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## Landmarks Preservation at Forty

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Good evening. Forty, as those of us who have reached this age ourselves all know, is a curious time. You are emphatically not old, but you cannot pretend to be particularly young, either. You have been around for a while, and people expect to see you. You are an established part of the world. And by forty you tend to have a certain identity, a certain set of standards, a set of things you are known for, and things that are expected of you. And yet, because you are forty, you are also questioning some of these things, and wondering what the next phase will bring. You are in midlife.

And so, too, is the New York City landmarks law. Forty years of landmarks preservation, and I would not say that we are in a midlife crisis, but I would certainly say that the preservation movement in this city is showing signs of middle age, with both the self-importance and the uncertainty, not to mention the challenges, that so often seem to go along with this phase of life. We have now had a Landmarks Preservation Commission for four decades, which is longer than many people in this room have been alive. Today, many architects who come before the Commission weren't born when the Commission was first created. We certainly have Commissioners sitting on the Landmarks Commission who didn't amount to much before 1965. And I suspect it will not be too much longer before we have a Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission who was born in the era we can call A.L.L - after the landmarks law.

It is worth observing, before we get into too many of the aches and pains that go with middle age, some of the strengths of this moment. The greatest by far is the extent to which preservation has simply been accepted into our culture. It is no longer something we are surprised about, and it is no longer something the real-estate industry fights. They will argue about specific situations, of course, but not about the basic premise that we have a landmarks law, that it is a reasonable and appropriate exercise of the police power to preserve certain buildings, and that this act has public benefits that more than exceed the limitations that they represent on private property rights. If you were around in the early 1960's, when architects fought to save Pennsylvania Station, but also in the 70's and even into the 80's, this is an astonishing thing.

I think there can be no better example of this than the controversy that surrounded the TWA terminal at JFK Airport not too long ago, Eero Saarinen's masterpiece from 1959 that had become woefully inadequate for contemporary air travel, in part because of size, in part because its public space was laid out in such a way as to make contemporary security nearly impossible to provide without compromising the architectural integrity of Saarinen's magnificent, fluid space. What to do with the building? The arguments were difficult, and angry, but no one - not even the Port Authority, the bureaucratic landlord of the airport that has rarely been known as an ambitious architectural patron - no one proposed tearing the building down. The lines of battle were drawn between those who wanted to see the building saved as a precious icon, as a kind of mid-century jewel, and used as a restaurant or museum or some such, and those who wanted to find a way to convert it into a more functioning contemporary air terminal, perhaps by using the building as a gateway into a larger, newer terminal that could be constructed behind it, a solution that would have the virtue of allowing Saarinen's space to remain undisturbed. It now looks as if some variation of this idea will in fact happen, under the aegis of Jet Blue, which has occupied I.M. Pei's excellent but not as distinguished terminal next door for the last several years, and wants to expand. For an airline that has emphasized somewhat more sophisticated design, among other marketing tools, the old TWA Terminal is a logical place to go - although I should point out here that while preserving use, as opposed to preserving a building as a pure artifact, does seem to have an appealing integrity as a concept, it isn't always the route to the promised land. Just across JFK is the old Pan Am terminal, an under-appreciated piece of late fifties design by Tibbets, Abbot, McCarthy and Stratton that was all but destroyed in an attempt to keep it functioning. Pan Am, which is now the Delta terminal, was a round structure up to which jets nuzzled their noses, protected under a huge, round saucer-like canopy. The design doesn't admit to expansion, but the architects expanded it anyway, and essentially obliterated it, all in the name of keeping original use.

In any event my point isn't about Delta or Pan Am or Jet Blue - it's that tearing the TWA Terminal down wasn't even on the table, not even on the Port Authority's list of options. We have to admit that this is a huge

cultural shift. Just bringing this cultural shift to bear is the greatest achievement of these four decades, I think. It isn't the work of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission alone it is a national if not global movement but New York has been at the forefront. We lost Pennsylvania Station, but we magnificently reclaimed Grand Central and in those complementary events we have, in a sense, the whole saga. Actually the relationship of each of these two train stations is itself a saga, since each also plays an essential role in the broader story of historic preservation, Penn Station, the building that died that others might live, is the martyr to the preservation movement; I truly do not know what else to call it, since whatever New Yorkers might say about the Brokaw mansion at 79<sup>th</sup> and Fifth or a couple of other hard-fought battles, it was really Penn Station that did it, and brought national, if not international, attention to our indifference to the great architecture we had. It was the battle we had to lose to win the war. We did not value it until it was gone, but then the shame and I think I can call it shame of what was allowed to happen became a positive force, galvanizing the movement.

