

The New York Times

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December 18, 1988

STREETSCAPES: Park Avenue; A Grand Residential Boulevard or Just Monotony Lane?

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THERE are two ways for a commissioner at the Landmarks Preservation Commission to look at Park Avenue - as the grandest residential boulevard in Manhattan or as a waste of time, with a monotonous collection of similar buildings and constant window replacements and air-conditioner installations.

It now looks as if there will be a verdict on Park Avenue between 86th and 96th Streets in the next few months, because the panel is considering proposals to include all, part or none of it in an expansion of the existing Carnegie Hill Historic District.

Park Avenue in the Carnegie Hill area developed much as it did in the lower sections. After the railroad tracks were covered in 1875, flats and tenements went up on most blocks. But the really high ground around 93d Street attracted generally modest rowhouse construction. By the turn of the century, Park was almost fully developed as a boulevard of the bourgeoisie.

But construction of town houses for the gentry was moving up Fifth and Madison Avenues and there was some spillover to Park, especially after the railroad converted from steam to electricity in 1903. That year, Elihu Root built a house at the southeast corner of 71st Street, and Amos Pinchot built one at the northeast corner of 85th Street in 1906. Above 86th Street, Francis F. Palmer built a house at the northwest corner of 93d Street in 1917.

But luxury apartment house construction came to dominate upper Park Avenue beginning with 1155 Park in 1916 and 1049 Park in 1919. In 1922, the next four of what would become a nearly uniform wall of apartment houses from 86th to 96th Street went up: 1045, 1050, 1060 and 1105 Park Avenue, which was the first cooperative in the section.

In 1927, an article in *The New Republic* called Park Avenue "the end of the American ladder of success," noting that "higher one cannot go." Although its similar apartment buildings constituted an "unendurable monotony," the article noted that it was still "a broad and noble avenue."

The wave of construction continued through the 1920's, but the crash of 1929 left unrealized several major projects, among them a 52-story apartment hotel at 86th Street by Fred F. French and a 21-story setback apartment house by Rosario Candela at 1245 Park. After that, only a few later buildings - Brick Church at 91st Street and the modern 1065 Park - interrupted the line of red, gray and tan brick that stopped at 96th Street, where the end of the railroad tunnel established a social boundary.

Today the buildings do not seem quite so uniform as they once did. Delano & Aldrich's 1040 Park is an unusual mixture of Georgian and Art Deco, with Conde Nast's glassed-in penthouse still intact, the first such dwelling in New York.

William Bottomley's 1049 Park, although carelessly altered, is still a distinctive Italian Renaissance design. Mott Schmidt's 1088 Park has its genteel garden courtyard and unusual detailing. DePace & Juster's setback 1100 Park is in a warm Mediterranean style, with multipaned windows that are steadily being replaced by single panes. Schwartz & Gross's neo-Gothic, blockfront 1185 Park has an immense drive-in courtyard.

The original Carnegie Hill Historic District designated in 1974 has boundaries that have proved to be an embarrassment to the Landmarks Commission. They protect midblock, side-street buildings and are so irregular that the district was rejected when nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. The Metropolitan Museum Historic District of 1977, farther south, is still mostly side streets, but the Upper East Side Historic District, designated in 1981, includes most of Park Avenue from 62d to 79th Streets and is called "essential to the architectural fabric of the area."

SINCE 1980, Carnegie Hill Neighbors, led by Elizabeth Ashby, and other groups have been lobbying for an extension of the Carnegie Hill District. The landmarks commissioners walked the area in November and are now examining the matter. They will almost certainly extend the district to include Fifth Avenue, and there are groups of rowhouses between Park and Lexington Avenues that are of fairly obvious architectural value. But Park Avenue itself remains a thorny question mark.

The most conservative approach would be to enlarge the existing district to the west to include Fifth and to the east just short of Park, covering the buildings east of Park by separate designations. But if the commissioners decide that Park Avenue is itself a feature worthy of protection, they will have to create a much larger district.

And if they do include Park from, say, 86th to 96th Street, many will then wonder why the avenue from 79th to 86th Streets, excluded from the Metropolitan Museum Historic District, is not similarly protected.

Photo of Park Avenue, looking north from 86th Street, in 1930 (Municipal Archive)