

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, 1987

R 7

Preserving Manhattan's Upper West Side History

Continued From Page 1

40-unit apartment building on Central Park West at 95th Street, even seriously planning, on West End Avenue and 85th Street, to build a 10-story tower on stilts above a 95-year-old house.

Unlike the preservation battles that swirled around such projects as razing the old Pennsylvania Station or building atop Grand Central Station, the fight to preserve the Upper West Side was not triggered by a single immediate threat.

Rather, the danger is considered incremental, assailing the neighborhood "stoop by stoop, cornice by cornice, gargoyle by gargoyle," to quote a slide preservation presentation narrated by the actor Tony Randall, a West Sider.

The reason for such broad support even absent a crystallizing threat, said Arlene Simon, the president of Landmark West!, a preservation group, is an evolving sense of place, a greater sensitivity to change, and a feeling, heightened by several current events, that in a chaotic modern world, there must still be some things that individuals can control — the face of their historic neighborhood being one very important one.

"MAYBE it's because life in general has taken on another tone," said Mrs. Simon, who has lived on the Upper West Side since she and her husband rented a \$115-a-month apartment on 73d Street in 1960.

"People today don't have control over many things," she said. But they need to understand their surroundings and feel they "have a share in their destiny."

But others say that share really amounts to an effort to stunt growth that is necessary and that the City Planning Commission has deemed appropriate for the Upper West Side. They say it is more than a coincidence that the landmarks designation process coincides with sharp public opposition to large new projects proposed for Columbus Circle and the West Side railroad yards. Even smaller projects, such as the tower Kiska Development plans on Central Park West and 95th Street, appear to be caught in a tug of war between preservationists and developers.

Jay A. Segal, an attorney with Rosenman & Colin, who represents Kiska, said that the Landmarks Preservation Commission "stretched its definition of historic purposes" last month when it designated the five row-houses on Central Park West as individual landmarks, blocking the Kiska project. The buildings had originally been proposed as part of the Central Park West Historic District. Mr. Segal said the commission moved beyond the district proposal and considered these buildings, and two adjoining row-houses, as a distinct group, even though the commission's own staff had originally found that the buildings, as is the case with most others in the proposed districts, did not merit individual designation.

The commission acted "primarily to sat-

ness being there."

"There" is a neighborhood of roughly 140 city blocks, which seems impossibly wider on a walking tour than it does on a map. It is, many long-time residents will tell you, a feeling more than a location, a stirring evocation punctuated by long streets of massive stone stoops and brocade carvings on human-scale buildings so numerous they seem a page from a 19th century baedeker.

In the larger context of things, the Upper West Side is Manhattan's attic, the connected but slightly out of the way place where curios from an earlier age can be found. Its special spirit may be that while it comprises so many different architectural styles, there is a connectedness, drawn from age, that molds it into a remarkable whole.

For unlike the streets of lower Manhattan, where unending waves of construction have swept over the land, most of what can be seen on the Upper West Side today is all that has ever stood on those sites, the equivalent of a virgin forest.

The area developed comparatively late in the city's history, not really taking shape until the Ninth Avenue (now Columbus Avenue in the Upper West Side) el was opened in 1879. Then, for a remarkable spurt of 50 years finally halted by the Depression, speculative builders and their favored architects built a neighborhood conceived in diversity and executed with unsurpassed skill.

