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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: MANHATTAN VALLEY; A West Side Stepchild Seeks Respect for Its Roots

By KELLY CROW
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Manhattan Valley, the sloping neighborhood east of Broadway from 96th to 110th Streets, has long played stepsister to the Upper West Side. In the 1850's, its only residents, squatters, had to move to make room for Central Park. In the 1870's, the poor and infirm found homes there, in tenements and asylums. Later, they were joined by working-class people who settled into rows of three-story brick houses beside the country's first cancer treatment hospital, at 105th Street and Central Park West.

Today, that landmark hospital, known as the Towers Nursing Home, is being transformed into a luxury-apartment complex, and neighbors want to preserve the nearby row houses by creating a historic district. The Landmarks Preservation Commission said it was awaiting a formal request for the designation.

Efforts to establish a district in the neighborhood have stalled in the past, but Community Board 7 took up the idea again last week.

"It's the one outstanding area on the West Side that has yet to be designated," said Andrew S. Dolkart, an architectural historian at Columbia University. "And while the Towers are in the news, it seems like a good time to remind people that there is this wonderful enclave of modest and original row houses."

The row houses, along Manhattan Avenue between 104th and 106th Streets, were built in the late 1880's, when terra-cotta brick and sunburst gables were the Victorian fashion. The architects included Charles P. H. Gilbert, who later found fame building Fifth Avenue mansions.

The buyers in Manhattan Valley were rarely wealthy, though, said Arlene Simon, president of Landmark West, a preservation group.

"The more affluent people in New York became, the more changes they made to their homes," Ms. Simon said, "but this area didn't change."

Until recently. Isabella Levinson, a resident since 1969, said the row houses once reflected a harmony of colors and architectural philosophy. But lately, she has seen many alterations, including a controversial proposal by Lewis Futterman, a developer, to build a six-story apartment building with a penthouse at Manhattan Avenue and 106th Street.

"New colors are coming in and new heights, and lots are already small," Ms. Levinson said. "We welcome the good times, of course, but if this designation protects us from bad changes, we welcome it, too."

Some people at the meeting doubted whether the landmarks commission would protect enough of the area, but a few also acknowledged that Manhattan Valley could use any stamp of architectural legacy.

"Designation of an historic district gives people a sense of belonging, a credibility," Ms. Simon said. "We need that here." KELLY CROW