

Upper East Side

As Towers Loom, a Hoped-for Line in the Sand



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

The Parge House, at 6th Street and Lexington Avenue, a candidate for protection.

By GREGORY BEYER

Published: August 15, 2008

SINCE 1962, Elaine and Hyman Weitzen have been happily ensconced in a white stucco house at 65th Street and Lexington Avenue. Ms. Weitzen is the founding director of the American Friends of the Israel Museum, and the house has a museumlike quality to it: a wealth of paintings, drawings and sculptures has left very few surfaces undecorated.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Elaine and Hyman Weitzen have lived in the white stucco house since 1962.

On the wall of her fourth-floor office hang framed photographs of Ms. Weitzen meeting the Israeli prime ministers Golda Meir and David Ben-Gurion. And from her kitchen window Ms. Weitzen can look across Lexington Avenue and see some of the thin towers along Third Avenue that have lately been making Upper East Side preservationists nervous.

That nervousness, as it relates to Ms. Weitzen's building, which is known as the Parge House for its whimsical exterior "paring," or designs in plaster, stems from the fact that it lies just outside the Upper East Side Historic District, which covers about 57 blocks total from Fifth Avenue to Third Avenue, between 59th and 79th Streets.

In July 2007, the preservation group Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts submitted a proposal to the city to add to the district 197 buildings — including the Parge House — along Lexington Avenue and side streets from 60th to 65th Street and from 72nd to 75th Street. The city's Landmarks Preservation Commission is studying the proposal.

There are hopes, but few illusions, of protecting every building in the proposed areas, which cover parts of 17 blocks, and in recent weeks preservationists have felt a jolt of renewed urgency. One of the buildings they hoped to protect, a brownstone directly opposite Ms. Weitzen's that was built in 1922 and known as the Kean House, will soon make way for a 15-story residential building, according to permits filed with the city's Buildings Department.

"If Kean House goes, and the residential building is built, it could create a domino effect for the whole area," said Seri Worden, the executive director of the preservation group. "A historic block would effectively be dismantled and ruined."

The Upper East Side Historic District was designated in 1981, and with a few exceptions, buildings on Lexington Avenue, which Ms. Worden called the neighborhood's "main street," are not afforded protection. For Ms. Worden and her colleagues, Lexington Avenue has more in

common with the designated district than with Third Avenue, whose architecturally unremarkable towers symbolize a style and level of development they fear will spread to Lexington's vulnerable blocks.

Fredric Bell, the executive director of the New York chapter of the [American Institute of Architects](#), said the expansion would preserve historic buildings but might also inhibit worthwhile development. "There will be projects that won't happen," Mr. Bell said. "Will it slow things down? Yes."

Lithgow Osborne, who works at Casa Del Bianco, a custom linens shop that rents space on the ground floor of Ms. Weitzen's building at 65th and Lexington, expressed appreciation, tinged with regret, for the intersection one recent afternoon while leaving work.

"How rare is it in New York," Mr. Osborne said, waiting on the sidewalk for the light to change, "for an intersection to be interesting from all angles?"