ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Some Good News, and Bad, For West 54th Street

This is another side-street story. New Yorkers will recognize some familiar themes — the battle to save a row of historic town houses of particular architectural richness from demolition for high-rise development, the dedicated attempts of a local group to save the houses, the rumors of air rights transfer and clandestine development studies, and an ending with mixed elements of celebration and uncertainty.

It is a side-street story, because the side streets of Manhattan, in midtown and on much of the Upper East and West Sides, are the literal last stand of the town houses and brownstones that once filled the city's streets and avenues. These small, handsome reminders of the past, with their domestic measure and generous sky, are the essential and welcome foil for the city's famous skyscrapers. Their architectural details and 20-foot fronts also set the intimate size and scale of the infinitely varied restaurants and boutiques that make the side streets a source of so many sophisticated pleasures and set so much of the city's style. Every one of these side streets lost to development seriously diminishes New York.

The street, in this case, is West 54th, between Fifth Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas. The houses are numbers five through 15, a particularly choice group of late 19th- and early 20th-century structures in the stretch between the University Club and the Rockefeller apartments, opposite the Museum of Modern Art garden. Two houses that back 13 and 15 West 54th, at 20 and 22 West 55th Street, are also involved. There is probably no more desirable or attractive row in fashionable New York. Those who pass with any regularity have come to treasure it as one of the last of its type in midtown, where most of the midblocks have been zoned for skyscraper development.

First, the good news, and then the bad news, about West 54th Street. The good news is that the double house at 9 and 11, which was built by McKim, Mead and White for James J. Goodwin in 1896, has been bought by the United States Trust Company of New York, and is being meticulously restored for the bank's own use as a midtown branch office. The other good news is that after a prolonged battle led by the Committee for the Preservation of West 54th and West 55th Streets, the entire row has been designated a New York City landmark. The bad news is that part of the row still has an uncertain future. Numbers 13 and 15 West 54th, and 20 and 22 West 55th, are owned by the Mendik Realty Company, and the information circulating in concerned circles from the time of purchase was that the company was planning to demolish them for a new building. With landmark designation, that becomes a more difficult, but not impossible procedure. Changes currently being proposed for midtown zoning, however, might downzone the block and further limit the developer's options. For the moment, the Museum of Modern Art is occupying the buildings, during the museum's remodeling and expansion and the construction of its condominium tower. While the houses are not in immediate danger, their future is still unresolved. But maybe that, too, is good news, since not too long ago the entire group was up for grabs.

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In the fall of 1979, the same year that Mendik bought its properties, the United States Trust Company acquired 9 and 11 from the Rhodes School, which had put them up for sale. The two houses are united behind McKim, Mead and White's sedate, neo-Federal front. This is the really nice part of the story. After investigating prestigious new buildings and prime avenue locations, with virtually no restrictions on price or choice, the bank chose the 54th Street houses specifically for their architectural and landmark quality. The decision was made with equal recognition of the unique ambience they would provide, and the gesture to the street and the city that their use and preservation would make.

For once, resources matched intentions; U. S. Trust has invested $5-million in conservation and conversion, including the discreet construction of a small rear addition. The entire operation has been marked by the most painstaking pursuit of perfection. Every bit of woodwork has been stripped, refinished, or rebuilt, plasterwork has been restored or remolded, an elliptical skylight has been cleaned and moved to its original position over the stairs, and all exterior marble, stone, brickwork and ironwork has been renewed. Scholarly detective work has found original fabrics and fittings and appropriate replacements.

But this is no historic house reconstruction with the inevitable air of a tidy, invented past; these parlors, bedrooms and studies have had to be adapted to bank and business uses. What is new has been designed in the simplest and most suitable contemporary fashion. Respect for the past has not denied continuity and change, and the results are handsomer for it. The investment in excellence is an indulgence that has only enhanced the value of a fine piece of property in a location where the market apparently has no top. The president of U. S. Trust, Daniel P. Davison, may have been following his own inclinations more than conventional real estate pratice, but the bank could not have made a wiser investment decision, or a better public gesture.