And then of course Grand Central is the other side of the story, the building that became the focus of the critical legal battle that went all the way to the Supreme Court. Grand Central proved that it was not enough merely to have a landmarks law; the law had to be judged constitutional, and the Grand Central case reaffirmed the legality of all that the commission was established to do. We in New York cannot claim to be in the avant-garde as often as we like to think of ourselves as being, particularly in terms of municipal governance but I think that in the creation of the landmarks preservation law, and in the rigorous fight all the way to the Supreme Court, we were very much in the lead, and the rest of the country followed us.

And so now we have 1,120 individual landmarks, 104 interior landmarks, 9 scenic landmarks, and 83 historic districts, protecting roughly 23,000 buildings all over the city. SoHo is safe, and so is the Upper East Side, and much of the Upper West Side, and Greenwich Village and Steinway and Park Slope. In many ways historic districts which those of you who were around in the sixties know were themselves a somewhat controversial idea, which I will get back to in a moment historic districts now seem to play a larger role in the Commission's work than individual landmarks, since they cover so much more area, and so many more issues involving appropriateness and change come up within them. Individual landmarks, which were once expected to be the bread-and-butter of the commission's work, sometimes seem almost peripheral, since the vast number of buildings within the vast number of historic districts now puts so much of the city under the Commission's purview much more than many of the formulators of the landmarks law may have envisioned, I suspect.

This is not a bad thing. Indeed, I think it represents an increasing sophistication about the idea of context. When the law was created forty years ago, I don't think the notion of context the notion of the <sup>3</sup>tout ensemble,<sup>2</sup> as they traditionally describe it in New Orleans, where the French Quarter historic district is generally described as the nation's first this idea didn't count for much. The special buildings were what was worth saving, and the ordinary buildings that make a neighborhood, that give its streetscape character that wasn't the job of the landmarks commission, or so a lot of people thought. Indeed, I think many of the architects who were active in the preservation movement in the sixties probably thought that historic districts could get in the way of the evolution of the city that they cherished. More modern buildings were exactly what New York needed, they thought at the time, and it was just a matter of making sure that this new modern city was correctly sprinkled with a few fine old buildings, to give it a kind of seasoning.

We have gone way, way beyond that, and let me talk for another moment about this notion of context, since I increasingly think it is the issue more than individual landmarks. Of course historic districts were permitted under the law, thankfully, and pressure from people in Brooklyn Heights forced the early designation of the Heights, followed by Greenwich Village. Once you designate a district, of course, the question then becomes how do you maintain it, and how much leeway do you give to the new, to the different, to the nonconforming. I tend to lean in favor of a fairly liberal attitude here, not because I don't love beautiful, serene, harmonious streets, but because what I fear even more than an awkward intrusion is the fakery of something that is too perfect, too self-consciously preserved in aspic. New York is not Colonial Williamsburg on the Hudson, and I do not ever want it to be. The reality is that very few neighborhoods in New York have ever been pure Charles Lockwood, the author of "Bricks and Brownstone," said to me not long ago that he thinks that many of the neighborhoods in New York are more pure today than they ever were, since most neighborhoods have always shown a range of styles, alterations, interventions and intrusions, and since the advent of the landmarks law we have been moving in many historic districts toward much greater harmony.

If the first attitude toward context was that it didn't matter, that it was barely an idea, the second attitude toward context goes too far in the opposite direction, toward a kind of false, Williamsburg-like purity. I'll take

the Brooklyn Williamsburgh over the Virginia one, any day. Now, this archeological attitude toward historic districts, if we can call it that, has never prevailed in New York, but it has always been there to some extent. Its big symbolic battle was probably fought right around the corner from here, on 11<sup>th</sup> Street, when Hugh Hardy designed a townhouse to replace the Federal house that was tragically destroyed in the Weathermen bombing of 1970. Hardy's design, which I must say now appears not radical but almost quaint, was quite violently objected to by some neighbors, who wanted a mock-Federal house put back, just like the one that had been destroyed. Hardy would have nothing of archeological replication, and insisted on something different not so much to be different, he argued, as to mark the event, to leave some sign that something had happened to disrupt the streetscape, so that the new house by deliberately breaking up the purity of the old row would be a *de facto* acknowledgement of the tragedy.

