

Miracle on 68th Street

No Victorian melodrama could outdo the miraculous last-minute rescue of the Percy Pyne houses at 68th Street and Park Avenue this week. Even as the wrecker's scaffolding rose and the parquet floors were ripped up and marble mantels removed, an anonymous hero charged in with \$2 million crying, "Stop!"

It was an extraordinary operation in a hard-boiled commercial city like New York, and there were more heroes in the drama than the unnamed buyer. Mayor Wagner and the Department of Buildings held up the wrecking permit while ways and means of salvation were sought; the head of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, James Van Derpool, pulled strings that led on the ninth try to Peter Grimm, the real estate entrepreneur, and to the public-spirited purchaser.

The whole operation was, in effect, an unofficial demonstration of the basic protection the landmarks legislation now before the City Council proposes to provide: a stay of execution for a specified period while possible methods of preservation are pursued; only when none is found would the wrecker move in to exercise his destructive prerogatives.

A solution was found in this instance, and New York is grateful. But it has not been found in lower Manhattan, for example, where the city's oldest buildings stand, rich in history and in more modest but even more meaningful architectural style. The early nineteenth century spice trade buildings of Fletcher Street are gone now for a parking lot. Of the remaining homogeneous Greek Revival commercial rows, one building has been plucked, here and there, leaving grotesque mutilation like missing teeth.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission operates in the breach by persuasion, acting a bit like a preservation marriage broker.

But it is a bitter battle without the legal basis the city needs so badly. Miracles and magnanimity are fine, but they are not the legislative answer to preservation. That lies in the hands of the City Council—now.