U. S. Trust hired the firm of Haines, Lundberg, Waehler to carry out the challenging assignment of restoration and conversion. This meant coordinating historic preservation with the creation of new spaces and facilities, while threading the necessary mechanical systems through the existing structure. A galaxy of craftsmen and restorers worked on the job. Acting as consultants with William Baltz, the architect in charge, were David DeLong, head of the historic preservation program of Columbia University's school of architecture and planning, and Marilynn Bordes, associate curator of the department of American decorative arts of the Metropolitan Museum. Their research and recommendations were followed unstintingly.

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A visit from Sage Goodwin, a grandson of the original owner, helped establish certain details that he recalled from childhood visits. Other features were recorded in "Rooftrees," a 1933 publication of the family's houses prepared by Philip Goodwin, who was the architect, with Edward Durell Stone, of the neighboring Museum of Modern Art in 1939.

The style of the Goodwin home was quite fiercely and somberly eclectic, in keeping with turn-of-the-century taste. Number 9, the smaller of the two joined buildings, was the more delicate and Adamesque, but what was called Federal or classical revival at the time covered a pastiche of solid, lingering Victorian ideas of comfort and suitability. The house contained everything from 19th-century versions of Jacobean tables and chairs and Louis XVI parlor suites to furniture by Herter Brothers — a stylistic hybrid that was the best of its day and has now become collectible again. Pictures show the inevitable Oriental rug thrown over the stair rail. The decorative glue seemed to be potted plants on innumerable tabourets.

Fortunately, perhaps, this heavy domesticity has not been faithfully reproduced. But the style has been sympathetically understood. A fine Herter Brothers display cabinet finished in gold, ivory and Etruscan red is a prized acquisition. As a gesture of pure nostalgia, a bust of Benjamin Franklin has been purchased similar to one that seems to have migrated from room to room like an unsettled ghost. The refurbishing involved everything from 45 tons of new steel for the infill tellers' quarters to forays to thrift shops. Some furniture was bought at auction and through antiques dealers. Other items, like desks, were custom-designed to suit the bank's institutional needs.

Not that this is any ordinary financial institution. U.S. Trust is the kind of bank that still has reception rooms and ladies' parlors. There are marble mantels and Caldwell gilded-bronze lighting fixtures in rooms paneled in mahogany, oak and Spanish cedar. Walls of green silk damask or

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The New York Times / Sara Krulwich

West 54th Street town houses—"no more attractive row in fashionable New York"

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flocked red paper have been matched to fragments found behind the wood. The popular Lincrusta-Walton wall coverings of the period, with their molded and gilded patterns, have been carefully reproduced. An octagonal dining room with adjoining conservatory has a walk-in silver vault that served the Goodwin family. It is a far cry from plastic décor and money machines.

Last week, in answer to an inquiry, the Mendik Realty Company said that it had no immediate or future plans to demolish 13 and 15 West 54th Street, but in view of the landmark designation, would aim to keep the facades of the row intact, whatever is done inside. These facades are, if anything, more splendid that McKim, Mead and White's conservative Federal front next door. They were designed in 1895 by Henry Hardenburgh, the architect of the Plaza Hotel and the Dakota apartments. Bay windows, balconies and elaborately carved floral keystones and friezes are a richly exuberant example of late 19th-century style. Behind these houses, 20 West 55th Street is part of a group that was the work of a leading New York firm, Clinton and Russell, in a more conservative Renaissance revival manner, and 22 is a Neo-Classical design by William Strom. All were built from 1895-97. Whether it will be possible to put new construction on the 55th Street side of the block will depend on the changes in the midtown zoning.

But the threat is not just here; it is on all similar Manhattan side streets. And it is a threat to the kind of image, scale, style and delight without which a city becomes a grim and unappealing place of cold shadows and giant slabs. The recent designation of an East Side Historic District — still to be approved by the Board of Estimate — will protect a generous number of the best midblocks. The critical question of midblock height and bulk is also being addressed by the City Planning Commission, which intends to support the East Side Historic District with supplementary zoning that would deal with blocks of lesser architectural quality but equal environmental amenity. That essential step would enlarge the protected area, but still leave a lot of vulnerable side streets. Call 54th Street a welcome, but token, and still uncertain victory. ■

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