We are all lucky that this battle was won, and the design, as I have said, now appears almost tame. It is an important issue that Hugh Hardy raised, however, and it remains with us, not just in historic districts but elsewhere. It was certainly an unspoken issue in the Ground Zero planning debate, where the question of the extent to which new development should show some scars has hovered over all of the discussions. It is a critical paradox if we build as if nothing had happened, then we erase history, and there is something false, even theme-park-like, about it. And yet if we show scars too visibly, too constantly, then we make it impossible for the normal pleasures of urban life to go on and be renewed there, that precious urban life that the terrorists so wanted to destroy. So, too, I suppose, on 11<sup>th</sup> Street, which prefigured this debate in miniature: too harsh a design would have shouted tragic history to us at every moment, destroying the serenity of the street; too calm a design would have denied history. Hugh Hardy tried to balance these things, and we are lucky that he succeeded.

And we are lucky, also, that the landmarks law allowed the kind of measured judgment necessary for this decision, and hundreds of others, to be made as it was. While the landmarks proceedings are not technically judicial ones, and indeed are subject to judicial review as in Grand Central and certain other cases, they are like judicial proceedings in one way, which is that they depend on the wisdom of the commissioners. The law can only take us so far; it cannot prescribe precisely what to do in a particular circumstance, and its success depends on the wise judgment of the commissioners. We may differ with their judgments from time to time, but I do not think that suggests a flaw in the landmarks legislation itself, any more than a difference we might have with a judge's opinion suggests that there is something wrong with the Constitution.

This is critical, because we will be seeing more and more cases in which delicate, subtle and difficult decisions will have to be made within historic districts as we move into what I think of as the third type of attitude toward urban context, which is the willingness to see it as complex, nuanced, and reflective of time. The first two attitudes are easy. If you don't care about context, but only about individual landmarks, then anything goes. If you care about context but think it's a matter of maintaining the architectural equivalent of ethnic purity, then it's easy, also: you just mandate more of what's already there.

But that's no way to design a real city. And as I said a moment ago, it's not even historically true to the reality of New York. But figuring out what can be added, and what should not, what degree of change is possible, and what is destructive, is difficult. There is no simple formula. There is no road map. It depends heavily on judgment, and on ability to think in terms of scale, materials, proportions, and so forth. I happen to think that in recent years we've generally done fairly well in this area again, there are dozens of decisions we might argue about, but by and large the Commission has followed a practice of non-archeological respect for context, and believing that any urban neighborhood is in fact a complex blend of past and present, being guided, in a sense, by Lewis Mumford's great line, "In a city, time becomes visible" an exquisitely simple expression of a profound idea or Vincent Scully's similar observation in his definition of architecture as a way in which the generations converse over time. We want to keep the conversation going that, more than anything, is the idea.

I think the deep, dark, unspoken motivation for much of the preservation movement is not so much love of what is being preserved, as fear of what will replace it. Nobody likes to admit it, but that's what a lot of it has been about. And I'm not sure I could blame people, at least in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, as the Landmarks Commission was being established, for thinking that way. After all, modern architecture had not exactly saved the day. It seemed to give us bigger and bigger buildings, more and more awful. It had created a few wonderful monuments, but it was a fiasco so far as urbanism was concerned. Its achievements were in the realm of individual, stand-alone, beautiful buildings, but not viable streets or neighborhoods. You would have to be crazy to think that Third Avenue was pleasanter than Park Avenue, or

Madison Avenue. No wonder people feared the new forty years ago, architects were giving them every reason to.

But a lot has been learned in the last generation, particularly in terms of urban design, where the value of the street, and the importance of scale, are understood, even by people who have no particular interest in historic style. We are seeing more and more modern buildings integrated gracefully into historic contexts, and this is another significant achievement. I won't say it had never happened before. I can think of things like Ulrich Franzen's wonderful little building for the Jehovah's Witnesses on Columbia Heights in Brooklyn Heights, which I think was the first new building added to a historic district, and it set a superb example in the 1960's but for a while it was almost alone as an example of modern design integrated gracefully into a historic district, and now its good example is more likely to be followed.

So much for the good news. Let me now say a little bit about the difficulties we face as the preservation era in New York City moves beyond forty. The very success of preservation has led to its being taken somewhat for granted, and I worry about that, not because I fear that Donald Trump will figure out a loophole in the Upper East Side Historic District that will allow him to slip an 80-story building onto the corner of 67<sup>th</sup> and Madison, but because the extraordinary sense of mission that once motivated this movement now seems to be lost. Maybe that's the inevitable by-product of success, I don't know. But there is certainly no feeling of a noble crusade any longer. It is more like a big-time legal proceeding, every landmarks hearing, and as one preservationist said to me not long ago, where you once had architects testifying, now you have lawyers.

