Saving the Ansonia: An Uphill Battle

The Ansonia Hotel, at Broadway and 73d St. (l) was saved after a long and heated campaign. But the Central Savings Bank, its distinguished neighbor across the street, was denied landmark status.

Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Fourth in a series

It took seven years, two commission hearings, more than 25,000 petition signatures, a foundation-financed publicity effort, support from Sens. Javits and Buckley, John D. Rockefeller 3d and other luminaries, and—most crucially—a threatened community lawsuit. But finally the Landmarks Preservation Commission declared the Ansonia Hotel a landmark . . . just when the owner was talking about tearing it down.

All over the city one can find stories of how the commission was forced into the kind of designations the landmarks law empowers it to make, but the Ansonia, at Broadway and 73d St., is probably the most dramatic example.

Brownstone Belt

The Ansonia is one of the city's most obvious landmarks in every sense of the 1965 preservation law—written to give protection to those structures and districts whose destruction would mean "an irreplaceable loss to the people of the city of the aesthetic, cultural and historic values represented."

And yet the commission was reluctant to act to save it.

The curving, turreted Beaux Arts Ansonia is the heart of its West Side community. Even the local post office is named in its honor—Ansonia Station. The hotel was built in 1904 by William Earl Dodge Stokes, a multimillionaire developer and amateur designer of the Phelps-Dodge family, who was one of the leading developers of Riverside Dr. and the brownstone belt of the Upper West Side.

It was the biggest and best of its kind, boasting a variety of construction and engineering firsts—including two huge swimming pools, one of them at the time the largest pool in the world. It quickly became a cultural treasure because of its unparalleled facilities for the teaching and practicing of the performing arts.

The 17-story chateau with mansard roofs and delicate ironwork is considered one of the most successful marriages of design and function. There are three-feet-thick concrete walls and specially insulated ceilings that allow whole orchestras to practice without letting neighbors hear a sound. A unique method of air circulation made it the first "air-conditioned" structure in New York.

Its heyday was the first three decades of the century when just about every great name in music lived or practiced in its elegantly detailed suites—Caruso, Chaliapin, Elman, Pinza, Pons, Stravinsky, Toscanini. Other tenants included Babe Ruth, Theodore Dreiser, Florenz Ziegfeld.

The importance of the Ansonia to performing artists is so international in scope that Italian performers reported that news of the battle to save it was carried on Rome television.

Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

Some of the architectural detail on the Ansonia

In recent years, the building has become more important as an arts center because of its proximity to Lincoln Center—the apparent reason that John D. Rockefeller 3d, retired chairman of Lincoln Center, joined the campaign for landmark designation.

Despite its illustrious past and present, the commission turned a friendly ear when lawyers for Jacob Starr, the Ansonia's owner, tried to make a case for giving him the right to rip the building down. With the growing renaissance of the West Side, the Ansonia's valuable blockfront could easily accommodate a new 40-story luxury apartment house and presumably it was with this option in mind that Starr considered demolition of the hotel.

"The hotel's architectural appearance is not worthy of designation as a landmark," one of his lawyers said. "It poses a question of taste and is a matter of debate. I am not, nor is the owner, aware of any particular historic significance to the building."

What's more, the lawyer told the commission hearing on April 28, 1970, Starr had "realized little or no profit. The only sound solution is the demolition of the hotel and replacement by a structure in keeping with the needs of the neighborhood."

In further attempts to prove economic hardship, the lawyers indicted that the building contained only "eight retail business stores," but did not mention that there are 25 commercial tenants, including an art school, an architect, a ballet school and a stockbroker.

Nor was there any mention that of the more than

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500 apartments only about 80 were rent-controlled, with the rest in strong demand.

Nor did the lawyers acknowledge that because of its status as a residential hotel the Ansonia has had vacancy decontrol since 1949.

Finally, the owner claimed it would take $4 to $5 million to make necessary repairs in the building, without submitting any engineering study to support the claim.