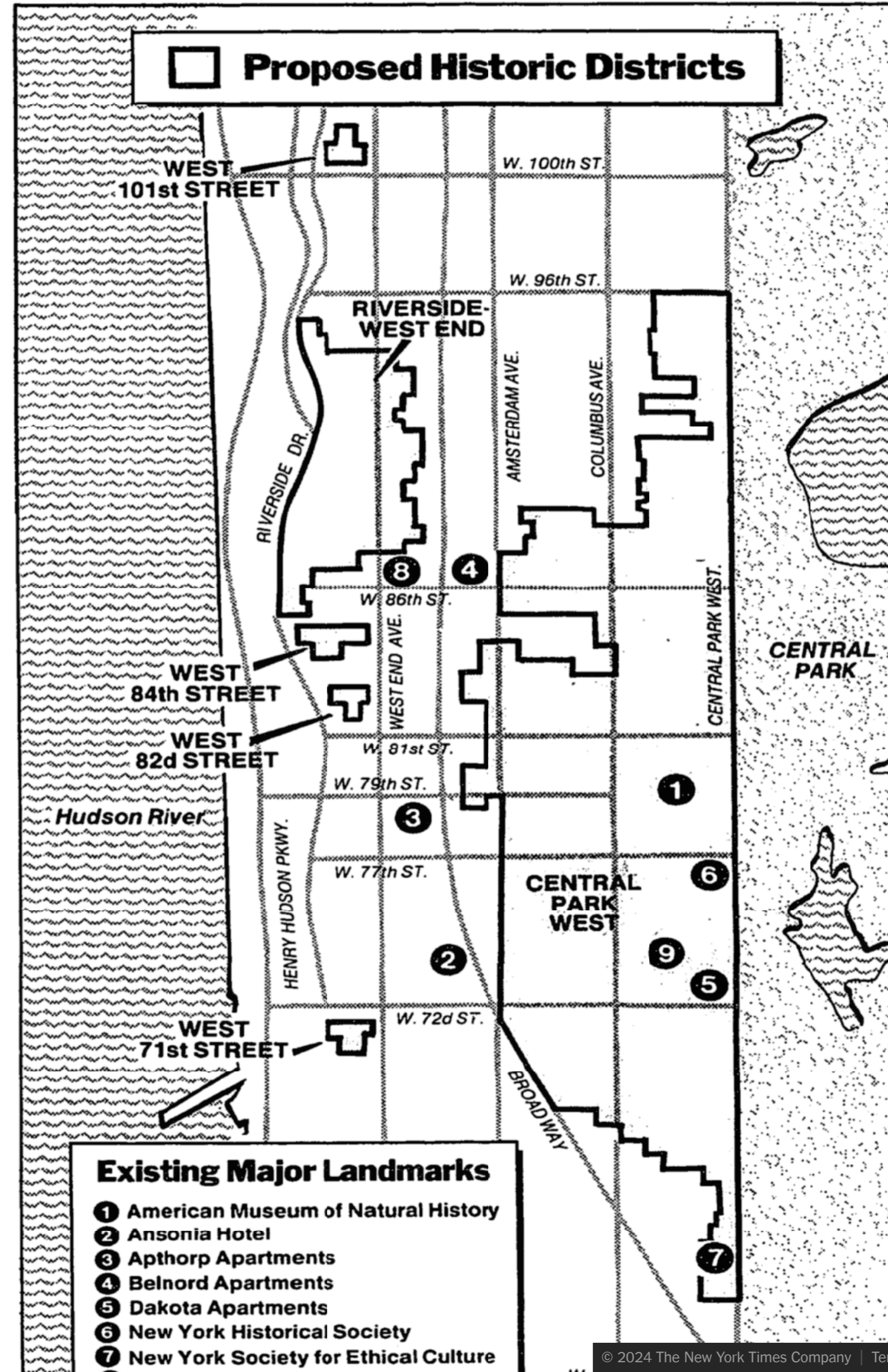
On his frequent walking tours of the neighborhood, Andrew S. Dolkart, the architectural historian, excitedly points out the small embellishments on building facades — a graceful robin carved in stone, a gruesome brownstone countenance, a laurel of stone leaves deep beneath a bay window — that only dedicated snoopers would find.

"The architects didn't really specify all this ornamentation," Mr. Dolkart said on a blustery afternoon tour last month. He explained that the architect handled all the major features of the facade, such as windows, doors and cornices, then would indicate areas to be marked with ornamentation, leaving it up to the craftsmen — recently arrived at Ellis Island and eager to show off their skills — to complete the design.

Mr. Dolkart delights in these small discoveries, believing they contribute a great deal to the development history of the Upper West Side. He said many of these details have survived only through "benign neglect," and if the area had not been nearly abandoned until just recently, many more owners might have made improvements that wrecked what today is most valuable.

Several notable buildings already have been designated Upper West Side landmarks: the Dakota on 72d Street and Central Park West, the Ansonia on 73d and Broadway, the Belnord apartments on 86th and Broadway among them. The city also has designated a few rows of houses — on 73d and 76th Streets — as landmark districts.

The current proposals encompass these buildings and many others, including some of the earliest apartment houses in the city, that are not sufficiently outstanding to be de-



boundaries of the Upper West Side districts, lopping off the weakest blocks. In the Central Park West district, the five blocks along Amsterdam Avenue — containing several buildings once used as stables — may have the shakiest footing and could end up outside district boundaries.

What most certainly would end up inside the district are a number of buildings clearly neither historic nor of landmark quality. These include new towers, such as the Park Belvedere on 79th Street, and many row-houses that have been modernized with blue brick or open riser steel staircases.

Mr. Norman said the commissioners have discussed treating these buildings in the same way as others like them in the Upper East Side historic district, which was designated in 1981. These buildings are considered "noncontributing" or "no-style," which, in effect, mark them as developable sites where the commission would not object to their being demolished and replaced by sympathetic new buildings.

Another Upper East Side convention that might be transplanted across Central Park is a set of guidelines for storefront alterations. Acknowledging that retail spaces change frequently, and generally are not integral to the historic fabric of a building, the commission allows the storefronts to be altered in accordance with guidelines.

Robert C. Quinlan, a developer active on the Upper West Side, said he supports district designation but with "the exclusion of the stores, because I think that's unworkable."

Mr. Quinlan, who bought and restored the Endicott Hotel on 81st Street and Columbus Avenue, said he owns about 50 storefronts, mostly on Columbus Avenue. "To have to go through a landmarks application every time, even if the process is shortened, would be quite a horrendous and pretty impractical experience," said Mr. Quinlan.

One of the largest nonresidential developers on the Upper West Side, the American Broadcasting Company, is building a new midblock headquarters between 66th and 67th Streets, Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, just steps from the proposed historic district. The company owns several other pieces of property that are inside the landmark area, but a spokesman said ABC has not finished assessing the proposal's full impact on its operations.

In a city where developers strive to call their newly constructed buildings "instant landmarks," most builders profess support of the commission's aesthetic considerations, while reserving their criticisms for the processes of protection.

Paul Ketterer, vice president of Housing Futures, a company involved in a project just north of the proposed district, said that while he generally support preservation, it concerns him that the landmarks panel considers "designating a district with such broad scope," at a time when its staff already is overtaxed. Mr. Ketterer said there should be