That's not to say we don't have engaged citizens, or impassioned citizens any longer. We do. But many of them are pushing not the broader social good, as I think the pioneers of the movement were in the sixties and seventies, but small, private agendas, intending to slow the pace of change so as to preserve their own views, their own light, their own memories of what their own block had always been.

I am second to none in my respect for the role of memory in the city. Without it, we are nothing, and when change occurs so rapidly as to push all memory aside, we have lost something essential in the making of a civilized place. But the landmarks law was never created to freeze a place in time. And it should never be allowed to do so. I wonder, for example, about the situation in the Carnegie Hill Historic District, at 91<sup>st</sup> and Madison, where a group of citizens protested against the plan to replace the low Citibank building with an apartment house. Actually they were right to protest, since their pressure led to a significant reduction in the size of the building, and improvements to its design. A smaller building went up, and we are all the better for it. But then there was an attempt on the part of some others to challenge the commission's actions, after the fact, in even permitting this improved building. There is no justification for denying it, in my view, other than the fallacious attempt to freeze a place in time.

Not so different was the ludicrous lawsuit against the Museum of Natural History on behalf of the old Hayden Planetarium, which had it been successful would have prevented the construction of the new Rose Center. The new planetarium is a vastly better building than the old, and we are all the better for it. Or, right now, to mention a matter now before the Commission, the Whitney Museum's current plan to erect an addition by Renzo Piano that would require the demolition of two of the five brownstones that remain in the row to the south of the Whitney. One of the two is of little aesthetic merit, since its façade was stripped of detail long ago; the other is better, and is referred to, in proper terminology, as a "contributing" building to the Historic District.

Contribute the building certainly does; no one can deny that. It is a fine building, and a likeable, welcome presence on Madison Avenue. But I am increasingly wondering whether just being a nice thing is enough. I question the argument that "contributing" status automatically entitles a building to certain preservation. And I question most of all the implications behind that judgment, which is that the individual judgment and weighing on the merits by the commissioners does not matter that what matters is the formal status of "contributing," and that it should be treated like a formula.

All of these are examples of what one distinguished preservationist, Otis Pratt Pearsall, recently called "preservation fundamentalism." It is a good phrase, because it tells us exactly the problem we are facing a replacement of common-sense, wise judgment with an absolutism, with a belief that the job of the landmarks process is to freeze a place in time. It is not, and fundamentalism has no more place in preservation than it does in religion or public life, where it also replaces balanced, liberal and judicious thinking.

As I said, there are no formulas, and there should not be. The commission should make judgments, and determine reasonable tradeoffs. To go back to the Whitney for a moment, I happen to believe that the tradeoff is reasonable in this case, and correct that we as a city are getting more than we are losing if this project goes ahead. I know that for some people whose views may change if the Renzo Piano addition is built, this argument will not be convincing. But it is the obligation of the commission to look beyond parochial concerns, and take the wider public interest into account. Indeed, that is its only obligation. If we do not think in terms of wider public interest, then nothing is left but individual property owners' interests and the very point of the preservation law is denied. The Landmarks Preservation Commission was created for the very reason that owners of private property cannot always be expected to act in the public interest, and because there are often times when it is necessary to look more broadly than any individual owner is likely to do. It is a striking irony of this moment that in their insistence on looking at preservation only through the narrow lens of their own property interests, landmarks fundamentalists resemble the real-estate interests that the preservation movement was created to oppose more than the pioneers of their own movement.

And while we are on the subject of difficult situations involving smaller museum buildings from the 1960's not a large category, to be sure I suppose I ought to say a word about New York's most celebrated amiable but distinctly not great building, which is the old Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art on Columbus Circle. I view that building as a likeable but somewhat dim-witted friend a foolish building that people understandably have some affection for. I have affection for it, too. I have spent most of my adult life living on the Upper West Side, walking down Central Park West and seeing it as the focal point of my view. I like it. To me, it is almost like a huge Oldenburg sculpture, a vast, soft form that offers a friendly and quirky vista in the distance.

But I am worried that we have begun to confuse worthiness and benign appeal with genuine greatness and architectural distinction, and that is dangerous. Yes, this building is historically important, and yes, it has value. But no, it isn't great, and if we keep it and in so doing prevent the creation of a new and potentially more significant work of architecture, I think we have tilted the balance in the wrong direction.

Now, by saying this I do not mean to endorse the Landmarks Commission's odd refusal to hold a public hearing on this building. I do find this inexplicable. This building may not be the strongest case for landmark designation, but there is an absolute case for a public hearing about it, and the decision not to hold one was not, in my view, one of the commission's prouder moments.

