

Architecture

The Landmark Hole in the Ground

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THIS is a saga of an unbuilt house, and also a tale of the odds against you in New York. It is about the house on West 11th Street—the one that was to be built on the site of No. 18, which achieved a kind of national fame when it was blown up by young revolutionaries almost two years ago.

It is worth relating why the house will not be built, simply because it shows how the odds are stacked, and why dreams so often have a hard time of it in the American way of life. There is no moral; it just tells it the way it is.

As the papers pointed out at the time of the explosion, No. 18 was part of a designated landmark row of Greek Revival houses at Nos. 14 to 26, built for Henry Brevoort Jr., in 1844-45. Assorted remodelings of 125 years had modified details but it was still a historically and esthetically homogeneous row, a felicitous urban architecture harmonious in style and proportion with evocations of a handsome past.

The house on 11th Street was being used by young radicals, one of whom was the daughter of the owner, to manufacture bombs, ostensibly to set social wrongs right. What went wrong, however, was the manufacturing process, and the explosion blew out the house and took a life. The disaster made front pages, and when the rubble was cleared, not much of the house was left. What still stood was demolished on the insistence of the insurance company, which wanted to be sure that the site was safely clear of bombs and debris.

What was left, then, was a hole in the ground. There was something fiercely tragic about that hole—more than words, that gap in the serene Greek Revival row spoke eloquently of the ills of our society and the fragility and vulnerability of history and beauty and the obscene waste of violence.

But New York goes on and the city bears its scars. Two young couples who had long wanted a house in New York bought the hole in the ground, paying \$70,000 for the land. They were the Hugh Hardys and the Francis Masons, and Mr. Hardy, a talented architect, proceeded to design a house to fill the gap in the 19th-century row that would suit two families in 1971, while it respected the past. The dream was almost in hand.

The first obstacle was one Mr. Hardy knew about and approached with sympathy. Because this was a designated landmark row, the replacement would have to be approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission for suitability.

The house that Mr. Hardy proposed to build did not reproduce the house that was gone, or its neighbors. He felt that would be a meretricious thing to do. With a great deal of integrity and intelligence, and some admirable intellectual and esthetic analysis of the existing houses and streetscape, he designed a contemporary house—one that clearly revealed itself as a product of the 20th century at the same time that every line and decision was tempered by consideration of its historic context and scale.

He presented the scheme at the Landmarks Commission public hearing, and there was an immediate and awful outcry from Greenwich Village residents. The house had an angled front, and not a single 19th-century detail. Its neighbors wanted a reproduction of the house that had been destroyed, or something closer to it. They wanted the street restored as if nothing had happened.

Mr. Hardy explained that he subscribed to a kind of philosophical and esthetic morality that prohibited such a sham. The thought turned him off. After all, something had happened on 11th Street. Denial is a lie. And so is a 19th-century house faked in



Design for a house that will not be built
"Prophecies of doom, propelled by the banks"

the 20th century. He hoped to be true to himself, and history, and the city.

The commission asked for some revisions, met again, and accepted the design by a closely split vote. It did so with considerable praise for the architect's work. "Mr. Hardy has demonstrated clearly that his approach to this difficult problem is in accord with the commission's objectives. . . . There is an area within which reasonable preservationists may differ. Mr. Hardy's design is intelligent; it is well within that area . . . the thing to be avoided is design-by-committee for the work of a thoughtful architect."

Building is a complicated process in New York and not only Landmarks Commission but also Buildings Department approvals were necessary. The architect had therefore begun what were to be protracted negotiations with the Buildings Department.

The city's new building code had not been written with two-family dwellings in mind. There were requirements for safety and fireproofing meant for super-office buildings that became

ludicrous for a small house. Both families wanted open, multilevel plans, and the code specified fire stairs connecting all open levels with enough steel and doors to sink the budget, all of which would have to be removable in some way to restore the scheme.

The design had to go through the Buildings Department several times. It was not a "horror show," says Mr. Hardy, because the department was helpful. It just consumed a lot of time.

Meanwhile, Landmarks approval was contingent on provisions of a stoop in character with the rest of the row. A stoop that is already there is O.K., but building a new one, which must project 18 inches out onto the street on city land, becomes a violation. It would therefore be necessary to file for a variance to permit the stoop, or go through a beautiful legal maneuver to circumvent the need for a variance which would involve getting a city license to do something or other on the street. This meant still further delays.

While all this was going on over a period of about six

months, construction costs continued to rise. The architect's figure of \$125,000 plus contingencies for the five-floor house—standard at the time—had been accepted by the contractor. By the time the Buildings Department approved the plans, the contractor revised his figures — upward, naturally — to \$175,000 to \$200,000.

This meant borrowing more money than had been planned, and in the summer of 1971 money was very tight. The round of banks began. For some "sound" business reason with which banks are relentlessly running the city into the ground by discouraging middle-class initiative and investment and helping neighborhoods to decay, they don't like this kind of deal.

Mr. Hardy did not count the refusals, but he remembers the reasons. "Oh yes," said one, "Isn't that a controversial design? Maybe if you change it we can give you the mortgage."

"Be realistic," said another. "It's not good sense to lend money 'downtown.' If your house were 'uptown' we'd consider it."

"Now if it were Scarsdale, there'd be no problem," said still another. And so on. But what was most disturbing to Mr. Hardy was the policy of basic cynicism about the future of the city. Prophecies of doom were self-fulfilling, briskly propelled by the banks.

He didn't get the money. "If we'd been rich," he says, "we'd have the house." End of dream.

There is a final irony. With the easing of the money market and the appearance of a more human banker, they could get the mortgage now. But the process was shattering and construction costs have risen even higher. Neither the Hardys nor the Masons want the house any more. The city lost a superior, demonstration solution to the problem of landmark compatibility and urban continuity as well as a desirable work of architecture, and New York lost what it needs most — the investment of youth in its future.

And the land is for sale again. With two years of taxes, interest, inflation and investment in architectural plans, the price is higher now. Anyone want a nice hole in the ground for \$140,000?