

Hot Landmarks

From a safe, sentimental cause of little old ladies, landmark preservation has suddenly become a dangerously controversial subject, thanks to a law to back it up and thanks to the official designations currently in process by the city.

It is a hot issue now—too hot to handle. Too controversial, for example, for the Chase Manhattan Bank, which has withdrawn its offer to the Municipal Art Society of space for an exhibition of New York landmarks. The exhibition seemed like a harmless enough civic gesture when there was no way to save them.

Too dangerous for the First National City Bank, which occupies a landmark-beyond-question, the original 1836 Merchants' Exchange Building on Wall Street by Isaiah Rogers, later enlarged by McKim, Mead & White. The bank now wants to preserve its inalienable right to get rid of it.

Too prickly for the Trinity Church Corporation, which opposes having five buildings designated and removed from the negotiable real-estate market, two of which are also in the landmark-beyond-question category: St. Paul's Chapel and Trinity Church itself.

Too awkward for the Stock Exchange, which considers the present home that it has outgrown and plans to sell as of "no special character or historical interest or value" in spite of the fact that the Landmarks Preservation Commission looks on it with favor.

Too uncomfortable for the Lutheran Church of America, which hopes to demolish the J. P. Morgan mansion for an office building, although this change would adversely affect the character of a zoned residential neighborhood.

Too objectionable for Sailors Snug Harbor, which does not want the landmark designation already made for its Greek Revival buildings on Staten Island.

Banks and churches that are among the city's most powerful and prestigious institutions are in one way or another expressing opposition to the preservation law that, for the first time in New York, makes possible a fair procedure for protection of the city's dwindling historical and architectural heritage. Similar laws have been upheld by the courts for more than seventy cities.

Are not civic spirit and public conscience to be expected from New York's financial, religious and charitable leaders? Is not the city's good to be put above self-interest?

Public spirit is also public relations; and some of the city's most influential organizations are well on their way to a large public black eye. Corporations have been known to spend sizable sums on their public image and to suffer grievously when that image is bad. Does New York have a friend at Chase Manhattan, or at any other of these institutions?