

Fighting on to preserve morningside heights

Robin Pogrebin

In its early days Morningside Heights was sometimes referred to as the “Acropolis of the New World” because of its soaring cathedral, acclaimed institutions of higher learning and Renaissance Revival brownstones bordered by grand parks by the likes of Olmsted and Vaux.

Neighborhood residents and public officials have been pressing for more than a decade to have the neighborhood designated a historic district. Their formal request for evaluation, submitted in 1996 to the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, championed the area — home to the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, Columbia University and Barnard College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Manhattan School of Music — as “a sustained, exuberant, cogent expression of the American Renaissance.”



Ari Mintz for The New York Times
Beaux Arts details on Riverside Drive near Columbia.

In January designation efforts were given a potential boost: New York State’s Historic Preservation Office deemed three residential buildings on West 115th Street to be historically significant, although their owner, Columbia, plans to demolish them.

The state office also determined that Morningside Heights overall met the criteria for listing on the state and national registers of historic places.

But the city landmarks agency has yet to be convinced that the area — roughly bounded by West 108th Street to the south, West 125th Street to the north, Riverside Park to the west and Morningside Park to the east — is worthy of protection.

The commission’s “criteria are different from those of the state and national registers,” said Kate Daly, executive director of the commission. For example, she said, Robert B. Tierney, the commission’s chairman, has made it a priority “to balance the needs of designating districts in Manhattan with districts in the other four boroughs.”

Ms. Daly said that the commission had surveyed 196 buildings in the Morningside Heights area from May 1996 to January 1997 and that it was currently revisiting the proposal, although no timetable has been set for resolving the matter.

Daniel J. O’Donnell, the state assemblyman who represents Morningside Heights, is tired of waiting. “We’ve gotten absolutely nothing out of” the commission, he said.

Last spring he filed a Freedom of Information Act request for any commission documents pertaining to the designation of Morningside Heights as a historic district. Part of Mr. O’Donnell’s request was denied, his office said; it is unclear what documents were withheld or why.

The assemblyman was given access to 200 pages of commission documents, of which about 75 were pertinent to the Morningside Heights Historic District, according to his spokesman, Shane Seger. He added that the papers did not include initial research submitted to the commission by a group advocating for the designation, the Morningside Heights Historic District Committee, and he called this "a glaring omission."

Mr. Tierney referred a request for an interview to Ms. Daly.

Elisabeth de Bourbon, a spokeswoman for the commission, said that Mr. Tierney had met with Mr. O'Donnell last April to discuss a potential historic district. She added that the agency had designated 33 historic districts since the start of the 1996 survey. "We simply made other choices," she said.

Mr. O'Donnell argues that the commission should at the very least schedule a hearing on the proposal so that views can be aired in public. "Maybe I'm wrong," he said. "Maybe this is not worthy. So have a hearing, calendar it, let people come out and say what they think. That has never happened. It's now been 13 years of trying to get that to happen."

In determining whether to hold a hearing, Ms. de Bourbon said, the commission's first step will be "to reach out to elected officials and other interested parties" and determine when a community meeting might be held with property owners within the proposed boundaries. "We are currently doing that outreach," she said.

But Carolyn Kent, the Morningside Heights resident who filed the original request for evaluation, called the commission's conduct on the matter "capricious."

"Their work on this absolutely fizzled," she said. "It's never been explored. I want to hear from the commission as to exactly what stopped this process."

Most of the Morningside Heights neighborhood took shape from 1900 to 1920. The arrival of the IRT subway line in 1904 brought a rush of speculative construction of upper-middle-class apartment houses in a Beaux Arts style on Broadway, Riverside Drive, Claremont Avenue and Cathedral Parkway. Most of them survive, as do more modest yet distinguished row houses and brownstones on the side streets.



Ari Mintz for The New York Times

Threatened brownstones on West 115th Street owned by Columbia.

At the same time cornerstones were laid for even more ambitious buildings at major institutions like Columbia, Riverside Church, St. Luke's Hospital, Union Theological Seminary

and the Church of Notre Dame. "It's the largest concentration of institutional buildings in New York," said Andrew S. Dolkart, the director of Columbia's historic preservation program.

The local architecture remains almost intact. "Largely it's the neighborhood that was here in 1912," Mr. Dolkart said.

The buildings most immediately threatened are three vacant brownstones on West 115th Street — Nos. 408, 410 and 412, between Amsterdam Avenue and Morningside Drive — that Columbia acquired in 2002. The structures, five-story residences with brownstone facades dating from 1898, are said to be among the earliest multi-unit residential buildings in the area.

The state preservation office in its report remarked on the buildings' "unusual design with undulating bays at the first and second stories reminiscent of low-scale row house design but with three upper floors and cornice above."

Columbia still plans to raze these buildings, but says it is unsure how the sites will be used in the future.

Preservation advocates say that as the largest property owner in Morningside Heights, Columbia has been the biggest obstacle to designation, opposing historic status to maintain its flexibility. (Any change to a building in a historic district — a new style of windows, for example — requires approval by the landmarks commission.)

"What we have here is a neighborhood that is dominated by institutions, institutions with great political power," Mr. O'Donnell said.

A common misperception, he added, is that designating Morningside Heights would mean limiting its growth. "It doesn't stop development," Mr. O'Donnell said. "It doesn't say, 'You can't do anything.' It just says, 'There is something here that deserves to be protected.' "

Lee C. Bollinger, president of Columbia, declined through a spokesman to comment on the issue of a potential historic district. A university spokesman, Robert Hornsby, said in a statement, "We are certainly open to the study of an appropriately defined district in the area."

But he said that Columbia considered it unnecessary to include its campus in such a district because the university "has long been a good steward of its valuable architectural legacy."

Asked about the 115th Street brownstones, Mr. Hornsby said they were dilapidated from years of neglect when Columbia bought them. The university invested the money needed to prevent further deterioration, he said, and they have been sealed ever since.

"Based on the unsound and unsafe condition of these structures, it is the university's intention to demolish the property," Mr. Hornsby added. "This decision follows a number of meetings with members of the local community over time to keep them apprised of plans and conditions of the properties."

Mr. Tierney's predecessor as commission chairman, Jennifer J. Raab, who served from 1994 to 2001, said she was unsure why the proposal for a Morningside Heights historic district never made it to the calendar after the research in 1996-97.

"There was property up there that we were interested in," she said. "I do know the whole process takes a while."

New York Times, New York, 1 mar. 2009, art & Design, online. Disponível em <www.nytimes.com>. Acesso em: 5 mar. 2009.