

DEPT. OF APPEARANCES

*A man's home is his castle, unless it's in a New York historic district.*



No one has ever been quite sure what to make of Edward Durell Stone's house, on East Sixty-fourth Street, for the same reason that no one has ever been quite sure what to make of Edward Durell Stone. Stone—the modernist architect who gave the world the Gallery of Modern Art, on Columbus Circle; the General Motors Building; and the Kennedy Center, in Washington—bought a town house in 1956 and promptly covered its façade with a white concrete grille. This grille was made of the same decorative concrete blocks that Stone had used on the façade of his United

States Embassy in New Delhi, one of the most well-known buildings of the nineteen-fifties.

Stone's house was an endearing oddity on Sixty-fourth Street for more than thirty years: a slice of something else plopped down in the middle of a block of elegant town houses. It never fit in, but no one seemed to mind, perhaps because of a certain *droit du seigneur*. Stone, who died in 1978, started his career in the nineteen-thirties, creating some of the most adventurous modernist buildings in the United States, including the original Museum of Modern Art. When he grew disaffected with modernism and began producing his decorative buildings of the fifties and sixties, his reputation took a nosedive. But some critics are now looking at these quirky later buildings as important works of proto-postmodernism; Stone's controversial museum building at Columbus Circle has even aroused the sympathy of landmark preservationists.

Whatever the outcome at Columbus Circle, Stone's own house now has the honor of being the first of his buildings to be saved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Actually, the landmarks commission hasn't precisely saved

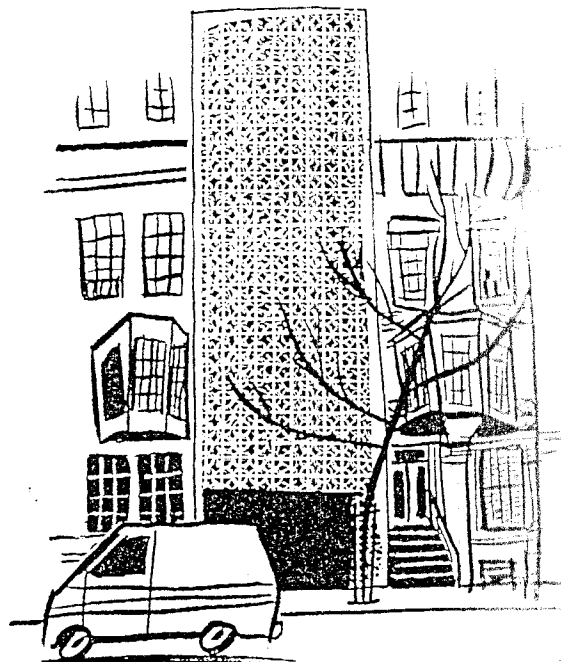
the house. It has mandated its reconstruction, which began this month, under the supervision of Stone's son, the architect Benjamin Hicks Stone. Ten years ago, he and his mother, Maria Stone, were alarmed to discover that the concrete blocks in the grille were cracking; they had the screen removed, exposing modern windows that the elder Stone had built behind the grille. The landmarks commission considered the removal of the screen an affront to the integrity of the Upper East Side historic district, and slapped a violation on the Stones.

Maria Stone recently decided to put the house up for sale, and since building violations have to be cleared up before the title can change, she and her son decided to put the grille back. Hicks Stone's first thought was to design a new façade. Last summer, he produced a handsome modern design that relates to his father's earliest work. But the landmarks commission suggested that nothing but a reconstruction of the old grille would win its approval.

Hicks Stone, an amiable man who spent four years working for Philip Johnson, views his father with an appealing combination of filial respect and criticism. "I know his weaknesses as an architect, but I also know that he was incredibly bold, coming from Arkansas and becoming the first modernist architect on the East Coast," he recalled the other day, sitting at a white

marble table in the town house, whose interior, a curious mixture of rococo and sleek, remains almost exactly as Stone designed it.

Hicks Stone is enjoying the irony of his situation. He says that his father's concrete grille, which bears no resemblance to anything else in the historic district, is just the sort of thing the landmarks commission "would never allow you to actually create today." Still, he is happy that his father's reputation may be climbing back upward. "I will never forget being in an architecture course at Harvard in 1979 and hearing the students begin to hiss when the New Delhi Embassy came on the screen," he said. "It did not make me feel good." —PAUL GOLDBERGER



*The Edward Durell Stone house*