

Landmarklubbers Fight for Peerless Old Pier A

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

A move to persuade Battery Park City officials to preserve rather than bull-

doze the city's oldest and last functioning covered pier is being organized by some of the city's most prestigious

landmark preservation groups.

At the same time, state historic preservation officials

will decide after a meeting next week whether to approve the 1886 Pier A at lower Manhattan for national

landmark status.

"It's an economic asset to the area and a cultural asset to the city," says Peter Stanford, president of the South Street Seaport. Stanford, along with leaders of the Landmarks Conservancy and the Municipal Art Society, is organizing the effort to save the pier.

"Battery Park City will have to depend on people wanting to go there and it won't happen if it's a dead neighborhood," Stanford says. "It will just work so much better with touches of grace."

Leased In 1970

Pier A, an active fireboat station, has been scheduled for demolition by Battery Park City since the city leased the land in 1970 to the state for the development. It is, however, one of the few viable waterfront landmarks left in an area fast losing touch with its maritime origins.

Resting on the north corner of Battery Park, only a stone's throw from Castle Clinton—the 1812 fort that once served as an aquarium—Pier A stands in the way of the BPC esplanade and bikeway planned for the waterfront.

"Pier A has always had a host of friends" notes Stanford. "I get letters, for example, from people in the Dept. of Interior pleading that it be saved. In a sense, it's been everyone's baby and no one's and we're all remiss in not really organizing sooner."

Political Implications

Stanford says the new group will try through "persuasion and reason" to convince BPC officials the pier should remain and to urge the city's Landmarks Commission to designate the pier a city landmark. The commission has avoided holding a public hearing on the matter because the pier's designation would interfere with city-state legal and political agreements.

Behind-the-scenes efforts to save Pier A have been stymied in recent years because of subtle but strong political complications. Two years ago, the State Board

of Historic Preservation unanimously voted to nominate the pier for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Such nominations require final approval by the State Parks and Recreation Commissioner. Once given, federal approval is normally automatic.

But former Parks Commissioner Alexander Aldrich, a cousin of then Gov. Rockefeller, avoided approving it for a national landmark because that would have pitted him against the head of another state agency, Charles J. Urstadt, chairman of the Battery Park City Authority. Urstadt is known to be adamant about having a clear southern vista for his commercial and residential community.

"It became one of the most politically sensitive landmark debates," one state preservation official recently said.

Now, with a Democratic Governor and parks commissioner, observers believe the reluctance to interfere with Urstadt, a Rockefeller appointee, may be diminished.

Personal Feelings

Orin Lehman, the recently appointed park commissioner, visited the pier last week and "came away with some rather definite personal feelings." He plans to discuss national landmark approval with the full State Board of Historic Preservation when it meets June 5 although it is his signature alone that could assure that designation.

The building of Pier A was initiated in the early 1870s by Civil War Gen. George B. McClellan, then engineer-in-chief of the city Dept. of Docks.

Under current plans, a new fire facility is to be constructed in Brooklyn and the clock tower is to be located within the grounds of Battery Park City. At this point, it is unclear what national landmark status would do to future plans for Pier A. Unlike city designation, inclusion on the federal register—under the auspices of the Dept. of Interior—only provides a moral, not a legal roadblock to demolition.

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