Whatever finally happens with the Ed Stone building at Columbus Circle, we will surely see more and more attention given to post-World War II landmarks. We have to. There aren't very many earlier buildings of any value left to designate at least not in Manhattan south of 96<sup>th</sup> Street. I should say parenthetically that the relatively smaller number of landmarks above 96<sup>th</sup> Street and in the other four boroughs remains a problem, and that we are still too inclined to think of preservation as protecting the grand buildings of the rich, and not of remembering how much cultural richness and history has taken place in other kinds of architecture in other kinds of neighborhoods. Increasing the diversity of landmarks remains a key challenge going forward.

But in most of Manhattan at least, where so much of the original work of landmarking is done, the problem is different it is of newer buildings, and what to do about them. We have now we have to face the question of determining the value of buildings that were new, or perhaps weren't even built, when the Commission was established in 1965. They are, after all, history. It is worth remembering that a building built in 1961 is now, today, ten years older than the Empire State Building was when the landmarks legislation was passed in 1965. And a building built in 1950 is the same age today that The New York Public Library was on the day that the landmarks legislation was passed. Yes the library was opened in 1911, and it was 54 in 1965. Today, if you were looking for a 54-year old building, you might end up with one of the ribbon-window, curved-corner office buildings by Emery Roth on Madison Avenue.

That doesn't make that 1950's building the equivalent of the New York Public Library. It isn't. But it is essential to keep in mind that we have a tendency to not entirely trust those things built in our own time, a tendency not to believe that they may have great merit, particularly when it comes to modern vernacular buildings. Often enough, that view makes sense so many of these buildings are lousy; as I said earlier, modernism failed utterly to create a workable language out of which to build beautiful streets and comfortable neighborhoods, the way the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could. We never have managed to make our age's equivalent of Georgian London, or brownstone New York.

But at the same time I think we have to remember that as late as in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the Art Deco buildings of the Grand Concourse were roundly dismissed as cheap, common, vulgar and unworthy of serious attention, as nothing more than ordinary builders' stuff. Now, as they recede into history, we all think otherwise. Will the same thing happen with the office buildings of the postwar era? I tend to be doubtful, but I know that some of that is because I grew up watching them be built, and never had the sense, as a younger generation does, that they were part of the architectural legacy to be inherited. I think we owe it to time to make certain judgments.

The notion that the office towers of Sixth Avenue, which I grew up hating, are now thirty and forty years old, is quite sobering, to be sure. Time does not stand still, and the purpose of the landmarks legislation is not to make it stand still. It is to force us to bring reason, and judgment, into the process of urban growth to create a form of managed growth, we might say, since we know that laissez-faire development will not create the civilized city that we crave.

I sometimes wonder what kind of city we would have if we had had a landmarks commission in the 1950's. We might have saved Penn Station, yes, but would we have gotten the Guggenheim Museum? Not if preservation fundamentalists had been in charge, no. And I've already explained how we wouldn't have had the Rose Center, one of the finest buildings of our time. If we had had a landmarks commission in the 1930's, I suspect we would have saved Carrere & Hastings' great Century Theater on Central Park West, but we would never have gotten Irwin Chanin's magnificent Century Apartments that replaced the theater in 1931, and that is a true landmark in itself.

There are other possible examples, but the point is that once, when we gave up good buildings, we felt there was a better than even chance of getting equal or better new ones. We ceased to feel that the new would be the equal to the old for much of the time leading up to the landmarks law in 1965 understandably, as I have said, since the architects of that period gave us plenty of reasons to indulge in the deep dark underside of preservation, how often we preserve not to protect what we love, but to save us from what we fear. But we have to do better than that. If we lose sight of the new, and of the value it brings, we have lost the very point of historic preservation. We do not preserve to bring ourselves back into the past we preserve to make use of the past to build a better present. Anything else would be creating a false city. And New York, for all its insanity, has always been a place of the real. We live here, after all, not because we crave the easy comforts of the false, but because we value the greater challenge of the authentic.

Making time visible means making the present visible as well as a series of layers of past times. And it means using the values of the past to inspire the present, and to encourage us to find new ways of expression that speak comfortably to the old. It is to create a sense of resonance in the city, a sense that things have been there for a long time and will be there for some time to come, but at the same time to always assure that you are in a place that is alive, not dead. If the landmarks legislation is truly successful, we will know it not only by what we have saved, but by what new architecture we have inspired. The job of saving the landmarks of previous generations is mostly done. The challenge now is to take care of what we have saved, and to protect it and nurture it and also, to assure that we never forget the need to create the landmarks of tomorrow.