

Now the Music Hall Drama Begins

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That was a real melodrama at the New York City Landmark Preservation Commission's hearing on Radio City last week. Feelings ran high among those who testified for and against salvation and those who came merely out of sentiment to watch the show. Alton Marshall, the head of the Rockefeller Center Corporation, was cast as the heavy and duly booed when he announced that he would go to court for permission to raze Radio City if it were designated as a landmark by the city and so protected from demolition for at least a year. Producer Joe Papp appeared as the hero and drew applause for demanding theatrical policy that would keep the Music Hall alive. The show was worthy of the Hall.

But histrionics aside, the proceedings delivered some clear messages. Rockefeller Center's management does not believe that preservation is practical. It considers the time that would be gained by landmark designation for adequate study of the problem would be wasted.

It was also apparent that preservation sentiment is strong and that the state of preservation expertise currently available is vastly underestimated. The environmental sensitivity and economic know-how that have rescued a legion of "obsolete" structures for new uses do not seem to have penetrated the handsome limestone walls of the city's finest landmark complex. Rockefeller Center's economic studies use none of the sophisticated architectural and marketing skills that have reconciled cultural and property values in so many other places.

As things stand now, Radio City may or may not be designated a New York City landmark, although it has been nominated by New York State for the National

Register. Barring an act of God (or Rockefeller) it will close its doors on April 12. A lot of talented and concerned performers and staff will be out of work. No mere stopgap measures can now save their jobs or the building.

That falling curtain must therefore be the signal to go to work. Landmark designation guarantees no more than a year's grace to find a solution before the owner will be free to demolish. It is time now to organize a professional group, like the Custom House Institute that was created by the Landmarks Conservancy to save New York's Old Custom House at Bowling Green. It would prepare the right kind of feasibility studies, with funds from government and private sources. There are special firms experienced in analyzing the uses to which large-scale landmarks can be put. And there are impressive precedents for the rescue of equally "hopeless" structures.

Boston's historic Faneuil Hall Market, for example, spectacularly reconciles history and real estate. Powell Symphony Hall in St. Louis and Heinz Hall in Pittsburgh are converted movie palaces. The 4,000-seat Fox Theater in Atlanta has been saved by Atlanta Landmarks, Inc., after three crisis-filled years that made the "Perils of Pauline" look like cozy domestic drama. It is now operating at a profit with a new entertainment mix.

New York has been given three months, and it has spent most of that period in a state of shock. The city needs time, expertise, a coordinated program—and the active cooperation of the Rockefellers. There are no ready-made answers for Radio City, but there are proven ways to find them.

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