

Are Experts Overlooking the Landmarks?

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Second of a series

Spokesmen for the Landmarks Preservation Commission like to point out that they have lost only one of 360 designated landmarks to the wrecker's ball—the Jerome Mansion, at 26th and Madison, the elegant house that was the home of Churchill's grandfather and later the Manhattan Club.

Commission critics argue that this is an empty boast. The Jerome Mansion could have been saved, they claim, if the commission hadn't been anxious to have that one important loss to prove to the real estate industry how small a threat they were.

The Replacements

"It's their only loss," comments Kent Barwick of the Municipal Art Society, "because the commission hasn't designated buildings that are in danger of coming down."

The old Metropolitan Opera House, the 34th St. Armory, the Beaux Arts Singer Building at 149 Broadway and the old Ziegfeld Theater at 54th St. are among those that were never designated and are now gone.

A 40-story office tower replaced the Metropolitan for two reasons—there was the new opera house in Lincoln Center and the opera's desperate need for money that the sale of the valuable land brought.

A 42-story combined office tower and street-level school is replacing the 34th St. Armory. U.S. Steel's new black and glass office tower has replaced the Singer Building and the Ziegfeld was replaced by a 50-story office building with a new Ziegfeld Theater adjacent to it.

A landmark loss usually means a taxpaying gain. But the Landmarks Commission, whose interest is supposed to be aesthetics, not revenue, is too often protective of real estate interests, its critics say.

The Landmarks Commission went far beyond the three-year limitation in the law when it declared its moratorium on designations in 1970, leaving more than 80 landmark proposals pending. Chairman Harmon Goldstone argues that there was no intention to avoid difficult designations. The problem, he says, was staff and money shortages.



The Jerome mansion on Madison Av., which was razed, and Police Headquarters on Centre St., whose future is in doubt.



Post Photo by Terence McCarten

But what is curious is that in July, 1972, the commission budget according to commission executive director Frank Gilbert, was increased \$95,000 — from \$163,000 to \$258,000 — and no new staff has been added

to the original nine professionals.

Goldstone says he asked for a staff addition of six but that after salary increases and required fringe benefits the money remaining is only enough for two.

Still, six months after the budgetary increases, those two have not been hired.

"They knew a year ago," says one outsider who helped lobby for that money, "that they would get more money and they could have been

ready to hire immediately. But then they wouldn't have an excuse for inaction."

Executive Director Frank Gilbert attributes the delay in hiring to "a lot of time-consuming paper work. We have to get proper clearances and proper job descriptions written so civil service exams can be given and they should be given by January."

Couldn't you hire people provisionally, he was asked. "We are now in the process of appointing someone provisionally," Gilbert says.

Pending Proposals

Soon it will be time for the commission to prepare for this June's hearings so there will be no staff energy left to enable the commission to lift the moratorium. Therefore, the 86 pending proposals will have to be reheard in 1973, which means more delay and more staff work.

Some of those pending proposals include the Frick and Jewish Museums, Brooklyn's Fulton Ferry area, lower Broadway's Woolworth Building, the Carnegie Hill district which includes the 91st St. mansion block off Fifth Av., Brooklyn's Park

Continued on Page 77

Are Landmarks Being Overlooked?

Continued From Page 2

Ridge and Searson Hill and the West Side's Bloomingdale District.

"We have established the precedent that if a matter is not disposed of in three years," Gilbert explains, "we want to hear it again so people can express themselves. We decided administratively to handle it this way, which is what we did with Chelsea, Mount Morris and Bayside Heights districts."

What new feelings could people express three years later, Gilbert is asked. "Well," he says, "people might feel differently in 1973 than in 1970 and we're receptive to hearing different views. Things change in three years."

Buildings get torn down in three years, don't they, Gilbert is asked. "Yes," he replies, "but we've been working with the city's Law Dept. and their advice is to rehear these things. It's only fair to the owner."

