

The Rothschild Lecture: *Landmarks: A Living Legacy*
Panel Discussion at the 92nd Street Y, New York, New York

May 10, 2005

Robert A.M. Stern

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(With panelists James Stewart Polshek, Hugh Hardy, Robert Tierney; Barbaralee Diamonstein, moderator.)

Good evening. I am honored to join James Polshek, Hugh Hardy, and Commissioner Robert Tierney in celebrating the fortieth anniversary of New York City's landmarks law. In setting tonight's agenda, Barbaralee Diamonstein has quite wisely recognized that our landmarks legislation can benefit from review.

Without the work of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, our city would be vastly diminished as a place to live in and visit. So I am wholeheartedly in support of landmarking. But I do think that over its forty years of existence things have changed, and that in some crucial ways the Commission has not kept pace with its mandate. I am not going to talk about the very vexing problem of how to add on to a landmark though I think that this is an area that the Commission has not adequately addressed. Perhaps we can consider it in the informal discussion following the formal presentation. But now I want to concentrate on another problem – that of preserving the post-World War II past. In tackling this subject I do not propose that legislation be changed but that methods of doing business be reconsidered, particularly the process of considering buildings for designation.

At its inception in the early 1960's, the historic preservation movement was frankly anti-Modernist. Its motivations were as much based on stylistic preference as on scholarly reflection. The preservation movement in New York grew from the collective gut. It grew out of a sense that many fine old buildings and neighborhoods were being senselessly bulldozed to make way for cheaply constructed, crudely conceived new ones. In fact, this was largely the case. Who can argue that the buildings that replaced Pennsylvania Station had any merit whatsoever? Or that should white brick-clad highrise apartment buildings be built, Brooklyn Heights would be enhanced? But not every post-World War II building was without merit; and little in the way of real scholarship, not to mention connoisseurship, has emerged to re-evaluate this period. Now the issue before us is not the preservation of the pre-World War II past, but the post-War era.

We must identify the characteristic exemplars of the post-World War II architecture that old-line preservationists still cannot abide. We must see that fertile post-War period with eyes wide open, not blinkered by narrow anti-Modernist ideology nor equally narrow pro-Modernist ideology. Ideology has no place in preservation. Those who claim an exclusive hegemony over what is good and bad, true and false, must not be entrusted with the future of our city's buildings and neighborhoods. The preservation of our Modern Architecture must be the responsibility of scholars and others who view the recent past with compassion, wisdom, and a sense that for our city to retain its soul it must prevail as a many-layered palimpsest.

Sadly, too many preservationists still seem stuck in the 1950s and 1960s. Too little real scholarship or public debate about the new buildings of that era has taken place. History teaches us that the art of the recent past is usually viewed with disdain; nothing is more out of fashion than yesterday's dress or necktie. But buildings are not dresses

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and neckties. This is not to say that architecture does not have its own fashion trends and fashion victims. But unlike dresses and neckties, most buildings are conceived for more complex reasons than to simply make a style statement on our cityscape. So we are obliged to take each building very seriously, to respect the intentions of architects and their clients in all their complexities, no matter how contradictory, even if they do not conform to prevailing tastes. We must not give way to the self-serving whims of those who claim that the god of up-to-date art is on their side.

When it comes to considering the architecture of the recent past, the problem with too much preservationist thinking is that what passes for theories are little more than prejudices, which are given virtually exclusive hegemony over other more reliable modes of thought, not the least of which is solid scholarship. The time has come when the straight-line High Modernist view of architecture must give way to a wider view that allows for a more inclusive conception of what constitutes Modern Architecture taken as a whole. There is no one true and correct Modern Architecture. The high modernism of Mies van der Rohe or Gordon Bunshaft is undeniably valid and must be preserved. But so too are the works of Edward Durell Stone and Morris Lapidus undeniably valid, and they have not been permitted their fair day in landmarks court. Top-down decision-making from ideologically-driven tastemakers imbued with a singular view of what Modern means is no longer acceptable. Top-down meddling by elected officials is equally suspect. The Commission and its staff need to foster a preservation process that is more scholarly, more transparent, and, dare I say, more democratic, than it has been. The voice of concerned citizenry needs to be reflected in open hearings. The muses of modern architecture, not just the muses of Modernism, must be heard – and honored.

--- Robert A.M. Stern