

## **WASHINGTON SQUARE**

### **Living Art Center Vs. Elevators and Doormen**

**By Milton Gendel**

Old residents of Washington Square, quiet tree-shaded Greenwich Village green, could not recall a time when the place had been more warlike. Not even the oldest could remember the blue uniforms of Union troops bivouacked there during the Civil War; and even the disturbing tramp of New York University students performing close order drill during more recent wars had become blurred in recollection. Today's battle was joined between the tenants and the landlords of the square.

The landlords, confident they fought for progress, prepared to exercise their property rights to raze the century-old red brick mansions and put up tall, modern buildings. The tenants, armed with petitions and court orders, defended their mellowing studios and apartments in the name of tradition, of the arts, and, chiefly, because they had no place to go.

On the northwest sector of the front, the tenants maintained an uneasy and truculent truce with a landlord who, although having made as yet no move to oust them, nonetheless dreamed of a luxury apartment building. In the sector to the southwest, New York University, longtime holder of the eastern front, moved to tear down the studios and build a new law school. The liveliest sector, however, was in the middle of the southern front, where residents of the most historically important and most dilapidated buildings on the square had put up the stiffest fight against eviction.

For more than two years, tenants of the entire square block had banded together to stalemate efforts of real estateman and housebuilder Anthony J. Campagna to demolish their homes, renting at about \$60 a floor, and build luxurious elevator apartment buildings, probably renting at \$60 a room. The fiercest action thusfar has been an acrimonious jury trial in Municipal court. A hung jury was directed by the judge to find for landlord Gampegna on the grounds that he would alleviate the housing shortage by creating five times as many as the 60 dwelling units now provided on his property.

Although the tenants, ordered to vacate by the end of February, started hopefully to appeal to a higher court, it seemed as though it would be only a question of time before the Washington Square of a more gracious era passed into historical limbo.

However, at the blackest moment for tenants, sentimental Villagers, and antiquarians, an appropriately ecclesiastical *deus ex machina* appeared holding out hope to the losing side. Bishop William T. Manning and co-signers Justice Henry H. Curran, painter John Sloan, and writer Carl Van Doran mailed letters to 500 New Yorkers high in the arts and public life urging them to support their proposal to create a "Living Art Center" on Washington Square South between Thompson Street and West Broadway. Said their letter: "The creation of such a permanent center as that proposed, where artists can live and make their contribution to our common life, is a matter of interest to all citizens of New York... Its realization offers the city an opportunity to take leadership among the cities of the world in stimulating and nurturing cultural development, while at the same time preserving, as London and Paris have done, the historic and cultural landmarks and traditions, so prized by all."

For the first time in the Battle of Washington Square the ground had been shifted from a tug of war between the Old and the New. The new proposal was based on a hope of preserving one of the few remaining monuments of Old New York, but from this conservative platform, Bishop Manning and fellow planners envisioned the constructive continuation of a cultural tradition identified with the little red buildings.

For four generations, painters, writers, and musicians had lived at 61 Washington Square South and the three adjoining buildings. Tourists, consulting New York guide books, had arrived by the busload to inspect and photograph “Genius Row”, and to ask weary tenants where the great men had slept and eaten. Famous songbird Adelina Patti had once rehearsed the Metropolitan Opera cast in the parlor of 61; former tenants included Theodore Dreiser, O’Henry, Frank Norris, Willa Gather, Alan Seeger, Edward Arlington Robinson, Gillette Burgess, John Barrymore, Will Irwin, Stephen Crane, and Pierre Matisse.

Bishop Manning's planning team offered a practical way for both compensating owner Campagna and preserving and utilizing the old structures. Like Peter Cooper Village and other Manhattan plots, the site would be acquired and developed under the Urban Redevelopment Law. The sponsors offered civic-minded citizens already accustomed to supporting New York's museums the chance to invest in a scheme that would return limited dividends and a feeling of satisfaction.

The plan called for the restoration of “Genius Row” and its extension along vacant frontage. New buildings would not attempt archaeological restoration of the style of the 1830’s and ‘40’s, but would reflect the same atmosphere. Behind studios, classrooms, and public exhibition rooms to be housed in the Washington Square buildings, the rest of the block would be given to low and medium cost housing open to creative artists and their families.

As embattled Washington Square watched this latest engagement between private property and public interest, speculation from the side lines allied New York University to one side, then the other. Smart guesses put the university on the side of the Living Art Center. For New York University’s ready-made campus in the square, the pleasant Old World atmosphere of the neo-Greek mansions would be more suitable than towering apartment buildings patrolled by doormen.