

A Landmark Decision Due

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

One of the longest and most complicated recent landmark designation disputes is expected to come to a head tomorrow when the Landmarks Commission announces whether it will give landmark status to a group of turn-of-the-century townhouses on the East 82d St. block across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two of the proposed landmarks are on Fifth Av. and the rest are on 82d St. between Fifth and Madison Aves.

Observers predict that only the corner Duke Mansion—owned by Mary Duke Biddle Semans and built by her maternal grandfather, Benjamin N. Duke, in 1901—will be designated. The Duke mansion is not endangered. The two townhouses on either side of it, however, are scheduled for demolition.

2-Year Controversy

The future of the fashionable and architecturally distinctive blockfront has been the center of controversy for almost two years and has been particularly heated because of the combined pressures of powerful real estate interests, politics and landmark preservation.

The dispute first came to public attention more than a year ago when East Park Apartments Inc.—part of the vast real estate complex of Sol Goldman and Alex DiLorenzo Jr.—demolished two landmark quality mansions at 1006 and 1007 Fifth Av. At the same time, they announced plans to build a 24-story luxury apartment house that would involve further demolition of 1008 Fifth Av. and 2 E. 82d St.

Since then an active neighborhood group — Neighbor-

hood Assn. to Preserve Fifth Av. Mansions — and high-level public officials have been pressuring the Landmarks Commission to designate E. 82d St. and the Fifth Av. blockfront an historic district to prevent further demolition.

Last July, the commission held a public hearing on the landmark proposals. However, instead of considering it for historic district status, the commission chose instead to hear individual proposals for only some of the E. 82d St. townhouses.

Commission critics charged that this selective approach was a strategy designed to avoid final designation, since the strongest landmark arguments can only be made for the block as a unified whole. Commission spokesmen argued that the omitted townhouses were not worthy of landmark consideration.

At the same time that pressures were brought to bear on the Landmarks Commission, the City Planning Commission began considering a zoning compromise first proposed by the real estate law firm of Abraham M. Lindenbaum, attorney for the builder, East Park Apartments Inc.

The plan — involving a special zoning amendment—would, in effect, permit the construction of the 24-story apartment house but preserve 2 E. 82d St. Demolition of that building, now a small apartment house, is necessary only for plaza space by zoning limitations for the residential tower. The planned building would not rest on that parcel. It would only fill the three lots on Fifth Av. between the corner Duke Mansion and 998 Fifth Av. — the Stanford White apartment house at 81st St. and Fifth Av.



Turn-of-the-century townhouse at 2 E. 82d St. is scheduled for demolition to make way for 24-story luxury apartment house fronting on Fifth Av. Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

Observers note that since the two small landmark quality buildings on Fifth Av. are already demolished—the third, still standing, lost its architectural importance in earlier renovations—the Lindenbaum proposal is probably the only solution left. At least, they say, it would leave 82d St. as a unified whole.

However, Planning Commission chairman John Zuccotti indicated last week that the plan had been worked out along these lines but as

currently drawn it hinges on landmark designation for 2 E. 82d St. If that designation is not forthcoming, he said, the Planning Commission will have to look for "other options" to preserve 82d street.

Although Zuccotti appeared skeptical about finding equally successful options, some planning experts argue that there are other precedents that could form the basis for a similar compromise even without landmark designation.

Some preservationists are hoping that if the Landmarks Commission turns down the 82d St. designations; it will simultaneously call for an examination of the entire upper East Side to determine what areas should be designated historic districts. There was no indication from representatives at the Landmarks Commission if such an approach would be taken.

A flat non-designation from the commission, observers note, could set a precedent that might endanger future East Side district designations.