

Preserving New York's Heritage

New York City's record of shameful indifference to the fast-disappearing architectural heritage may be improved in the future if the Mayor acts now to establish a Landmarks Preservation Commission with definite powers and responsibilities. Creation of such a body within the city government has just been recommended to the Mayor by a committee he appointed last spring, headed by Geoffrey Platt.

New York's action is long overdue. Some thirty American cities, among them Boston, Providence, Charleston, Philadelphia and New Orleans, have already taken positive legal steps to save their historic buildings and districts. New York City is still open hunting for private speculators. Washington Square, for example, has been irreparably ruined by real estate promoters and a university that should know better, and care more. The postwar building boom and certain phases of urban renewal have already rooted out whole areas of Manhattan of special architectural interest. Virtually all that is left of the early city, from the Battery to Brooklyn Bridge, will soon be bulldozed by the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Plan.

New York has no official body or procedure for review of such cases. There is no official way to make recommendations for retention of landmarks or sites to the City Planning Commission or the Housing and Development Board. The lack of this essential information, or even the desire to have it, is the cause of serious defects in both agencies' programs.

For the sake of its future New York needs a radically increased awareness of its historic and esthetic assets. If we put half of the energy, ingenuity and activity into retaining these assets that we do into ripping them out we can be assured of impressive results. The establishment of a Landmarks Preservation Commission would be a hopeful indication that New York City is at last moving in this direction.