

Landmarks Panel Hit on Frick Plan

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By ROBERTA R. GRATZ

The Landmarks Preservation Commission was criticized by the Municipal Art Society today for failing to block the Frick Museum from its planned demolition of the adjoining Widener House at 5 E 70th St.

The Frick Collection at Fifth Av. and 70th St., one of the country's most distinguished art museums, recently announced plans to demolish the elegant six-story townhouse to make way for a museum addition. Commission spokesmen reacted angrily, denying any knowledge of the Frick's plans.

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'This Seems Curious'

"One would get the impression that the commission was just now considering designating the Frick," says David Prager, president of the society. "But this seems curious since the commission voted to designate the Frick on Dec. 19, 1970. In our view, the public has a right to some explanation as to who held up the designation and why."

Commission spokesman deny the Frick designation was made, but say the panel did decide on that date to declare a moratorium on all future actions until more money was available.

Prager also expressed surprise commission spokesmen said they had no prior knowledge of the Frick's plan to raze the 1909 townhouse. Those plans have been in the works for some time, he said, and reportedly were shown to some commission staffers well in advance of a March 2 meeting at which Frick representatives assured the staffers they had no immediate building plans.

A designated landmark would mean any plans for exterior alterations—including a new addition—would have to get commission approval. A public hearing would be necessary on any plan to demolish the Widener House, formerly owned by George D. Widener, heir to a Philadelphia trolley-car fortune and racehorse owner who died in 1971.

A series in The Post in January focused on the limitations of the 1965 Landmarks Preservation Law and on widespread criticism of the Landmarks Commission's reluctance to make use of its limited powers. Since the series, the commission has reportedly been under pressure to designate some of the 86 individual proposals and seven historic districts that are pending from its 1970 hearings.

In the wake of the Frick's announced plans, the commission today is expected to formally designate the Fifth Av. mansion—built by Henry Clay Frick, the 19th century millionaire who amassed one of the world's great art collections. But there is some question as to what, if any, effect this would have on the building plans.