

ARCHITECTURE VIEW
ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Plan to Preserve the Upper East Side

The problems of building cities are enormous, and the way they are built has profound and inescapable consequences. Construction — and its converse, preservation — not only shape the city, they determine its future. Buildings form the framework for all the city's activities; their size, quality and distribution create its appeal and amenity, and control its financial and functional health.

In other words, building is too important to be left to the builders. Only in New York is that considered an odd or heretical statement. With an economy closely tied to boom-and-bust development cycles, this city has fostered an attitude of sanctified laissez-faire toward real estate. And because the stakes are as high as the buildings, New York's developers are particularly skilled in the shrewd manipulation of financial and zoning matters. There is nothing wrong with that kind of market expertise; it just does not necessarily promote a better city as a primary objective.

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Sometimes, it can even threaten the city. A case in point is Manhattan's Upper East Side, a concentration of rich and elegant architecture that includes residential Fifth and Park Avenues and the connecting side streets, as well as the chic, luxurious shops of Madison Avenue, in a glittering, cosmopolitan mix. Here are New York's best addresses — and some of its most valuable real estate. But development usually means demolition, and building plans that would destroy existing scale and character have already been beaten back by local groups — the repeated battle of East 62d Street is one example — while general concern for the beauty and integrity of the area has been mounting.

The city has clearly been faced with a difficult decision. It could allow the free market to continue to operate, which would mean losing a lot of what gives the neighborhood its prized qualities (and attracts the developer), or it could try to preserve the area's unique assets in some way. New York has opted for preservation. On May 19, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the blocks from 59th to 79th Streets, bounded by Fifth and parts of Lexington Avenue, as the East Side Historic District. The Board of Estimate must accept or reject the designation within 90 working days of that date.

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The controversy this has engendered reflects the unusual elements of power and profit that are involved in the area. There is intense lobbying going on now, for and against the designation. And there is a great deal at stake. Builders see the designation as the loss of some of the most desirable development opportunities in Manhattan. Almost everyone else sees development as the loss of a very special place. The real estate community would prefer no preservation controls at all, or at most, partial designation that would leave Madison Avenue and the corners of the

abutting side streets free for redevelopment. Very similar fears and objects were raised before the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District.

Actually, there is nothing really controversial about this designation at all. The Landmarks Commission's action is neither radical nor unusual. It follows local and national precedents of many years' standing — there are already 40 historic districts being administered in New York — and was made after 15 years of study and consultation with concerned and affected groups, from the local community boards to the Real Estate Board of New York and other special interests. Public hearings on the final proposal were held in 1979.

