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The New York Times/Fred R. Conrad

A view of East 62d Street—"Nothing like these townhouses will ever be built again."

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

As East 62d Street Goes, So Goes New York

This is a script we've played before. The title is Side Street Sabotage. A little suspense-and-disaster music, please. Somehow, this drama is always being performed on East 62d Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues.

As we wrote back in 1968, when Syracuse University acquired the houses at Numbers 12, 14, 16 and 18 with a speculative look in its eye, this block is an almost intact example of the rows of richly detailed, five-story townhouses built in the French Renaissance or Beaux Arts style of the early years of this century. Their landmark quality is enhanced by the completeness of the block. Nothing like them will ever be built again. Same words, same tune.

Side streets like this one, with their minipalaces and brownstones, are not only enclaves of architectural excellence; they are quintessentially New York. They are the other side of the skyscraper coin, the glamorous milieu its upwardly mobile inhabitants aspire to, its most polished, elegant and wordly face. Any erosion of these blocks diminishes the whole city incalculably. Nor is the loss only sentimental or esthetic; it is the irreversible, hard-core destruction of the superior architectural and environmental character that makes New York not just a big-business town, but a cosmopolitan world capital.

East 62nd Street should have been "landmarked," to use that awful, bastard verb, from park to river, a long time ago. Except for a few intrusions, its homogenous residential scale and character continues over many blocks, with a rich and diverse architectural heritage and a high quota of beauty and charm. Designation is badly overdue for many of these uptown East Side streets, in whole or in part. But this is one that I go out of my way to walk on because it restores the spirit and rewards the eye. A few violins, please, and pan the south side from Numbers 4 to 18, east of the Knickerbocker Club at the corner of Fifth, to the Carlton House on Madison.

Now enter the real estate developer — in this case, Mr. George Klein, who has looked at 62nd Street and found it good. Because it is beautiful and fashionable, he wants to construct a luxury apartment building on the site of two of the townhouses, Numbers 4 and 6, for a distance of 79 feet along the street and a height of 25 stories, located 100 feet from the Fifth Avenue corner. There are, of course, taller and broader buildings in New York, just as there were deeper and wider wounds than Mercutio's, but none that could more effectively spoil the block by chopping into its character and shooting skyward. This one is quite big enough to do the job.

Just around the corner at 61st Street and Fifth Avenue is a large, new luxury apartment house, 800 Fifth, that stands on the site of the Dodge House. It is relevant to our story. Eight hundred Fifth is a dreadful building, if so forthright a description can fit anything that combines so much banality and hypocrisy, the result of some of the most tortuous and complicated games ever played with the city's zoning in order to put it on that spot. In fact, this structure was spotted if anything ever was. But since it was the only construction game in town at a time of dire financial need, there was a lot of pressure to waive the rules to get it built. That extremely dangerous precedent has now come home to roost.

Eight hundred Fifth has one of the city's most sought-after addresses, at whopping prices. It also has a false front that makes bows or pratfalls to the cornice height of the Knickerbocker Club, and façades that curtsy obliquely to the views from the windows of Fifth Avenue neighbors to the north. This monstrosity is a money-maker, and so it must be emulated. If there is no more Fifth Avenue frontage in the

immediate vicinity for another of these beauties, why not slide one down 62nd Street instead?

Why not, indeed. Just a few zoning variances will do it, plus some virtuous talk about saving the Knickerbocker Club, which is apparently suffering from terminal gentility, and could be restored to life by selling its air rights to the project.

Unfortunately, the air rights can only be used if the new building is allowed to break the existing zoning, which is designed to protect the small scale and low density of those side streets. Because the city's planners were wise enough to value their quality, they undertook to preserve them. The mid-blocks in the 60's and above are therefore zoned lower, at R-8, than the avenues or major cross streets, where larger R-10 buildings are permitted. On Fifth Avenue opposite Central Park a special Park Improvement District redistributes the permitted bulk of the avenue structures from very tall towers to squatter, 25-story or 300-foot high buildings. The tradeoff for extra square footage for the builder, in this case, is not the customary open plaza, but a cash contribution to the upkeep of Central Park.

