

Schermerhorn Row: Landmark

It is seldom that any matter in this city is simple, but the issue before the Board of Estimate today in approving the landmark designation of the block called Schermerhorn Row could not be clearer. It is a black-and-white question of whether city endorsement will be given to a particularly offensive form of speculators' sabotage of the public interest.

Schermerhorn Row, a rare survival of early nineteenth-century buildings at the waterfront just below Brooklyn Bridge in lower Manhattan is the core of the South Street Seaport, a nonprofit, privately financed state- and city-sponsored preservation project that would keep and restore one of the last historic sites of the city's sailing age. The city has included the Seaport program in its official urban renewal designation of the twelve-block area known as Brooklyn Bridge Southeast. A trend-setting renewal plan combines new development and housing with historic preservation.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has already designated Schermerhorn Row; today's Board of Estimate ratification would ordinarily be routine. What has happened, however, is that Schermerhorn Row has been bought by commercial developers, Sol G. Atlas and John P. McGrath, who purchased the property with full knowledge of the project's status and the city's interests while the Seaport was still raising the money to acquire the site. Now they are trying to block the landmark designation so that nothing will interfere with their plans, which are to demolish the Seaport buildings in order to erect new commercial construction.

Mr. McGrath, a former corporation counsel for the City of New York, has excellent political connections. He says that he is not used to losing. A great many New Yorkers want him to lose this one.

The real issue involved here is whether the Board of Estimate, by withholding landmark ratification, is going to scrap the city's own exemplary plans to please two men who seem bent on personal gain irrespective of civic cost. To permit this would be an unconscionable act of cynicism by responsible public officials.