

January 26, 2007

PUBLIC LIVES

## Distinguishing the Remarkable From the Merely Old

By [ROBIN FINN](#)

AS de facto custodian of everything within the built city that bears sprucing up and saving for posterity, Robert B. Tierney, chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, is instantly miffed when a photographer gives his office the once-over and offhandedly remarks that there is nothing in it worth preserving on camera. Well, maybe him. But only if he puts on the silly paper party hat crowned by a cartoonish depiction of the Chrysler Building sitting on the bookcase next to two — likewise ceremonial — hard hats from [Lincoln Center](#) and the High Line.

“I saw it at a street party and took one because it seemed to speak to what I do,” explains Mr. Tierney, 63 and dignified in a herringbone jacket and a rep tie that features New York City’s official 1625 seal and was designed by former Parks Commissioner Henry Stern and former Deputy Mayor Robert Wagner Jr. The tie cost \$9.95, was not a hot seller, and was probably a gift from Mr. Wagner, now deceased, his political mentor, touchstone, and office neighbor inside City Hall during the Koch administration.

“But I’ve never worn this hat, and I’m not putting it on now,” Mr. Tierney continues, mock-defiantly, in his office at 1 Centre Street; he also declines to be photographed with his tacky green glass ashtray from the Landmark Hotel in Las Vegas. In defense of his defensiveness, he alludes to the mess President Calvin Coolidge once got himself into by plunking an American Indian headdress on his cranium for a photo op.

Not that the noncombative Mr. Tierney ascribes presidential powers to himself. “I’m not a demagogue,” he says, when asked to articulate his reaction to a 2006 op-ed article in this newspaper in which Tom Wolfe, incensed by a proposal to graft a 30-story tower designed by [Norman Foster](#) onto a 1949 building in a historic district at 980 Madison Avenue, pilloried the commission as a spineless “bureau of the walking dead.”

But the power to subjectively distinguish and designate landmarks from run-of-the mill geriatric architecture and, touchier still, the power to preserve them, even without consent from their rightful owners? All his, along with the 10 unpaid commissioners, most of them architectural experts, who sit on the board and spend Tuesdays reviewing preservation prospects at public hearings.

Or not: it was on Mr. Tierney’s watch that no additional public hearing was convened in response to the protective flurry, and irate lawsuits, that peaked in 2005 when the so-called Lollipop Building, [Edward Durell Stone](#)’s 1965 design at 2 Columbus Circle, was sold to, and reconfigured by, the Museum of Arts and Design. Bye-bye, big white elephant with the lollipop portholes. Mr. Tierney does not miss it, and insists that the city’s residents, tourists, and skyline aesthetics are better served by its reincarnation.

“There is just an enormous responsibility to keep intact what we already have, keep it healthy, used, and animated,” he says. “That said, we make discretionary decisions all the time. You can’t designate everything. Choices have to be made.”

One recent choice, which temporarily appeased Mr. Wolfe while consternating the high-octane developer Aby Rosen and a celebrity coterie including the artist Jeff Koons and Revlon’s chairman, Ronald Perelman, was the commission’s rejection last week of the pencil-thin, sky-piercing tower proposed for 980 Madison Avenue. Impressive but inappropriate for the neighborhood, says Mr. Tierney, who otherwise has accolades for the designs of Mr. Foster (the Hearst Tower) and holdings of Mr. Rosen (the Seagram Building and Lever House).

“There are historic districts where we’ve allowed pretty modern interventions,” he says, citing the [Morgan Library](#). “We don’t freeze districts in aspic, or Jell-O, or whatever the right word, but you can’t just throw a glass building in the middle of a historic district.”

Mr. Rosen and Mr. Foster were invited to resubmit a proposal of less invasive proportion. “I don’t think we’re blocking progress at all,” adds Mr. Tierney. “But the landmark of the future doesn’t have to be all glass boxes and dramatic interventions.” The refurbished Gansevoort Market and the soon-to-be designated Crown Heights, among others, are proof, he says, of that.

Mr. Tierney’s ties to city government and friendship with deputy mayor/mayoral confidante Patricia E. Harris, who works with the commission, hark back to the late 1970s, when he became counsel to Mayor [Edward I. Koch](#). Mr. Tierney was appointed commission chairman by Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) in 2003 despite his lack of a formal education in architecture or urban planning.

A doctor’s son, Mr. Tierney grew up in West Haven, Conn., in a sea captain’s house built in 1854. He graduated from [Yale](#) and in 1968 earned a law degree from [Vanderbilt University](#). He lives in a historic district in Greenwich Village in a 1914 building that Mr. Koch dismisses as “a tenement.” He and his wife, Carolyn Wakeman, a professor at the [University of California](#), Berkeley, have a weekend home in Old Lyme, Conn.

He has learned, he says, how to read architectural drawings and is most passionate about the designs of Louis I. Kahn. “A lot of this job is about interacting with other branches of government. I now know that times of great economic activity, though good for the health of real estate, put a certain strain on the city’s fabric.”

Economic viability, he notes, has to be factored into landmark decisions. “Sentimental feelings don’t drive what I do here, but this,” he says, picking up “Lost New York,” a book about vanished landmarks, “can actually reduce you to tears.”

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)