Surrounded by larger buildings, the mid-blocks are protected for the increasingly rare human scale that serves as necessary relief for the bulk and density of the avenues. It cannot be stressed strongly enough how essential this zoning is to New York's quality and liveability, or how prescient the planning vision was that saw the streets and buildings as unique assets in the larger urban context. But it must also be stressed that although this zoning protects from overdevelopment, it does not save the existing buildings; they can still be replaced by moderate-size ones. Only landmark designation can do that.

Mr. Klein's plan is based on an option to purchase numbers 4 and 6 East 62d Street, which have been the York Club buildings, plus the air rights of the Knickerbocker Club, demolishing 4 and 6 to build his tower. The problem is that 25 feet of this property lies in the R-10 Park Improvement District, while the major part, 54-feet, is in the R-8 district. Mr. Klein and his architect, Emery Roth and Sons, want to put up an R-10 building in the R-8 district. Since they do not have an R-10 site, the size is based on the use of the Knickerbocker Club's R-10 air rights, which they hope to transfer down the block.

This trick will not be done with mirrors; it is to be executed by going to the City Planning Commission or the Board of Standards and Appeals to ask for variances to permit the maneuver. The variances are necessary because the scheme is not only illegal without them but it is clearly against the intentions of the zoning ordinance.

The argument being made for the proposal, ironically, is based on the virtues of preservation, or the saving of the Knickerbocker Club through the purchase of its air rights. Provided, of course, that the zoning rules are changed, or bent, to allow the 25-story building on the side street where it doesn't belong. The argument is also made that what can be constructed there legally now is a 14-story building, and the proposal would "only" be 11 stories higher. Straw-man alternatives of the horrors that could be built "as of right" are being hoisted by the developer. (Actually, the legal "split" building, by breaking down the bulk, looks better.)

There is also a lot of familiar nonsense about relating the base treatment to the cornice lines of the older buildings and the promise of token limestone and a design "reminiscent" of the 20's, with parts "addressing" themselves to Central Park and a "crown gradually penetrating the sky." That would take Houdini, not an architect. The rendering suggests that a better building could be pulled out of a hat.

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In sum, this is bad preservation, bad urbanism and bad architecture. And it is not, as presented, a question of the future of the Knickerbocker Club versus two houses and the spoiling of one block. If the club is saved by this kind of illegal transfer, the precedent has been set for the destruction of entire groups and streets of buildings of landmark quality that have far more impact on the city's character and style than a single structure.

The threat is to all R-8 mid-blocks, and the danger is not just from the Fifth Avenue side, where sites are limited, but from the Madison Avenue side, which is far more vulnerable to this kind of treatment. Watch them go down like dominoes if this one is built. And don't think other developers aren't waiting to see what happens here.

That is not the only dangerous precedent that would be set. Beginning with the construction of 800 Fifth Avenue at

61st Street, the line is being erased, or smudged, between the densities allowed in the central business district and in residentially zoned areas. If the line moves from 61st to 62d Street, can 63d, 64th, or any others, be far behind?

There is also the matter of the cash contribution to the upkeep of Central Park, which sounds as pious as saving the Knickerbocker Club. Under the Park Improvement District legislation, the figure was set at \$7.20 per square foot of bonus floor area. The munificent check that Mr. Klein would write comes to about \$150,000. This is a pittance for the park and a bonanza for the builder, because it is so far below what that added space is worth at today's land and market values that it should be listed in New York's Best Buys.

Any kind of negotiated settlement by the Planning Commission that sanctions this building can only be seen as a giveaway or default. And any variance granted by the Board of Standards and Appeals — hardship is scarcely a factor with the returns assured by this location — guarantees the rapid loss of some of the city's most valuable environmental and economic assets. Either way, it is side street sabotage. Fade out, New York. ■