

Landmark Bid Foundering For Fulton Ferry District?

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

When the Landmarks Commission designated Brooklyn's Fulton Ferry an historic district last November, it appeared to be an uncomplicated and logical decision. **JAN 22 1976**

The area, a low-rise waterfront district in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge and adjacent to Brooklyn Heights, was once the heart of Brooklyn's "downtown." It is still dotted with interesting and varied structures reflecting a rich maritime and commercial heritage.

But the district designation was not as simple as it appeared and is now facing stiff opposition before the Board of Estimate—which must approve all landmark designations, usually in a routine fashion.

Opposition stems from inclusion in the district of a piece of property owned by Con Edison and coveted by several governmental agencies, all seeking the final say on how it is redeveloped.

The Board of Estimate was scheduled to take up the issue today but was expected to lay the matter over to Feb. 5 for further consideration.

The Con Edison property—almost 9 acres situated just north of the bridge, the yellow framed fireboat house, a mini-park and Fulton St.—contains an historic grouping of 1860s red brick warehouses known as the Empire Stores.

The Civil War warehouse complex, varying in height from two to five stories, is distinguished by its uniform arched doors and windows on every floor and every side and the fieldstone walls and wooden columns that mark the interior. It is representative of the type of warehouse that once crowded most of Brooklyn's waterfront.

The property was bought by Con Edison in 1963 for a power generating plant that never materialized. Several years ago, Ed Logue of the state's Urban Development Corp. proposed a housing project for the site. But com-

munity opposition prevailed.

The property is zoned for heavy industry—for which development prospects, most observers agree, are minimal considering current and near-future economic conditions.

But Con Edison is anxious to sell and is arguing that landmark status would "depress the value of the land."

The utility also questions the "aesthetic value" of the land and contends that designation would force it to renovate the buildings, which it has no desire to do.

Parks Panel Interested

Landmarks Commission Chairman Beverly Moss Spatt labels Con Ed's objections "a misrepresentation of designation as an inhibiting factor in development and an exaggeration of the potential of the area for development other than for recreational or institutional use."

Mrs. Spatt says studies have shown that "district status more often enhances an area economically."

The district is already included on the National Register of Historic Places, which means any proposal to use the Empire Stores site for preservation or new construction—already requires review by the Interior Dept. if any federal funds are involved.

Key to the controversy is the interest shown in recent years by the State Parks Commission, which would like to acquire the site for partial use as a Maritime Museum—an extension of the one started at the South Street Seaport—and for partial development of income-producing activities.

Cost of acquisition would be between \$1.5 and \$2 million, but the state is in no position to make such a commitment under present economic circumstances. Without such, Con Ed wants the unencumbered option to sell to a private developer, even though Con Ed spokesmen say none has shown any interest.

During the commission's designating process of public hearings and private conversations, objections were

raised by the Dept. of Ports and Terminals, which has jurisdiction over the waterfront. The agency is currently negotiating a lease arrangement by which a group of Brooklyn Heights residents could construct temporary, open-air tennis courts on the vacant water edge property fronting the Empire Stores.

'Timing' Questioned

The Brooklyn Heights Assn. and the Landmarks Commission have not objected to the arrangement, but are seeking assurance that it would, indeed, be temporary and not involve a bubble structure blocking the view.

Questions have also been raised by the Office of Downtown Brooklyn Development and some members of the City Planning Commission, who question the "timing" of the Empire Stores designation. Since development of the parcel is so up in the air, they say, why not wait until something is definite and approved before designating?

Supporters, including the Brooklyn Heights Assn., argue that designation should come at "the beginning of the planning process" to prevent "uncontrolled and inappropriate development."

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