

## White Bricks and Pale Imitations

By JAKE MOONEY



MANHATTAN HOUSE, the 19-story slab of an apartment building on a full Upper East Side block bounded by 65th and 66th Streets and Second and Third Avenues, was built to stand out from its size to its stark silhouette to its most striking feature: Its bold white-brick skin. Time, changes in fashion and a host of pale imitations around the neighborhood have perhaps made the facade less surprising but this month the building, which is actually light gray, may be on its way to getting the recognition that advocates say is long overdue. The City's Landmarks Preservation Commission is considering protecting the building and heard testimony on the matter last week while the local Community Board plans to consider it this week.

Meanwhile Manhattan House tenants who are involved in a long struggle with its owners over plans to convert the building to condominiums hope that a Landmark designation will preserve elements they love.

The building, completed in 1950 and designed by the firms Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Mayer & Whittlesey, was part of a project by the New York Life Insurance Company which bought adjacent land and kept buildings there low to ensure Manhattan House had abundant light, air and visibility. The pale brick exterior, one of the first of its kind, was meant to stand for cleanliness; the bricks were covered in a glaze to make them self-cleaning in the rain.

"It wasn't the high-end part of the Upper East Side and when it went up the Third Avenue El was still there," Seri Worden, Executive Director of Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts said last week "so it would have been very impressive to see this 19-story white building rising among the brownstones and old tenement buildings."

John Jurayj, Co-Chairman of the Modern Architecture Working Group a collective of Preservationists pushing for Landmark designation of Manhattan House and other Modernist buildings including 40 Central Park South, a white-brick precursor, called Manhattan House a synthesis of high modernism and middle-class living and one of the City's first and best manifestations of the theories of Le Corbusier. "It was a belief, on some level, that industrialization in general and the byproducts of it - your kitchen stove, your refrigerator could - free you up to have a better life." Mr. Jurayj said. "It was a very hopeful idea of designing and living." Developers of a half-century ago, though, took another lesson from the building where Benny Goodman and Grace Kelly once lived: White Brick was In. The resulting homages were less than sparkling. "It's exciting at first," Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director of the Historic Districts Council said of the medium "then it becomes banal. Manhattan House is an incredibly important building and it was really the very best of a bad lot."

The proliferation of copycats may have robbed the building of some of its distinctiveness but Mr. Jurayj said the bricks, which eventually fell out of fashion, were not to blame. "Most of the other white-brick buildings in the city, it's not the white brick that's the problem," he said. "It's not the material. It's a paucity of skill and imagination in those architects." What sets Manhattan House apart, he added, is the little touches like the large picture windows, glass-fronted balconies and landscaped gardens. Details like those along with the building's height and outward appearance are what tenants hope Landmark designation would preserve.

The building's current owners, N. Richard Kalikow and Jeremiah O'Connor, are in the midst of a billion-dollar conversion to condominiums and the Manhattan House Tenants Group says hundreds of tenants have been forced out. The owners, who deny any impropriety, consider the building "an iconic property truly deserving of Landmark status." said their spokeswoman, Barbara Wagner.

Preservationists meanwhile hope the attention will benefit other modernist buildings which have generally been harder to protect. Modern designs, Ms. Worden said "don't always have the same heart-tugging appeal of older buildings but they are an important part of New York's cityscape." Mr. Jurayj noted that even Manhattan House which is relatively well known and well liked was eligible for Landmark status for more than 25 years before last week's hearing. "You run the risk," he said "of losing important things."