

Schermerhorn Row Saved

The landmark designation affirmed by the city for Schermerhorn Row did more than save the South Street Seaport preservation project and the Brooklyn Bridge Southeast urban renewal plan from destruction by speculators. The prompt action by the Board of Estimate raises hope that things are changing in New York.

Conventional cynicism, this city's traditional substitute for conventional wisdom, has long had it that the power of real estate and the pragmatism of politicians was the natural alliance that shaped this community. Where so much money was involved in land costs and potential profits nothing but money was sacred. Those who argued that the city existed in other terms—livability, history, function, the quality of environment and even beauty—and that the future could be foreclosed by ignoring these factors, were called bleeding hearts and dreamers.

The dreamers have turned out to be realists. New York's environmental crises have made it increasingly obvious that a city does not exist on bread alone. A decade ago no one would have given odds on a New York preservation law. It exists. Five years ago professional urban design was unknown at administrative levels. Today it is being practiced by the city. Although much is still on the drafting boards, both preservation and planning are functioning as part of New York's building processes now. There are members of the real-estate community who understand this, and there are others who do not. Although attitudes can change with the speed of elections, there is evidence that New York is beginning to subscribe officially to the values that make a city civilized as well as great.