit the wall of the street back together, but with a structure suitable to ourselves."

Mr. Hardy is one of New York's younger and more

talented architects, and so his solution is not exactly anonymous. But it is based on eight months of painstaking study to find a kind of contemporary harmony that will live well with the past. As in marriage, compatibility is the key word.

It is on the definition of

harmony, or compatibility, that the commission's difficult decision must rest. It was obvious from many Villagers present at the hearing that the only thing they would be happy to see was a reconstruction of the house that was destroyed, perhaps just a little "truer" to the original than later "Federalizing" (stoop removal and door faking) had made it.

The commission can safely settle for such an "archeological" approach, and run no risks other than those of historical and esthetic hypocrisy. This is the school of preservation that believes in reproducing old details with injected plastic in vacuum molds—a kind of false bosom approach. Waxworks, but nice.

Or it can, like the historical city of Savannah, which has an enlightened landmark policy, judge appropriateness in terms of relationships of scale, surface, texture, color, material, general effect and use. When the old fabric is gone, it cannot be brought back. Something must replace it that weds past to present. Done sensitively, without fakery, this is true historical continuity, and the genuine culture of cities.

Twofold Conviction

This is the much harder way, but it has the virtue of historical validity. Mr. Hardy's design has that virtue. It seeks appropriateness without mimicry or make-believe. He has worked conscientiously in the context of a beautiful, if somewhat mutilated, 19th-century survival; he is sensitively aware of the need to relate to it. His refusal to do so through pretending that the past can be built in the present grows out of a moral as well as an esthetic conviction.

Whether the Landmarks Commission shares this conviction remains to be seen. The design they have under advisement is a brilliant attempt at synthesis of new and old. It is a strong statement, and that may be its weakness. Some shading, even a few inches of adjustment can make a difference. In a street where uniformity is not so much real as the product of subtle similarities, a design of conviction and talent can have its proper place.

Mr. Hardy is not willing to pretend that there was no bomb. Or that history of another kind is not now part of West 11th Street. Architecture is not a stageset; it is the continuing evidence of a city's reality. Nothing can bring number 18 to life again. The house is dead; long live the house.