Not many people outside of the commission's closest circle are aware of the two-year-old moratorium. One person who actively worked for the 1965 law and knew vaguely about the moratorium notes with a bit of enthusiasm:

"I think a lot of us felt everything was in good hands after the law passed so we went to other things. But the fact is, the public doesn't realize just how weak the commission is. So little is known about the law and the commission that people have the impression it is more powerful than it has been."

Another observer puts it more bluntly: "The first thing the commission should be doing is creating a constituency to demand preservation. If you are the commissioner of Air Resources you get the public to demand clean air. The interest in preservation is widespread but the commission hasn't prioritized it. The fact is that the commission began as an outgrowth of public opinion and demand, but it has alienated that very constituency that demanded its establishment."

Many of the complaints about the commission's record cannot really be addressed in new legislation, but some of the weaknesses in the law are. Legislation was recently introduced in the City Council by Carter Burden (D-Man.), based on a long study with recommendations by the Municipal Art Society that would close some of the loopholes in the landmarks law — primarily the three-year limitation.

That crippling clause was included after intense, mostly behind-the-scenes real estate opposition, in the 1965 legislation. It was the price of passage. The crux of that opposition was that active landmarks preservation could halt real estate development in the city and would soon be subject to interference with private property.

How many real estate people imagine the commission doesn't need legal restrictions to act in their best interest. J. Clarence Davies notes: "The artificial limitation on time is foolish. What remains to be designated is probably not of vital importance so I don't think people are afraid anymore."

Choices seem good that some form of landmark law reform will pass the City Council this year. Council Majority Leader Thomas J. Cuffa (D-Wght) is supporting the reform effort and David Blafford (D-Man.), chairman of the General Welfare Committee handling the Burden bill, says there will be public hearings held, probably at the end of this month.

There seems to be a growing recognition among Council members, as there has long been among preservationists, that despite the law the city loses a bit more of its architectural heritage every year. Whole areas are bulldozed for massive projects, a mansion disappears in Queens, a once sacred building falls into irreversible disrepair, a disputed landmark is destroyed by fire.

The 1875 Flatbush Town Hall is slated to make way for a parking lot. Three of the remaining Fifth Avenue mansions are demolished for a luxury high-rise. A row of 18th-century townhouses in the landmark district of Mount Morris Park are left half-demolished by the State Narcotics Control Agency that had once planned to use them.

Developers cast an eager eye on the yet unprotected East River district in SoHo, the largest remaining example of a unique American architectural form. The fate of the Renaissance Revival Police Headquarters on Centre St. is left precariously undecided as the Police Dept. prepares to move into its new Pearl St. headquarters.

The list goes on.

Yonkers: Does a landmark grow as old in Brooklyn?

How Landmark Panel Operates

The Landmarks Preservation Commission is an 11-member body appointed by the Mayor for three-year terms. By law it must include three architects, an historian, a city planner and a realtor. All five boroughs must be represented.

Harmon H. Goldstone, an architect and former member of the City Planning Commission, was appointed the commission's first paid chairman in 1969. It is a part-time position at \$18,000 a year. Goldstone is the only paid commissioner.

Executive Director Frank Gilbert joined the commission staff in 1965 after experience in city planning and public housing. He is a lawyer in member of the Washington bar but not New York's, earns \$18,000 and in terms of commission politics is more influential than any commissioner except Goldstone.

Non-Salaried Members

The 10 non-salaried commissioners are Vice Chairman William E. Fisher, a lawyer from Brooklyn Heights; Thomas H. Benton, lawyer, Staten Island; Hawthorne E. Lee, a Harlem real estate man; Martin H. Cohen, architect, Queens; James Heslin of Manhattan, director of the New York Historical Society; Paul E. Parker Jr. of the New York Urban Coalition,

from Manhattan; Elizabeth Cull, architect specializing in public housing, Manhattan; Edward A. Anos of the Ford Foundation, the Bronx; Barbara Diamondstein, former director of the city's Office of Cultural Affairs, Manhattan; and Morris Ketchum Jr., architect, Manhattan.

Ketelson and Miss Diamondstein were appointed in July, replacing Helen Beeman and Evelyn Haynes. Mayor Lindsay did not reappoint them though they are considered by preservationists to be among the best members ever to serve on the commission.