

UPPER FIFTH AVENUE IN WRECKERS' HANDS

New York's Most Famous Mansions Have Their Facades Cut Back to Widen Thoroughfare.

BUSINESS ROUTS SOCIETY

Vanderbilt Railings at the Plaza Must Go—St. Patrick's Cathedral Shorn of Half Its Lawn.

Fifth Avenue north of Forty-seventh Street, beginning with Miss Helen Gould's residence, on the northeast corner, is in a state of ruin. A stranger might well think that house wreckers had taken possession of the eleven blocks from Forty-seventh to Fifty-eighth Street and were preparing to tear down several rows of fine brownstone mansions to replace them with towering business structures, of which the avenue north of Forty-second Street presents so many examples.

No thoroughfare in the city for so many consecutive blocks presents such a scene of destruction as this Fifth Avenue area. It is all due to the order of the Board of Estimate last Spring requiring the removal of all encroachments so as to provide for the widening of Fifth Avenue, conforming to the work already accomplished in the lower portion.

The work of demolition is now at its height. The cost to the property owners will be many thousands of dollars, as almost without exception every building on the eleven blocks is undergoing some alteration. In many cases, as in the homes of William K. Vanderbilt and of his son, W. K. Vanderbilt, Jr.; the Twombly and Seward Webb houses, and the three comparatively modern residences north of the Union Club, with their heavy marble steps, it has been necessary to remove the ornate façades.

Beauty of the Avenue Suffers.

The architectural beauty of the avenue will naturally suffer, as the entrances to all the houses are to be set back almost flat to the building line. The necessity for such a radical transformation of what was only recently New York's most select and expensive residential thoroughfare illustrates in a marked manner the permanent invasion of business interests all along Fifth Avenue, and at present only three or four blocks are entirely free from indications of trade.

One of these blocks is that between Fifty-first and Fifty-second Streets. The westerly front is occupied by the once famous Vanderbilt twin houses, built in 1880 by William H. Vanderbilt at a cost of \$3,000,000. They are twin houses no longer except in name, for the southerly house was altered completely, both outside as well as inside, in 1905, by Henry C. Frick, when he leased it from George W. Vanderbilt, who inherited the house from his father. Mr. Frick replaced the flower garden facing the avenue with an entrance driveway and shut off the view by a heavy brownstone wall. The driveway is now being torn up and in a few days workmen will begin demolishing the wall.

The attractive garden, which for years has been one of the beauty spots of the avenue, in front of the northerly house, now owned by Mrs. William D. Sloane, has been ruthlessly destroyed within the last few days, and a few flowering geraniums on the edge of the bank, which has been cut away, only remain to bear evidence of its departed glories. Both of the houses were originally set so far back that they will undergo no change in outward appearance.

Vanderbilts Cannot Sell Mansions.

By the terms of William H. Vanderbilt's will, neither of these mansions can be sold by the present inheritors. The alteration to the lower one recalls the legal battle between Georg W. Vanderbilt and the city authorities in 1903, when Mr. Vanderbilt wanted to build a porte cochere in front of his house. The work was well under way when an injunction by the Corporation Counsel compelled him to tear it down, and George Vanderbilt never lived in the house after that. When he leased it to Mr. Frick in 1905, he gave Mr. Frick a ten years' lease, with the privilege of a renewal for the same term. What Mr. Frick pays has never been stated, but it is said to be a few hundred thousand dollars a year.

The two Vanderbilt houses on the block to the north will suffer materially in appearance. The broad steps leading up to William K. Vanderbilt's home on the northwest corner of Fifty-second Street, with the rich carved entrance, all in granite and light stone, have made the house one of the genuine show places on the avenue. The wide step and the sunken area in front are now gone, but the elaborately carved doorway has not been disturbed. A short flight of steps will hereafter lead up to the house, but it will lose by the necessary alterations its former imposing appearance.

Nothing has yet been done to William K. Vanderbilt, Jr.'s, house in the middle of the block, but the sunken area and the carved granite railing will soon have to go. The only other house this side of the block is the Gallatin home, on the southwest corner of Fifty-third Street, adjoining the home of William K. Vanderbilt, Jr. This was altered for business a year ago, and has been cut back close to the building line.

