

# Despair of Demolition

## Plans to Raze 79th Street Mansions In Line With City's Destructive Trend

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The seriousness of the news that New York is to lose one of its most distinguished blocks of buildings, including a mansion designated by the Landmarks Preservation Commission as worthy of preservation, is matched only by the apparent hopelessness of doing anything about it.

The proposed demolition of three houses at 79th Street and Fifth Avenue is the latest incident in a trend as surely destructive of the city as if it were being systematically razed. And in a sense, it is.

The majority of the buildings in the more fashionable residential areas that have been torn down since the war for new luxury apartments have been mansions, brownstones and older structures, frequently irreproducible in terms of the economics of today's building market. The loss is in scale, intimacy, history, individuality, architectural quality and the character of the urban scene.

Most important, they provided variety. The apartments that have replaced them are all stamped out of the same mold. The mold is a routine economy model, using standard brick on steel or concrete frames and standard plans and fenestration, dictated purely by the speculative formula of maximum profit to minimum investment.

### Built as Showplaces

The houses on 79th Street were built not as speculative investments with good addresses, but as showplaces. They were among the city's finest examples of the baronial and classical homes of New York's kingly merchants and bankers just before and after the turn of the century. They were extravagant, luxurious constructions designed with pride and pardonable ostentation.

The solid masonry walls of the Brokaw mansion at 1 East 79 Street are several feet thick. Built from 1887 to 1890 by Rose and Stone, it copied a part of Diane de Poitiers's 16th century chateau of Chenonceaux in the Loire Valley. Stained glass, Italian mosaic and marble, elaborately carved woodwork, stone and wood paneled ceilings, murals and French and Italian furnishings completed the interiors.

The house at 984 Fifth Ave-

nue was one of a matching pair constructed in 1905 by Charles F. Rose for two of the Brokaw children. Flamboyant Gothic in style, they were modeled after the late 15-century Palace of Justice at Rouen. With the parent chateau they have added a singular charm to 20th-century Manhattan for almost 60 years.

The mansion at 7 East 79th Street, designed in 1911 by H. Van Buren Magonigle, was built in a more chaste classical manner, as moneyed taste became more restrained. Its finely crafted wrought iron was by Samuel Yellen.

The materials, techniques and styles of these buildings are acknowledged to be virtually extinct. The tragedy of the situation is compounded by the fact that such mansions are almost equally obsolete in terms of maintenance, housekeeping and function.

### Land Worth More

In addition, the land is worth more than the buildings, and the potential income from the site far outstrips any to be derived from the existing structures. The wreckers and builders move in with the inexorability of the laws of economics, and the opposition, of those who would preserve the city's past, have no weapons and no hope.

That, in fact, is the crux of the matter. Preservation legislation prepared by the Landmarks Preservation Commission has been waiting on the Mayor's desk since spring, with no sign of action. The city's tax system not only does not offer aid or assistance to the old or the beautiful, but by making it impractical dooms it to demolition.

The problem of re-use, the only realistic solution to preservation, is not being properly studied by any official agency. Foundations offer generous aid to long-range surveys of how to solve remote crises, but no concrete assistance to closing the economic gap between preservation and destruction.

Above all, there is apathy, the disease that is blamed increasingly for many of the city's ills. Another group of mansions, another landmark, bites the dust. Another faceless blockbuster goes up. This is accepted, with the city's myriad inconveniences. And another of New York's links to the past, one of its few remaining claims to urbanity and style, is gone.