

Testimony of Bruce Simon
to the Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 7, 2005

I support designation of the Plaza Hotel interior. So does just about everyone.

As though it matters.

What matters is that the Commission has received its marching orders from City Hall, where key landmarking decisions -- and non-decisions -- are made these days.

And that's what I really want to talk about.

I would like to address the volunteer, unpaid, commissioners -- those who, unlike the Chair, fulfill the statutory criteria of professionals in architecture, history, city planning, real estate.

The Chair, of course, is simply a lawyer with a political appointment, with no landmarking background. He was not a preservationist before his appointment. He won't be one after his term of office. Most unfortunately, he is not one now. When his term ends, he will be measured by his fulfillment of his political mandate -- and he will be measured by his political and legal cohorts.

But you, the professional landmarking Commissioners -- your legacy will be in the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of your landmarking obligations.

Unless you act -- and it must be you, because your Chairman for some unknown reason is incapable of acting -- Two Columbus Circle will join Pennsylvania Station in the Pantheon of lost treasures -- lost without even a hearing. Lost, despite the pleas of every significant landmark constituency --

- The National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Preservation League of New York
- The Municipal Art Society
- The Landmarks Conservancy

- Fine Arts Federation
- Historic District Council
- The current and former architectural critics of the New York Times
- The Dean of the Yale School of Architecture - Robert A.M. Stern.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Now, really, is that what you signed up for? Do you really want to be remembered as the Commissioner who stood by like a deer in the headlights as this building was destroyed? On your watch?

I want to challenge you to examine your motives for not acting. It is possible -- though unlikely -- that you all professionally and sincerely believe that the building does not merit designation. We know that professional opinions vary. But is each of you so sure of the rectitude of your opinion that you simply dismiss the enormous outpouring of professional opinion the other way? Is your hubris so profound, your arrogance so impenetrable, that you cannot perceive the necessity for a public hearing -- so that the merits and demerits of this singular structure can be debated? Or is it out of some misguided "loyalty" to your Chairman -- the landmarking version of the "Stockholm syndrome"? Is it out of fear that you will not be reappointed?

Surely, persons of your stature would not be moved by such unsubstantial matters?

Pause and reflect. Your tenure on this Commission will be weighed and measured by whether you act -- or continue to hide behind your desks. By preservationists, for years to come. By your peers. By your grandchildren. Perhaps most significantly, I respectfully suggest to you, by yourselves.