

A Historic Street Is In Danger

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

A block long row of perhaps the finest Georgian townhouses in the city is in imminent danger of destruction—an ironic spinoff of the nursing home scandals.

The 17 limestone and brick front houses, designed as a unit in 1904 by one architect, line the south side of West 74th St. between Central Park West and Columbus Av. It has long been known unofficially as nursing home row because it contains mostly small nursing homes.

Now five of those homes—New York, Hayden Manor, Aron Manor, Riverside, Park Terrace—comprising eight townhouses are in the process of closing because they are unable to meet fire and safety code regulations.

Fate Changes

The buildings are up for sale at prices well over \$200,000. Community residents fear the purchase by a developer who could alter the facades into architectural oblivion.

"If those buildings were bought together, a developer could under present zoning build up to 14 stories," notes block association spokeswoman Janet Vrchota. Any modification of the facades would, residents feel, damage the continuity of the block-front.

In 1966 and 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held public hearings to consider the block an historic district. Despite considerable support from architectural and preservationist groups, the block was never designated, reportedly due to legal threats and political pressures by nursing home operators.

At the same public hearings, the proposed designation of West 76th St. (including the New York Historical Society) from Central Park to Columbus Av. was considered. Community representatives appealed to the commission to designate the

two blocks together. Instead, on April 19, 1973, the West 76th St. block was designated alone.

Last month, representatives of the West 74th St. Block Association and Community Board 7 initiated a new appeal to the Landmarks Commission for designation "as quickly as possible."

Under the city's landmark preservation law, the commission can do so because it has already met the legal requirement of a public hearing. But commission precedent that has evolved in the 10 years since the law's passage calls for a new hearing when more than two years have elapsed since the last one.

New Hearing

That new hearing is now being scheduled for either July or September, according to a commission spokesman. This time, sources say, the commission seems "more sympathetic."

The simple but formal, columned-front buildings were designed by architect Percy Griffin for the Frederick Ambrose Clark (of Clark Thread) estate and has remained almost totally unchanged for 70 years.

While it was not unusual for West Side builders at that time to construct several contiguous townhouses together, this row is considered unique in its architectural unity. Common building materials, symmetrical architectural elements, wrought-iron detailing and copper roof lines remain reasonably intact. It is reportedly the longest Georgian-style row in the city.

According to a 1906 article in *Architectural Record*, the Clark estate's aim in building it was to provide homes for the family life "that used to exist before the city grew to proportions that forced real estate values so high that now only the wealthy can live in houses."



Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

Eight of the 17 turn-of-the-century Georgian townhouses on W. 74th St., between Central Park W. and Columbus Av., which face destruction unless the Landmark Preservation Commission acts to save them.