

Architecture

From Sentiment To Social Force

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE last column in this space added up the score on planning and urban design in New York in the critical decade from 1964 to '74, and this one proposes to do the same for preservation. These two sides of the urban coin provide equally remarkable chronicles of achievement, with this city now in a position of acknowledged national preeminence in dealing with the physical environment.

Right now, the Landmarks Preservation Commission is in a transition of leadership from Harmon Goldstone, its chairman since 1968, to Beverly Moss Spatt, Mayor Beame's appointee. It is also a moment of transition in other ways, with newly-enlarged responsibilities as the result of a recent strengthening amendment to the landmarks law. This permits hearings and decisions at any time, instead of restricting hearings to a period every three years, and extends jurisdiction to landscape and interiors from exteriors only.

Increasingly, the work of the Commission has become an unexpected and decisive force for neighborhood stabilization, a development of serious significance. With the strongest law in the country, and the proven worth of nine years of experience in administering it, the Commission is currently at a new threshold of power and influence.

Preservation enjoys more popular understanding and support than planning, for obvious reasons. It is less abstract than the numbers game of zoning, less "conceptual" than the principles of urban design. Dramatic destruction of the past, whether legitimate landmarks or merely familiar neighborhood touchstones, through widespread urban renewal clearance and private development in the 60's, made it terribly clear to people that such losses profoundly weaken and depersonalize their sense of community and place.

In one decade, the cause of preservation has undergone a remarkable transformation from an odd and harmless hobby of little old ladies in floppy hats who liked old houses to an integral, admin-

istrative part of city government dealing with an essential part of the city's fabric. Sentimentality has given way to sophistication. From a cultural nicety it has developed into an environmental necessity of important sociological impact — a remarkable consequence no one foresaw.

The statistics are simple enough. In the nine years since the Landmarks Commission was established, 406 individual buildings and 24 historic districts have been designated, with the districts comprising almost 10,000 properties. It is the latter category that has been the sleeper, with repercussions for neighborhood stability far beyond issues of historic preservation.

There are now 46 pending historic district requests. Because this device has turned out to be such an important social tool for the retention of neighborhood health, the requests come from the residents themselves, who are quick to recognize the need for a broader kind of preservation. They are impassioned requests, supported by everything from the most naive to the most professional research and documentation.

Because the borderline between landmark and social value has now become so thin, the Landmarks Preservation Commission is working closely with the City Planning Commission on district designations where the area falls short in art or history, but has clearly definable and desirable characteristics that can be mapped, zoned or retained.

It is fascinating to realize, for example, that one superb historic brownstone district, meeting all of the architectural criteria of the Commission, the Stuyvesant Heights Historic District, is in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, less known for architecture than for urban problems. While in other cases, such as Sheepshead Bay, which also requested historic designation, the architectural score was considerably less high and the answer had to be a different kind of district designation by the City Planning Com-



A street in Brooklyn's Stuyvesant Heights Historic District
A decisive weapon for neighborhood stabilization

mission rather than by Landmarks. This extends the function and validity of the district, or neighborhood, concept, in terms of community values.

In the planners' pipeline now are potential solutions for such places as Sunnyside and Forest Hills Gardens, where the quality of layout and open space make the sections unique, and again, community preservation is involved. And for such areas as an extension of the Mt. Morris Historic District, where architectural merits become thinner, special neighborhood rehabilitation programs are being made available through the Housing and Development Administration.

At this point, the import of district designations has gone far beyond anyone's dreams. The character and quality of the city that was once narrowly defined in terms of history and style has become totally identified with its social fabric.

There are some delightful tales involved. There was the day that members of the Landmarks Commission went to Mott Haven in the Bronx to publicly tour four blocks that had just been designated. The residents turned out en masse in a celebratory mood. "You're the first people from the city who've come to tell us anything good," they told the officials; "it's always absenteeism and delinquency rates." And then Mr. Goldstone and his colleagues were taken to an intact, old-

fashioned neighborhood ice cream parlor for large chocolate sodas.

The preservation story goes back to the Wagner administration. After proselytism for landmarks protection, led conspicuously by the Municipal Art Society, Mayor Wagner set up an advisory committee in 1961. This was followed by another committee in 1962 to carry out the first one's recommendations, which included drafting legislation and making an inventory of buildings worth saving. Both committees were headed by Geoffrey Platt.

The job took three years, and it was not until 1965, after what seemed like endless legal and departmental review and landmark losses detonating like bombs, that the Landmarks Law was passed and the Landmarks Preservation Commission established. Mr. Platt was its first chairman.

Under Mr. Platt and his successor, James Vanderpool, and with Frank Gilbert, now executive director, the Commission was pioneering and careful — understandably wary of getting embroiled in lawsuits that might challenge the law's constitutionality before a precedent-setting body of successful designations had been made. There were notable triumphs and awful losses, but the concept, and the operation, became firmly established as part of official city procedure. Accusations of foot-dragging have been

made by the ever-watchful Municipal Art Society, but Mr. Goldstone has effectively consolidated the gains.

There have been lawsuits, when the Commission saw no way out and the principle of preservation was at issue. The Sailors' Snug Harbor case was settled out of court by New York's advantageous purchase of that handsome Staten Island property and its commitment to a cultural center. A second suit, concerning designation of the Morgan House on Madison Avenue owned by the Lutheran Church, is still proceeding through the courts.

But the largest battle and stakes are involved in the Penn Central suit against the city for the preservation of Grand Central Terminal, now awaiting decision. Although alternate development sites have been offered to avoid "hardship," the railroad is determined to turn back the clock to the time when the priorities of private enterprise over the general welfare were undisputed. It is attempting to overturn the law.

Landmark law is admittedly innovative law; with zoning law it is on the frontier of public control for the public interest. But out of the courts and law offices, it goes right back into the city streets where people live, to affect the quality of life there to do with how the city itself provides. That has a lot of lives.