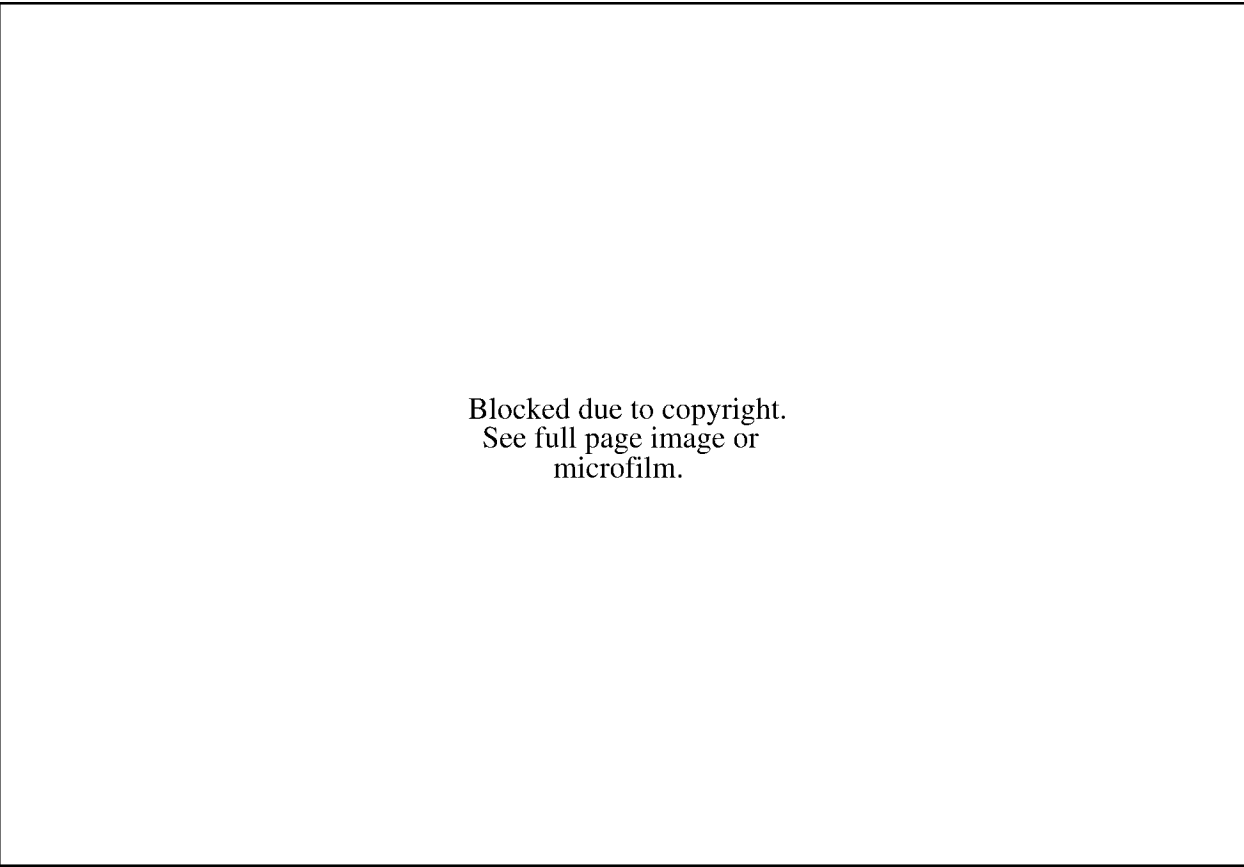
During this time, problems were recognized, objections were aired and revisions were made. The process has resulted in innovative procedures that advance preservation law and deal specifically with the needs of the business and residential communities. The final regulations are meant to encourage, rather than to inhibit the dynamic commercial qualities of the area, as in Madison Avenue storefront remodeling, while protecting special features.

The City Planning Commission has just announced its endorsement of the designation, which amounts to a recommendation for landmark status to the Board of Estimate. The commission is also preparing supportive zoning. This kind of action is not unprecedented; the city's planners took a similar step by authorizing the transfer of air rights over landmarks to assist the designation of Grand Central Terminal, and in the reduction of building heights to reinforce the scale of the Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village Historic Districts.

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Anyone interested in detailed information about the East Side Historic District can find it in the Landmarks Commission's meticulously researched and compiled, 1,400-page designation report. It contains descriptions and recommendations for 1,044 buildings on 59 choice blocks. The Upper East Side is known locally and internationally for the quality and charm that rely on a particular kind of architectural character. Its small, handsome buildings range from the extravagant to the eccentric, following fashionable late 19th- and early 20th-century tastes. Sedate and solid apartment houses line Fifth and Park Avenues, while rows of brownstones and townhouses on the side streets combine the domestic scale and palatial ambitions of earlier New Yorkers. Madison Avenue's shops offer the treasures and pleasures of the world. These streets contain the city's most sophisticated splendors.

Although many of the Madison Avenue shops have



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Stephen L. Seng

A view of East 72d Street—"sophisticated splendors"

familiar international names, their architectural context is unique. The small, 20-foot storefronts that have resulted from the remodeling of the first and second floors of the old houses supply a lively variety of chic, modern designs within an unusual period framework. What goes on over those stores, in terms of their nostalgic, quixotic and richly detailed facades, is as important as what goes on in them.

The arguments against designation usually begin with the statement that the Upper East Side does not qualify as a historic district because it does not have a homogeneous, historic character. This is simply not true. Sixty-nine percent of the buildings are either Beaux Arts or Neo-Georgian in design, two closely related academic styles. Only

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six percent were built after this academic period, and only three percent are later, stylistic intrusions. The entire area was developed for luxury residences within a short, 50-year span, following the creation of Central Park. According to the designation report, this gives the neighborhood "a distinct and cohesive architectural character." The district qualifies as a "tout ensemble," or coherent whole, as established legally many years ago in New Orleans's Vieux Carrée.

Another frequently voiced objection is that the district is too large to administer, and that adding it to the city's other historic districts will cause hopeless bureaucratic burdens and delays that could be disastrous for the businesses in the area. In fact, other cities are successfully administering larger historic districts — Boston's Back Bay and New Orleans's Vieux Carrée, for example — and New York is managing three larger districts now, Greenwich Village, which is twice the size of the East Side District, Park Slope and Brooklyn Heights.

