

Architecture: Why Planners Get Gray

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE problem raised by the possibility of rezoning the 37th and 38th street blocks on the east side of Madison Avenue from residential to commercial use—a highly controversial proposal now on the City Planning Commission calendar—goes beyond the question of the loss of the J. P. Morgan house, which would be demolished. It is far more important as a demonstration of the objectives of zoning and the difficulties of administering the zoning law in the face of the city's conflicting needs and values.

There is, on the one hand, a particularly attractive residential neighborhood of apartment and town houses stretching east from Madison in these blocks, which still retains much of Murray Hill's traditional domestic character and 19th-century architecture. It is a later, more staid, uptown Victorian version of Greenwich Village, an area in which bloody battles against encroachment have been fought.

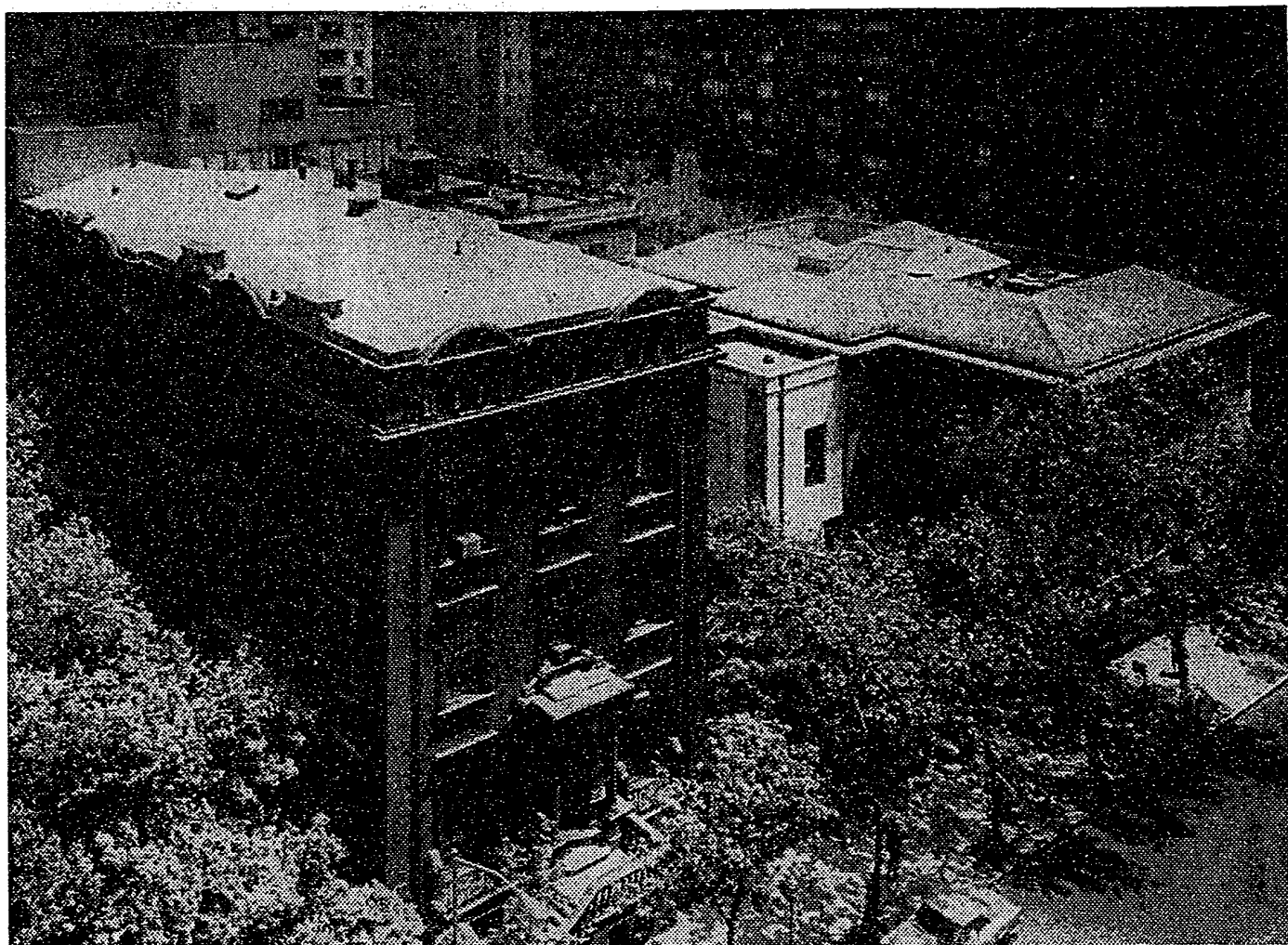
The present zoning is meant to protect and preserve this Murray Hill residential area, and it is worthy of protection. Many homeowners here are those doughty New Yorkers, dwindling in number, discriminated against by every turn of municipal management and economics, who fight formidable odds to own and maintain the city's disappearing private houses on a middle-income level. Urbanistically, this is one of the city's most appealing sections.

