

A Harlem Row House— Save It or Demolish It?

MAR 1 1974

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The city has decided to demolish an abandoned Harlem row house that some community people feel should be left standing for possible rehabilitation.

Seymour B. Feller, director of demolition for the Housing and Development Administration, says demolition was ordered after the Health Dept. declared the building a hazard.

The five-story building at 728 St. Nicholas Av. near 147 St. is in the middle of an architecturally attractive row of graystone houses that in any of the city's brownstone belts like the West Side or Brooklyn's Prospect Park West would be a likely candidate for renovation.

Near Hamilton Heights

It is situated on the fringe of the Hamilton Heights area just north of City College, a more stable community of mostly row houses and small apartment buildings that is under consideration for historic district designation by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Historic district designation often spurs neighborhood revival for areas im-

mediately outside its boundaries, as has happened in Chelsea and several Brooklyn districts. But unfortunately for the building at 728 St. Nicholas Av., the Hamilton Heights fringe benefits do not yet mean interest on the part of the brownstone buying public.

Feller says the decision to demolish followed complaints from neighbors that the vacant building was a safety, drug and fire problem—the usual assortment of disorders that accompany abandoned buildings all over the city.

What other residents had hoped the city would do is to seal the building with cement block to give the community time to devise a rehabilitation plan.

A Year's Delay

"This insistence on ripping down instead of sealing up is part of the whole city's abandonment problem," says Herman D. Farrell, a Democratic district leader. Farrell has gone to court to try to prevent demolition on behalf of himself, the Harlem Heights Neighborhood Assn. and the Riverside-Edgecombe Neighborhood Assn.

"All we're asking the city for," says Farrell, "is a year's delay to give us time to come up with a plan. It wouldn't take much to make the neighborhood turn around. One spark could do it and when it happens it won't be helped with a hole in the middle of a fine row of houses."

Farrell notes that the Planning Board 12 area north of 155th St. has been designated as part of the special HDA-Planning Commission neighborhood preservation program. Under that program, an emphasis is placed on putting public funds into rehabilitation of existing housing. According to Farrell, his community has applied for the same status and he believes there is a good chance it will get it.

"St. Nicholas is the backbone of the area," says Farrell. "We're not looking to save this building for his-

torical purposes but just because someone may want to buy it and a hole in the ground could destroy the future value of the complete row."

Feller said: "When we do seal buildings, they are often broken into from the rear. Gangs use them as shooting galleries and they become a real fire hazard."

At this point, Feller says, his department is waiting for a court decision. If the city would agree to a year's delay, he said he would drop the law suit.

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