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Commentary: Former West Side Stables and Proposed East Side Tower Spawn Controversy

Ross Sandler

New York Law School, ross.sandler@nyls.edu

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Former West Side Stables and Proposed East Side Tower Spawn Controversy

Making delicate decisions in the face of strong public sentiment is the lot of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Current examples, now before the Landmarks Commission, are three controversies reported in this issue of *CityLand*, two on the West Side and one on the East Side.

The first involves whether to landmark the Dakota Stables at 348 Amsterdam Avenue, an 1894 building that began as a high-rise horse stable and was later converted into a car garage. The owner has in his pocket a permit from Buildings to remove the facade, and a future plan with the Related Companies to construct an apartment complex designed by Robert A.M. Stern. The issue is complicated, or perhaps made easier, by the parallel consideration of the New York Cab Company Stable located at 75th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, an 1890 Romanesque Revival stable also converted into a car garage. At designation hearings on both, voices raised both for and against. Zoning allows substantial new structures on both sites, but many in the community prefer the low buildings with their redolent history and neighborly feel.

Across town, the gloves have come off on whether to allow a Norman Foster-designed 26-story residential structure to be built atop the Parke-Bernet building at 980 Madison Avenue opposite the Carlyle Hotel, a site within the Upper East Side Historic District. The Commission must decide whether Norman Foster's 26-story addition would be appropriate.

For some in New York, the sky's the limit. For others, the skyline should remain quite a bit lower. The Commission's charge is to define the skyline, site by site. A building may be said to contribute to a historic district, while a new structure may be judged not to belong at that place. The AIA Guide called the Parke-Bernet building "an insipid box unrelated to any cultural values." Opponents have defended the low building as appropriate in height, and attacked the proposed 26-story tower as an unwanted revolution.

There is little middle ground in these viewpoints. The members of the Landmarks Commission will choose. It will not be easy.

Ross Sandler

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Ross Sandler
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