

MANHATTAN'S WEST SIDE

ARTICLE III: North From 59th.

By ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

IT IS spoken of as THE West Side—sometimes Upper, sometimes Middle, more often just The. But in reality it is dozens of communities lumped together under one geographical umbrella. It runs roughly from 59th St. to 110th, but, as will be seen, the boundaries tend to blur along the edges. More than 212,000 people call it home, that slice of Manhattan that is sometimes defined on the south by Lincoln Center, on the north by Columbia University and Morningside Park and along the sides by two of the city's most remarkable parks—Central and Riverside.

Beyond its boundaries—even those are subject to dispute—the West Side is not easy to explain.

Ask 20 West Siders to define their neighborhood and you'll get 20 different descriptions. More than a community, the West Side is a state of mind. To hear a West Sider speak is to think there is no other place in the city.

It is the area of the city that seems to spawn more urban chauvinists per square foot, more promoters of community spirit and defenders of have-not groups than any other neighborhood. It seems, as well, to contain more activists in far-flung causes, more aspiring politicians, more community improvement groups and, certainly, more beads and blue jeans than any area outside Greenwich Village.

It is home, in fact, for many disenfranchised villagers who, like one former Village resident, believe that "the West Side is the vital center of whatever is good left in New York City." Even the Bank Street School, that famous Village-born institution, is now located on 112th St., between Broadway and Side Drive.

West Siders will recite as if by rote the same litany of advantages that makes their neighborhood so appealing—sound housing of every kind, sometimes even at rational prices; excellent transportation including two subway lines and a variety of buses; ethnic diversity that is not only reflected in the faces and accents of residents but in the local stores, restaurants and cultural groups; small playgrounds and large parks; museums, uncrowded movie theaters and, of course, Lincoln Center.

Says David S., who has in the last 22 years lived in a rent-controlled apartment on West End Avenue, a co-op on Central Park West and now a renovated brownstone on the landmark block of W. 78th Street off Central Park West: "The appeal is that there are options. If you want to walk you can choose between colorful, cluttered, commercial Broadway or tree-lined East Side-looking side streets. If you want your child to go to public schools, there are good ones and plenty of private ones if you want to switch. You can get involved in any kind of local group or you can remain aloof and if you tire of high-rise living as I did you can buy or rent a brownstone apartment without destroying your roots."

Many West Siders like to define the West Side by what it is that the East Side isn't. "The East Side is so plastic," says one. "It's all a facade," says another. Yet another says: "It's not a neighborhood. It's just one big clean place." All those things, they mean to say, that the West Side isn't.

The West Side's "cheaper more convenient and it is definitely the more beautiful side," says Bill Silver who, with his wife Susan and two children, lives in a Riverside Drive co-op. "Riverside Park is more complete and picturesque than, say, Carl Shurz Park. There's little on the East Side to identify with. It's so rebuilt and restructured there's no past history, nothing to identify with your childhood."

Then, after elaborating on the rent, transition and friendliness of the neighbor-

hood, Silver adds: "There are only two reasons to move to the East Side—if you're a swinging single or you need a new address for prestige. But you have to really pay for that step on the social ladder. It's for the person who will spend his last buck on Gucci shoes and Aramis cologne."

"Just look at the parks," adds Susan Silver. "On the West Side there are children with mothers and on the East Side they're with nannies." As a child Mrs. Silver lived on the East Side and even then, she says, "I felt it was more formal."

"The city seems smaller here," she says. "You always see people you know and there's so much diversity. We have a Broadway block where a deli was bought by an Israeli, a cigar store by an Arab, there's a Greek-owned food and vegetable store, a burger place owned by Italians and an Indian clothing store. It's an incredible mixture that wasn't as complete a couple of years ago."

Historically, the West Side has always been "the other side of town." It was always 20 years or so behind the East Side in development trends and it wasn't until mansions and townhouses spread over the East Side that the developers gave serious attention to the West Side north of 59th Street.

When in 1880, Singer Sewing Machine heir Edward S. Clark began construction of the city's first luxury apartment house—a chateau of gables, bay windows and incomparable detail at 72d Street and Central Park West—observers teased that he was building so far into the country that he might as well be in Dakota Territory. The name Dakota stuck and today it is still considered one of the city's most exclusive addresses.

Soon after, the Ninth Avenue El was completed, opening the West Side to the first of many waves of upwardly mobile middle-class families and the beginning of serious development. Rowhouses were built in great numbers for single-family elegance through the last 15 years of the 19th century.

Gracious high-rise apartment houses—not as opulent as the Dakota—started slowly on Broadway after the turn-of-the-century with the Beaux-Arts Ansonia at 73d Street, and the more sparsely ornamented Apthorp at 79th Street and Belmond at 86th Street. By the 1920s and '30s, Central Park West, West End Avenue and Riverside Drive were lined with fashionable high-rises that remain the housing anchors for the entire area.

After World War II, as the middle-class Irish and Jewish occupants moved further north to the Bronx, to the East Side or to suburbia, brownstones were subdivided to house waves of new immigrants—blacks from the South and the West Indies, Hispanics from Puerto Rico, Cuba and South America. Because the units were small, overcrowded, high in price but low in maintenance, many rapidly became slums.