Issue Dropped

At no time during the hearing, according to a transcript, did anyone on the commission cross-examine the owner on these points. When, in fact, the commission later requested financial records, the issue of economic hardship was dropped.

The Ansonia Residents Assn. and community groups—including the local planning board—fighting for preservation of the Ansonia had requested the commission to notify them of the scheduled public hearing. They say they were never so notified—a procedure the commission commonly follows with uncontested landmark proposals. After the April 28, 1970, hearing, lawyers for the tenants requested hearing transcripts; they got them, finally, on July 6.

The tenants' lawyers argued that the owner had been "less than frank" in his arguments against designation and submitted papers informing the commission of the hotel's architectural value and star-studded history as the "mecca of the music world." They further questioned all the testimony claiming unprofitability.

The law provides the "granting of partial or complete tax exemption" for landmarks, if their loss is threatened due to economic hardship. The commission has never made use of this provision and there is no indication that the commission considered this alternative for the Ansonia.

Community people question just how much the commission staff researched the Ansonia before embarking on a time-consuming fight to resist designation. Chairman Harmon Goldstone challenged the community to come forward with proof that the future "viability" was insured, a surprising request since there is hardly a landmark anywhere which could be given a guarantee of perpetual viability.

While the tenants were told by the commission to find an economic solution to saving the Ansonia, owner Starr refused to consider selling. Even foundations expressed interest in buying it for no other reason than seeing it preserved. Under the law, if a landmark is found to be losing money and the owner requests demolition, the commission has a year in which to find a buyer. But without designation, it can't even officially do that.

The Ansonia Residents Assn. in conjunction with neighborhood groups like the Lincoln Square Community Council, the local Planning board, the Municipal Art Society and Lincoln Center, waged an intensive campaign for designation, gathering one of the most awesome endorsement lists ever given a proposed landmark.

Year-Long Drive

The J. M. Kaplan Fund donated $3000 for publicity, more than 25,000 petition signatures were gathered in eight days, brochures were printed, a street music fair was held, and there was even a sing-in on the steps of City Hall. The drive lasted more than a year, but Goldstone did not bring the proposal before the full commission for a vote.

To designate a landmark over the owner's opposition, commission spokesmen said, there must be "some visible plan in sight" to insure its preservation. The only apparent opponents to designation were the landlord and the commission staff.

West Side Treasures

Finally, a community group led by Planning Board Chairman Rita Ald went to see Goldstone. They told him they had tried to find economic solutions, that foundations were interested but that the owner refused to sell. And, they told him, they were prepared to testify at capital budget hearings that the commission had vacillated and therefore didn't deserve full funding. They said too that they were prepared to go to court to prove it was the commission's responsibility under the law to designate the Ansonia.

A few weeks later, last March 15, the matter was unanimously approved by the commission.

The story of the Ansonia is perhaps illustrative of the commission's attitude toward the West Side, whose architectural treasures it has done little to save. Consider these examples:

¶The Central Savings Bank across Broadway from the Ansonia — considered one of the city's finest examples of Italian Renaissance architecture — was turned down for landmark status after a hearing in June, 1966. The American Institute of Architects Guide to New York describes it as "a Palladian Palace. Wrought-iron lanterns and window grilles by Samuel Yellin are the finest features of this richly embellished limestone bank building."

¶The East River Savings Bank at 96th and Amsterdam, which the AIA Guide describes as "a classical temple inscribed with exhortations to the thrifty," was also turned down by the commission in 1966.

¶Pomander Walk at 95th and West End Av., also rejected in 1966, described by the AIA this way: "Pomander Walk is a tiny street in the London suburb of Chiswick. It came to New York in 1911 as the name of a stage play. This double row of small town houses is modeled after the stage sets used for the New York production."

West Siders not only complain that their landmarks are turned down but point to the several blocks that were considered and never acted upon, such as the 74th and 76th St. blocks off Central Park W. and the Bloomingdale District of 105th and 106th Sts off Riverside Dr. With real estate development working its way up from Lincoln Center, much of the neighborhood's distinguished residential architecture is feared endangered.

Tomorrow: The Future