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OPINION

Expand the Frick museum

Among the many things that make New York City great are its museums. More than 100 of them, each with its own character, enhance the quality of life for residents and keep tourism dollars flowing into locals' pockets.

Among the many things that make the city infuriating are its kvetchers. These are the folks who react to change by asking, "What's in it for me?" They bemoan any idea that might inconvenience them.

Which brings us to the Frick Collection, the magnificent little art museum housed in the former residence of Gilded Age industrialist Henry Clay Frick.

A longtime fixture of the city's Museum Mile, the Frick has seen its attendance rise nearly 40% since the mid-1990s but lacks the space to show much of its collection of Old Master paintings, European sculpture and decorative arts. Its concert series and student programs cannot meet the demand. Patrons wait in lines just to

hang their coats and use the bathrooms. Modern wheelchairs cannot fit through the doors.

Decades ago, museum officials bought and demolished three adjacent buildings to expand their Fifth Avenue institution and connect it to the Frick Art Reference Library. They couldn't afford to do the project then, so they created a splendid private garden on the

The public benefits offset the lost views of a privileged few

expansion site in the interim.

Neighbors of the museum, suddenly blessed with a view of a garden rather than the sides of buildings, came to treasure the green space, although (or perhaps because) it was closed to the public. You can tell where this is going: Some neighbors now object to the

expansion plan the Frick envisioned all those years ago.

The museum's thoughtfully updated and designed proposal, which requires both a zoning exception and landmarks commission approval, is to replace the private garden with a public one on the roof of a new addition. The neighbors' kvetching, boiled down, is that they will lose their view of a closed garden. We side with the other 8.3 million New Yorkers and 55 million tourists who would get a garden they can visit—and a vastly superior "house museum" experience, too.

The Frick could build on its property without a zoning action, but the current rules demand a tall, thin building that's hardly ideal for a museum. Of course, if the Frick had proposed such a tower, neighbors would have griped about that as well. They want the garden, and everything else, to stay the way it is.

"It's a beautiful garden," a museum official admits. "We built it."

And now it's Exhibit A in a classic lesson of New York City land use: No good deed goes unpunished.