

**Architecture**

# A Tale Of Two Houses

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**T**HIS is a tale of two houses, and a demonstration of the fact that there are New Yorkers to whom their city means more than the going price of land. It is quite frankly meant to offer some slight embarrassment to those who believe that the most beautiful thing in New York is a buck.

There are standards of heart and mind, of history and art, of urban excellence and environmental quality that the buck does not touch, and there are some people in this town to whom these standards mean enough so that they will pass up the buck to keep them. For the cynics who say that every man has his price, we offer these two examples — and there are more. We assure you, this is no fairy tale. It can, and does, happen here.

Both houses are landmarks that were courted by developers, not for love, but for destruction, in the usual pattern of trading the city's history, style and architectural diversity for profitable new building. They both neatly refute the gospel according to real estate that when land values go up, landmarks go down. It really wasn't too difficult to save them; in both cases the principals involved thought that what existed had more value than the money offered. It just took some civilized conviction based on a fair degree of cultural sophistication and a relative absence of greed.

The first example is the Lewis Gouverneur Morris house, on the southeast corner of Park Avenue and 85th Street, now owned by the New World Foundation. The New World Foundation is an omnibus organization embracing civil liberties, education and the problems of the disadvantaged. It rents part of the house to the Field Foundation, another socio-logically oriented fund.

The house was built in 1914, when Mr. Morris married a Lorillard, another fine old New York family name associated with disappearing landmarks. It was designed by Ernest Flagg, one of the notable architects of Manhattan's early, romantic sky-

scrapers; his Singer Building of 1906-08 at Broadway and Liberty Street is just being demolished.

Mr. Morris's house may well be the only split level, 22-room mansion in New York. It is a curious melange of proper Georgian and picturesque Norman Shaw, with a tower and small court on the 85th Street side next to a fan-windowed gable over bays. Inside, its rooms are on two offset levels, joined by shallow stairs.

It is an appealing maverick of a house that adds a sense of place and individuality (try to recall most Park Avenue corners) to a genteelly homogenized residential avenue, as well as the archaic virtues of fine construction and materials. There are gracious rooms with mahogany trim, French parquet floors and a crystal and cupid ballroom chandelier brought from the Morris Mt. Fordham mansion — a landmark that made way for the uptown campus of N.Y.U.

Mr. Morris lived in the 85th Street house until his death last year, when his heirs decided to put it on the market. He had, in his lifetime, refused a 1920's offer of \$1-million for the property, saying that it was his home. In New York, home, even for the affluent, is a place you take a profit on to move somewhere else to invest the surplus to make money. Not to do so is to violate a couple of cardinal rules: that the rich must devote themselves to getting richer, and that anyone who does otherwise is slightly soft in the head.

For the previous two years, the New World Foundation had been looking for new quarters. Its avowed intention was to find and preserve a landmark building.

When the Morris house went up for sale this spring, the asking price was \$500,000. A corner site on Park Avenue, with the possibility of enough adjacent assembly to put up luxury apartments in the city's elite neighborhood—something for which the New York market is apparently bottomless—would be worth up to \$650,000.

In two days, the house was



Wooden houses at 312 and 314 East 53rd Street  
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sold to the New World Foundation. To do so, the heirs lowered their price to \$400,000. They refused to speak to interested developers offering more. They were quite aware that they were holding prime, negotiable, speculative property. But to see the building preserved, they took \$100,000 less than the broker's asking price, and probably \$250,000 less than the market would bear. This, by conventional New York business standards, is not astute. It is wise, but that is not the same thing.

According to Vernon A. Eagle, executive director of the New World Foundation, preserving and using the

house will not cost more, in the end, than rent. "We were trying to demonstrate that we could purchase and retain a landmark building on a purely economic basis," he says. Remodeling, by Richard N. Fried, has been held to essentials, with all architectural elements retained. Mr. Eagle adds the obvious; "The space is so much more beautiful than you could rent."

It is also obvious that many owners prefer profit to preservation, and many foundations like anonymous new office space better than landmark buildings. With one hand they give; with the other, they take away.

The second example is the

case of a small frame and brick house at 312 East 53d Street, one of a pair built in 1866. It is owned by John Schaffner, a literary agent, who bought it in 1952 for \$41,000. He is approached, almost weekly, by agents playing the game of midtown side street assemblage, but last March he received a firm offer, by mail, of \$185,000. With that anxious a buyer, a little haggling might have brought it closer to \$200,000. A profit of 300 per cent is not hay, and Mr. Schaffner is not oblivious to the uses of money. Any pocket feels nicely padded with an extra \$150,000.

In family session, a Schaffner son pointed out that the house was home, a sentiment voiced 40 years earlier by Mr. Morris. The Schaffners refused to sell. But they did more. Mr. Schaffner requested a landmark designation. "We would not sell," he says, "but we did not ever want the house to fall into the hands of developers who would tear it down." His neighbor, in the other house of the pair, felt differently. The price was too high to resist, he let it be known, and he did not wish to become involved with the Landmarks Commission.

The Landmarks Commission reported that the Schaffner house, No. 312, has "a special historical and esthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural character of New York City." It gave the designation, citing the building as "one of the few wooden houses remaining in Manhattan, a fine example of the small French Second Empire town house, retaining on the street a reminder of the post-Civil War period of New York architecture." The other house of the pair, 314, is on the market for \$185,000.

Mr. Schaffner has also protested relaxation of the street's residential zoning successfully so far, and helped save the street's trees from one of the city's periodic sidewalk-cutting, street widening schemes. A neighbor behind him claims that by his decision not to sell, her house was saved too, since a new building would have blocked off all light and view.

The moral? One the city has been slow to learn. Mr. Schaffner states it. "An individual doesn't think he can accomplish anything here. But it's amazing what he can do." New York's greatest strength is New Yorkers.