

## Anything Left to Preserve?

In a curiously poignant ceremony at City Hall yesterday, Mayor Wagner signed a proclamation establishing "American Landmarks Preservation Week in New York City" as part of a national and international program to protect landmarks that neither he nor the city has any power to protect.

The paper that the Mayor should have been signing is one that would really do the job: the landmarks preservation legislation prepared for the city of New York by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Corporation Counsel. Through a series of bureaucratic vicissitudes, it has been in the Mayor's office since May. It is reported to be a strong bill, based on the example and experience of other American cities that have already acted on the need to protect by law their historical and architectural patrimony. New York may not actually be last, but it sets an impressively consistent record for being late.

Even more poignant and curious than yesterday's ceremony is the fact that while the legislation has been prepared, considered, amended and passed from department to department, the city has suffered an irrevocable and accelerated number of losses. For one such private preservation success as the conversion of the Jefferson Market Courthouse into a branch library, achieved by a resourceful citizen group, and one such public plan as the Fraunces Tavern block, envisioned by city officials, there are countless catastrophes. The fate of the Brokaw houses at Fifth Avenue and 79th Street and of the Percy Pyne block on Park Avenue appears to be sealed; they will be replaced by apartment houses. The future of buildings like the Beaux Arts Custom House, the cast-iron Haughwout Store and the first Singer skyscraper is in doubt. Pennsylvania Station and the Black Starr Building are gone.

As things stand now, we may eventually have an excellent protective law and almost nothing to protect. It's simpler that way, of course—fewer problems, less controversy, and a model statute on the books. And even that won't touch the matter of a Savoy-Plaza substitute, for example, which is not strictly landmark preservation, but concerns retention of the special character and charm of a central public square. For this we need esthetic zoning or controls of the avenues and plazas that are the city's diminishing and tenuous claim to beauty.

For this is a city being ruthlessly rebuilt—a process in which progress has merely become a misspelling of profit—at the near-total sacrifice of its distinctive urban quality. We need more than good intentions. Actions speak louder than proclamations and the only action so far is the steady swing of the wrecker's ball.