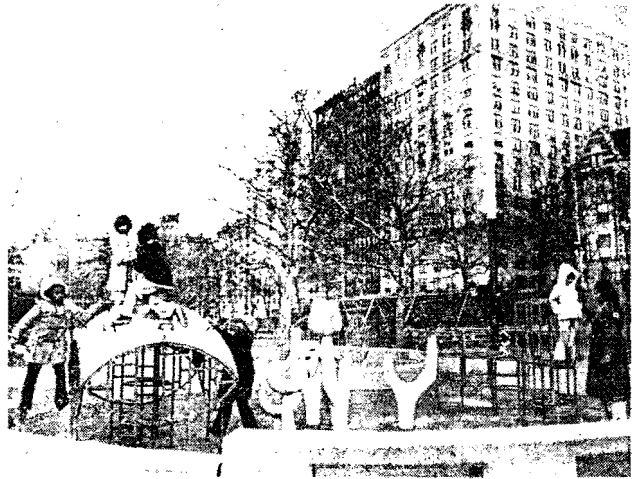
Then, in the late 1950s and early '60s, came the beginnings of the city's two largest urban renewal programs—the 12-block Lincoln Center and the 20-block West Side Urban Renewal Area between 87-97th Streets, Central Park West to Amsterdam Avenue—and construction of two large-scale middle-income developments—Lincoln Towers at West End Avenue in the 60s and Park West Village at Central Park to Amsterdam, 97-100th Streets.

With those four developments strategically scattered, a West Side renaissance began. Co-operative conversions swept through the high-rises, anchoring the professional middle-class that had moved there for the large rent-controlled apartments.

The brownstone movement spread out from the Urban Renewal Area, reclaiming some of the most solidly built housing in the city for young middle-class families seeking space, elegance, value and the suburban amenities of a backyard and basement.

Ten years ago, unrenovated houses sold for \$30-\$40,000. Today, few remain unconverted but when they do come up for sale,

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Post Photo by Nury Hernandez

Along Riverside Drive near 77th Street yesterday.

comparable buildings sell for \$80-\$100,000, higher south of 72d and lower north of 96th.

Low-income tenants concentrated along Amsterdam Avenue and up to the Manhattan Valley area (107th to 110th Streets, Central Park West to Broadway) that is now considered as bad as lower reaches of the West Side used to be in the 1950s. Manhattan Valley is, reportedly, the area where the gangs of "West Side Story" legend moved when Lincoln Center bulldozing leveled blocks of low-income tenements.

Some of the West Side's poor, dislocated by redevelopment, relocated into the 10 public housing projects containing 4628 apartments scattered throughout or into the more than 1900 middle-class units in new buildings leased by the Housing Authority and rented to low-income tenants. Many sought out the remaining pockets of untouched tenements or turned to other boroughs as the West Side low-rent apartment supply diminished.

Seven new public schools have been built since 1960. Private schools, too, have built new facilities or expanded old ones. And there are now 17 day-care centers, including four Head Start programs. Block associations have planted trees, Broadway malls have been re-landscaped and playgrounds have been rebuilt. A beginning of the solution to the West Side's most gnawing problem—welfare hotels—has been made with the conversions of the Hamilton on W. 73d and Hargrave on West 71st into desperately needed housing for the elderly.

The welfare and single-room-occupancy hotels are what many people like Community Board 7 president Robert Kagan call the "great sore" of the West Side. Yet, says Kagan and others, they could be a viable new housing source because they are "sound structures with space to house many people."

Signs of renewal are showing more and more in the commercial fabric of the West Side. Only a few years ago residents welcomed as a breath of fresh air such clothing stores as Charivari or Children's Concepts and the multi-department store with two branches, West Town House.

Now local shoppers accept almost matter-of-factly the boutiques, plant shops and antiques stores that spring up regularly along Columbus Avenue from the 60s to 80s and along Broadway.

Bill James and Lloyd Jordan gave up an East Side business to open last spring a plant shop named Oasis, at 243 Columbus Av. "It's so much nicer here," says James. "It's friendlier, more relaxed, half the rent and a high concentration of artistic types. This area is like New York used to be in many of its neighborhoods."

This year Lloyd Toone and Jerry Dowie opened Scavenger's Outpost at 351 Columbus Av., where they sell refinished furniture, antiques and art objects because, says Dowie, "Columbus is becoming known as an antique row and it's nice to get in on the ground floor and develop with a neighborhood."

Even a night life has blossomed on the West Side. Churches have opened coffeehouses—The Pit at St. Paul & St. Andrew at 86th St. and West End, The Middle Earth at The Society for Ethical Culture at 2 W. 64 St.—where young singles find welcome relief from expensive and pressured East Side night spots. Restaurants and bars—Stryker's, Miltells, Rust Brown and The Cellar, all in the 80s and 90s—offer live jazz and have become favorite spots for the steadily growing black middle class.

Slowly but surely, theater groups are taking hold with "Godspell" in its fourth year at the Promenade Theater and "Sgt. Pepper" at the newly renovated Beacon and other productions scattered about in churches.

New restaurants have opened on upper Broadway near Columbia, lower Columbus and even Amsterdam Avenue where PS 77 opened at the corner of 77th Street, two blocks south of an apartment house at 79th Street now under construction. "We won't eat anywhere but on the West Side, where prices are still reasonable," says Anne Navasky, a stockbroker, who with her husband, author Victor Navasky, moved to a W. 67th Street co-op from the Village after the first of their three children was born seven years ago.

Yet with all the changes, with all the improvements so well publicized and discussed, there are still people who have to be talked into moving to the West Side.

Thirty years ago Sidney Rosen, an engineer, had moved his family from Brooklyn to a house in Great Neck. His three children have long since grown and moved into the city. Rosen and his wife were always coming in to visit friends and family or to enjoy city nightlife. Finally, they decided to move also—to a new building on the East Side with a view.

Instead, they moved four years ago to One Lincoln Plaza and from their 24th-floor apartment—3½ rooms, \$650 rent—have a spectacular view of the park and beyond. "We never thought of living here although we visited Lincoln Center often. But our oldest son lives on the West Side and insisted we look because it was the more human side. As outsiders we worried more about crime than we had to."

Now the Rosens, like thousands of other West Siders, wouldn't live anywhere else.

TOMORROW: The Problems.