

# Newer Landmarks

One of the most unwanted honors—to the real estate community and many building owners—is landmark designation. And one of the gestures made to investors by the drafters of the city's landmarks law was to make buildings less than 30 years old ineligible for designation. The idea was to keep New York's newer and larger structures completely negotiable, a kind of tradeoff for support of the law, which imposes severe limitations on the disposition of landmarks. A more philosophical argument was that it took time to know the architectural gems from the duds.

Now, in a sudden switch, owners of buildings less than 30 years old are requesting designation, which would require a change in the law. This surprising reversal has been brought about in part by the recent Federal tax reforms, which give the same tax breaks for the renovation of an older or landmark commercial property as for new construction. In addition, the Seagram Building's owners have asked for landmark status—a distinction that 18-year-old masterwork surely deserves.

The proposal would accord these newer buildings designation on a "voluntary" basis, or only at the request of their owners. The fear seems to be that if the Landmarks Commission were given the power to list any building, regardless of age, and allowed to designate at its own discretion, it would rush off on such a mass designation spree that it might endanger the economic viability of the city's most active and valuable property.

That is nonsense; the commission's procedures have been marked by notable realism and caution, with preference always given to owners' requests. It treads carefully where designation is opposed.

By holding any of the commission's actions to "voluntary" submissions, the city's right to designate according to its own professional standards would be compromised, both legally and in principle. There is no magic about the 30-year figure, and there is no cutoff point for superior architectural or environmental quality. The arbitrary time limitation ought to be lifted.