On the other hand, it is surrounded by business blocks, and it is being pushed relentlessly and inevitably by commercial interests, with their larger investment returns and higher tax value to the city.

Permit to Raze

The requested change would not touch the residential blocks but would rezone only the Madison Avenue frontage plus 100 feet east on 37th and 38th Streets to include a nonconforming building already on 38th Street. Its immediate purpose would be to permit the razing of the Morgan mansion at 37th Street for a tall office building. Inevitably, the handsome Democratic Club on the facing 37th street corner would go too; the commercial value of the rezoned site would prove irresistible.

The Lutheran Church,



Morgan block on Madison Avenue; house, left; library, right.
To hold the line or give way?

The New York Times (Sam Falk)

which owns the Morgan mansion and uses it as a Church House, has requested the zoning change. Its motives are understandable: a real need for larger quarters and the possibility of a prime investment.

What is involved, therefore, is an all too familiar conflict of interest, based on economics, and the equally familiar threat of creeping commercialism against the city's older residential areas with their architectural and human values.

The convenience and finances of a private group or institution are at cross-purposes with the character of a neighborhood that needs the strongest kind of protection because of its particular vulnerability.

The fact that the block in question is at the fringe end of that neighborhood where commercial character has already taken over, and that it involves a handsome old house that could easily qualify as a landmark, makes the issue a little grayer and more complicated than usual.

The answer is for the City Planning Commission to take a walk, if it has not already done so. It will find that the question of urban character cannot be resolved with the most carefully compiled data, but only through the eyes and senses.

It will see that the 36th-37th street block in question, with the Morgan mansion and the Morgan Library connected with a unifying green of trees and grounds, is far more important to the residential neighborhood stretching behind it than maps would indicate. This is why, obviously, it was included in the residentially zoned neighborhood in the first place.

Loss to the City

This block is a non-commercial buffer for that neighborhood, with two buildings of more than routine architectural interest and historical importance. It adds a rare note of openness, green, tranquillity and the past to the pressing commercial surroundings. It would be a serious loss.

The prime point here, and

one that is too little considered, is that it is the total block plus its relationship to the contiguous area, not the independent value of the Morgan house as a landmark or less, that is at stake.

We do not judge the urban scene as we should, in terms of the cohesive or distinctive character of an entire area, although this far transcends the importance of isolated landmarks, few of which are masterpieces in New York. We have yet to learn to recognize the real quality of the New York cityscape.

This was also true of the Brokaw house, which had as its chief merit an integral excellence with two flanking blocks of homogeneous, luxurious architecture of the Golden Age. With Fifth Avenue and the facing park, it formed a major, plaza-like oasis of beauty, elegance and history that deserved perpetuation.

The tragedy there is the brutal disruption by a new apartment house of this architectural "wholeness," which had a distinctive New York

period grandeur. The loss is in terms of a historical enclave and a total area of unusual civic urbanity rather than the end of the house as a monument. No zoning change was involved, but the destruction was as sure as throwing a bomb.

The problem in such cases is one of area protection, whether through the landmarks law or zoning. To hold the line or give way? This is a question that New York has yet to face with firmness and understanding.

The purpose of zoning is to guarantee values to the city and its people that are not easy to maintain against more expedient and conflicting uses. The choice here is between hardship to the private property owner who cannot develop his investment and the kind of irreversible erosion of the attractive and less profitable features of the city that are of irreplaceable civic value and that zoning is meant to control. No one can envy the City Planning Commission its Solomon-like decision.