Fears are expressed that landmark controls will cause expensive interference with essential commercial activity, particularly in storefront remodeling. To meet this critical concern, the legislation has been designed to speed or eliminate reviews wherever possible. Two-thirds of Madison Avenue's 307 shopfronts in the district area can be remodeled "as of right," or without approvals. Those with some protected features will require minimal review; only three buildings are listed for detailed review. Procedures have been revised for speed and efficiency.

Some opponents argue that landmark designation should be limited to individual structures of superior quality. But individual landmarks simply will not do what is necessary here. The harmonious avenues and blocks, or "tout ensemble," could still be disfigured. In fact, district designation is far

more common than building designation in most cities; it is usually preferred for legal and administrative reasons.

The real estate community has been asking for the exclusion of Madison Avenue from the district, saying that designation would be too restrictive for this prime, commercial part of town. But that would leave side street fragments cut off from their proper historical and architectural context, something the Planning Commission makes a point of noting in its review. And by releasing most of the storefronts from controls, the necessary freedom is supplied.

If reviews of storefronts can be dispensed with, the next argument follows, then why have controls for the rest of the building? The answer is that the storefronts are on the first and second floors, and they have already been changed many times. The upper floors are either intact or close to their original state. And it is precisely the variety of the original, historic details above the shopfronts, in combination with the fashionable street facades, that create the avenue's special ambience. For buildings that lack such features, controls are loosened or eliminated.

Still another argument suggests that the desirable height and scale that is characteristic of the area could be kept through zoning, rather than by imposing the more restrictive landmark designation. This fails to recognize that the size of a building and the style of a building are not the same thing. A brick box (new) and an Italianate palazzo (old) can fill the same space, or zoning envelope. The palazzo can be replaced by the box, unless

landmark designation discourages demolition. If replacement is not economically desirable right now, that is a factor that could change. The point is to protect what is there, under all conditions.

The most serious charge being made is that preservation is encroaching dangerously on planning. The fact is that the City Charter has carefully separated the two functions. Planning controls deal with what can be built in the future; preservation controls are concerned with what has been built in the past. Planning deals with the impact of use, bulk and scale; it cannot, and should not, address matters of style. Preservation focuses only on questions of architectural style and historical context. Inevitably, both preservation and planning determine the nature and quality of the urban environment, and controls of any kind affect land use. But the expertise required, the basis for judgment, and the judgments themselves are totally different in law and in practice; there is no inherent conflict of role or responsibility.

Ideally, the two functions should reinforce each other, but they can set up conflicting tensions if they operate at cross purposes or with inadequate agency communication. In New York, the Planning Commission is required by the City Charter to review and comment on landmark designation in the light of planning objectives. In the case of the East Side Historic District, the two agencies are working together in a sensitive and cordial collaboration that could be a model for other cities. The Planning Commission proposes two kinds of zoning revision: reducing the height of buildings in some parts of the district, with particular attention to

the midblocks, and revising existing special district provisions to eliminate plazas and arcades, in order to make new construction fit into the historic context.

Finally, there is the philosophical question of change, particularly in a dynamic city like New York. If change has always taken place, and change is responsible for much of the Upper East Side's admired amenity, then why should we try to stop it now? Unfortunately, the factors responsible for the kind of change that created the character of the Upper East Side stopped operating by 1930. The radically different nature and much larger scale of today's investment building, and its standardized commercial product, could wipe out exactly those incremental, additive, small-scale and highly individualized changes that are essential to the neighborhood's attractions.

Admittedly, the complexities and difficulties of planning and preservation law and practice are formidable. But the more one observes and learns the simpler the answers seem to be. Cut through the specious or self-serving arguments, walk through the district looking above the shops and along the side streets, enjoy the sunlight and shadow, and the intimacy and delight of the passing architectural parade. Think of the bland uniformity of Third Avenue or of brutal new buildings like 800 Fifth, and see the sabotage that even as-of-right construction is wreaking on Madison Avenue and the side streets. It is clearly time to take action. The legislation has been studied and simplified for fairness and ease of administration. The alternative to protection is the inevitable, eventual mutilation or replacement of the distinctive character of one of New York's most valuable esthetic and economic resources. The destruction would enrich a few builders and impoverish the city. The East Side Historic District designation is enormously important to New York's prosperity and style. ■