

Landmarks in Retreat

New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 30, 1975; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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of American Standard's historic skyscraper overlooking Bryant Park.

As things stand now, everything from New York's celebrated skyline to its smallest historic survival is vulnerable. The problem is not alleviated by lethargy and conspicuous disinterest at City Hall. What is being sacrificed to political pragmatism and investment opportunism is the city in the only terms that history recognizes. It is an unconscionable giveaway, by men and minds that will never make history at all.

Landmarks in Retreat

This is, unfortunately, a time of retreat. There is a backing off from social programs, from environmental interests, from urban planning and landmark preservation, from the pursuit of the necessities and amenities that make a better society. Not the least indicator of what is happening is the State Supreme Court decision against the landmark designation of Grand Central Terminal in New York City.

The decision was delivered two years after the trial, in a growing climate of abdication and defeat on landmarks issues. It is bad news, bolstered by the earlier adverse court decision on the designation of the J. P. Morgan house on Madison Avenue, and fed by an apparent municipal backdown from both the landmarks law and its administration.

There should be no hesitancy about appealing this decision. The factual case the city made that it had provided compensatory alternatives to the economic hardship of designation of Grand Central was convincing, although it was discounted by the court. Appeal is essential because there is much more at stake here even than the city's right to designate what is an incontestable landmark in architectural, planning and symbolic terms. Also involved are such progressive devices as extensions of air rights transfer that the city had been developing in the effort to deal with questions of hardship. There is, further, the issue of good faith between an owner or a developer and the city in trying to work out these solutions in the public interest.

Some of these matters are legal concerns and some are not. Their sum total, however, profoundly affects the quality and character of New York wherever the architectural beauty or cultural strengths of the city are in conflict with the urge for speculative destruction. This threat goes beyond the adverse court decisions, which underline the need for landmarks law revision and a more determined handling of cases by the city.

In this downbeat climate, an increasing number of owners and institutions are seeking to reject rather than to approve their landmark designations. The Board of Estimate has for the first time turned down a Landmarks Commission historic district designation, for the Steinway section in Queens. The fact that such district designations have consistently increased property values rather than the other way around completely nullifies the argument to which the board succumbed. There are also strong indications that the board may yield to real estate pressures in resisting the commission's nomination