

Public Hearing On Landmarks

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Special

The Landmarks Preservation Commission tomorrow holds its first public hearing in three and a half years to consider new designation proposals.

The City Hall meeting promises to be a lively one since at least two of the items on the agenda—the Flatbush Town Hall and the East 82d St. group of townhouses off Fifth Av.—have been the focus of heated neighborhood controversies.

Both the Flatbush Town Hall and the Fifth Av. mansions figured prominently in a New York Post series last January focusing on the Landmarks Commission and the widespread criticism of its apparent reluctance to make designations in the face of strong realtor resistance.

Fighting to Save It

The Town Hall was approved for demolition and replacement by a parking lot in 1969 by the Board of Estimate Site Selection Board. Ever since, an activist local group has been fighting to save it for community use.

Two Fifth Av. mansions have already been torn down and another two are scheduled for demolition, despite strong neighborhood protests. An extremely fine 2½-story luxury apartment house sponsored by the Goldman-DiLorenzo realty firm.

Landmark designation for any of the proposed sites could forestall further demolition plans while the communities work out plans to save the buildings.

The full agenda for tomorrow's 10 a.m. meeting covers sites in all five boroughs that have been sponsored by community groups, local historical societies or individual property owners.

The Sites

Included on the agenda is the imposing 52d Street House on Webster Av. in the Bronx. Near the Botanical Gardens, the 1905 structure was designed by Stoughton and Stoughton, architects of the Robbers and Sailors Monument on Riverside Dr. The AIA Guide to New York describes it as a "high point of our provincial civic architecture. This solid red brick building gains authority from a large terra cotta masonry seal and grace from its handsome clock tower and bright terra cotta facade."

Other sites are: the 1903 Lyceum Theater on West 45th St.—one of Broadway's oldest; two Greek Revival private homes in Staten Island; 29 red brick "company town" rowhouses in Queens built by the Brinley Firms Factory for its workers in the 1870s; and the turn-of-the-century Rice Mansion at 86th St. and Riverside Dr.

The French Beaux Arts building—the last almost free-standing lawn-fronted structure on Riverside Dr.—

is currently occupied by Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim.

The Landmarks Commission is prohibited by law from designating buildings that have not been considered at public hearings. At the same time, the 1965 Landmarks Preservation Law limits the commission to holding public hearings for six-months every 3½ years.

The last series of hearings began in January, 1970. Tomorrow's hearing is the first of the new six-month period. Legislation currently awaiting City Council action would amend the landmarks law to permit the commission to hold public hearings on an unrestricted basis and, proponents argue, would allow the commission to respond on an emergency basis when undesignated landmarks are threatened.

In December, 1970, the commission declared a moratorium on designations because of reported staff and money shortages. At that time, seven historic districts and 86 individual structures—all considered at public hearings in 1970 and some for a second time were left pending. Eighteen districts and 260 individual landmarks had already been designated since passage of the 1965 landmark law.

Four New Districts

Since the Post's series in January, the commission has designated four new districts—two in Brooklyn and two on Manhattan's West Side—and six individual landmarks in Brooklyn and Manhattan. They were the first designations since the 1970 moratorium.

Turn-of-Century Examples

Although the long-awaited designation of the Soho Cast Iron District is expected shortly, the commission apparently remains reluctant to designate more than a few of the 85 proposals still pending.

The 1815 Flatbush Town Hall was the center of civic and cultural life for the Town of Flatbush until 1894 when Flatbush was absorbed into the city of Brooklyn and the Town Hall became a police station. Of the same Victorian architectural vintage as the Jefferson Market Courthouse in Greenwich Village, the red brick building just off Flatbush Av. remained a police station until the 67th Precinct recently moved to a new facility nearby.

The 15 townhouses across from the Metropolitan Museum are classic examples of the turn of the century architecture that has long been disappearing from the Fifth Av. landscape. The surrounding community began a well-organized preservation campaign that gained support from scores of architects and public officials well over a year ago when plans were announced for the high-rise apartment house.