On the east side of the avenue, immediately opposite the twin Vanderbilt houses, is the Union Club on the Fifty-first Street corner, while the remainder of the block is occupied by three fine houses, the town homes of William B. Osgood Field, Robert Goelet, and Morton F. Plant. The stone railing in front of the Union Club has been demolished, and the little grass plot has gone. The heavy marble steps on the Plant house, at Fifty-third Street, are being cut back, and workmen are preparing to attack the similar projections of the other two houses.

Big Lofts Near the Vanderbilt

The block on the east side between Fifty-second and Fifty-third Streets, presents an unusual appearance in that it is entirely vacant and excavations are being made for three big loft buildings, a business invasion in the heart of the Vanderbilt district that would not have been dreamed of a few years ago. The Fifty-second Street corner was once the site of the Langham Hotel. When that was torn down, there was talk of putting up an apartment house, and to prevent such an undesirable improvement the Vanderbilts and Sloanes bought the property for considerably over \$1,000,000, and restricted it against business.

E. H. Harriman, a few years before his death, bought the corner plot, intending to erect a magnificent home, but he soon detected the impending changes and went further up the avenue. Not until last year did the different owners remove the restrictive clauses, and it then found a ready sale for business. The Fifty-third Street corner had, until a few weeks ago, three old houses, one being the former H. M. Schieffelin home. They have lately been torn down and that entire block will soon be covered with twelve-story lofts.

Persons who have not passed by St. Patrick's Cathedral within the last few weeks will be surprised at the change there. The high grassy bank and the wide steps in the centre of the block have disappeared, and the new entrance will be fifteen feet nearer the Cathedral door, coming up close to the building.

Opposite the cathedral everything is now business except Benjamin Altman's home on the northwest corner of Fifth Street. The railing in front of the house has been cut off, but the commercial development of the block has not demanded any other changes. The new loft adjoining the tall apartment on the Fifty-third Street corner, occupies the site of the old home of D. O. Mills, which was torn down less than a year ago.

Church Entrances Suffer Greatly.

The two churches in this region have suffered greatly. The stone and iron railing formerly in front of the Collegiate Church, at Forty-eighth Street, has gone, and hereafter the entrance will be by a short flight of steps directly from the sidewalk. Mrs. Russell Sage's home, ad-

joining the church, has been badly torn out, the high stoop being removed and a great hole made on the parlor floor where the bay window has been removed. Adjoining the Sage house on the Forty-ninth Street corner, is one of the old Goelet houses, and this is in almost a state of ruin, the elaborate bay window on the corner having been removed and the broad stoop cut off. Such extensive alterations were required here that it has been necessary to erect a scaffold to protect pedestrians.

The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church on the Fifty-fifth Street corner is so badly cut up that the front doors in the lobby are boarded up and workmen are fitting up a new façade which will be simpler and less pretentious than the former entrance. The St. Thomas Church site on the Fifty-third Street corner is vacant, the half-burned church having lately been torn down to make way for the new \$1,000,000 edifice, now in process of construction.

The bay window and the projecting railing of the Huntington house on the southeast corner of Fifty-seventh Street have been cut back and a new marble balcony is being placed at the second story. Directly opposite, the bay window of the old Whitney residence has been lately cut off, giving the Fifth Avenue side of the house a most incongruous appearance.

The ornamental iron fence imported from France in front of the Vanderbilt mansion on the west side of the avenue between Fifty-seventh and Fifty-eighth Streets has not yet been disturbed, but it will only be a matter of a few days when it will be taken down. Workmen are now tearing up the roadway at the Fifty-eighth Street entrance and cutting away the garden patch on the Fifth Avenue side. Several thousand dollars will be spent on the alterations, and when completed the sidewalk will be set back close to the house.

Hotels Lose Their Summer Gardens.

The Summer restaurants of the St. Regis and Gotham Hotels on opposite corners of Fifty-fifth Street have not yet been touched. These raised gardens project about fourteen feet over the legal building line, and when cut away the hotels will lose one of their most attractive features.

When the work is finished Fifth Avenue from Twenty-third Street to Central Park will have a uniform width of fifty-five feet. The blocks now under alteration will have seven and one-half feet taken from each side of the walk, adding fifteen feet to the former width of the thoroughfare.