Preserving Noo Yawk Landmarks
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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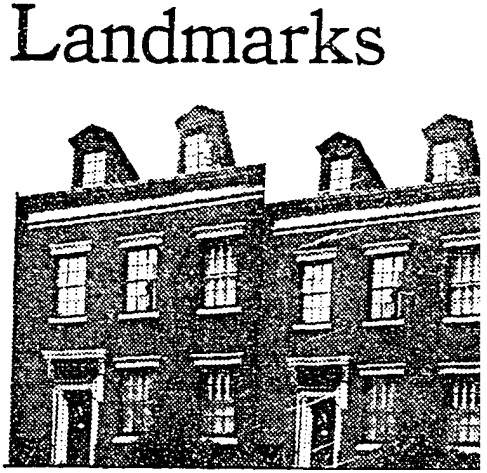

By Ada Louise Huxtable

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has recently and wrongly been accused—in an article on this page by Prof. Herbert Gans—of espousing the undemocratic designation of élite and stately buildings by and for the rich and famous, while allowing popular architecture to disappear.

The truth is quite different. Of the approximately 450 buildings that have been designated in New York, some are undoubtedly élite and stately; indeed we are fortunate to have a few in that category. But 26 historic districts have also been listed, containing about 11,000 buildings, the overwhelming majority of which are popular or vernacular. (The word democratic is to be avoided. The romantic fallacy of esthetic virtue comes off better in Ruskin.)

These districts consist of houses, warehouses, lofts and modest commercial structures and at least 2,000 of one of Professor Gans's most-wanted items—the tenement. "The small rowhouse designs to be found especially in Brooklyn" that he admires and seems to believe have also been bypassed are designated in Boerum Hill, Carroll Gardens and Park Slope among others, with perhaps a dozen variations from the Bronx and Harlem and Queens.

The 27th historic district designation, for a section of workers' houses in the Steinway area of Queens, was turned down by the Board of Estimate recently because the people who lived in them didn't want them listed. (That was probably democratic.)

Professor Gans asks for a public bathhouse. The one at East 23d Street and Asser Levy Place in Manhattan is a landmark. He mentions taverns. The Old Stone Jug and others in historic districts are protected. First Houses, the first low-income public housing in the country, has received designation.

The reality is that architectural historians and professional preservationists are passionately dedicated to the popular and the vernacular; these are probably today's largest areas of documentation and research. Neighborhood preservation, where the whole is often more important than its anonymous parts and the emphasis is on the synthesis of sociology and style, is a joint preoccupation of preservationists, planners and scholars. Industrial archeology (factories and industrial buildings of all kinds) is a booming new field. So much of man's life and taste and achievement is written in these structures; the point is not only to study but to save them.

However, to stigmatize major architectural monuments as products of the rich, and attention to them as élitist cultural policy, is a perverse and unserviceable distortion of history. The art historian who does this is playing a false and dangerous game.

These buildings are a primary and irreplaceable part of the story of civilization. Esthetic singularity is as important as vernacular expression. Money frequently made superb examples of the art of architecture possible, and there were, fortunately, great architects to design and build great buildings. There will probably never be enough money, or craft, or the cultural moment, to create such things again. And because their restoration and re-use are formidably difficult and costly and their land values usually high, these are the hardest buildings to preserve. So "élite" them not; they need all the help they can get.

"The ordinary and the extraordinary" is the proper range of history, according to Professor Gans. In this he is totally correct. That includes the buildings of the rich and the poor, of the famous and the anonymous, of the masses and the aristocracy. It treats of the beautiful and the ugly — the evaluation changes with the eye of each generation making nonsense of the question he raises about "who is to judge beauty" — in the full range of Establishment and vernacular worlds. "Mill and Mansion" was the title the eminent architectural historian John Coolidge gave to his study of Lowell, Mass., in 1942.

The point to be made is that history, and particularly the history of building, is inclusive. It is a tangible record of the nature of our lives, ideals, pleasures and aspirations, the conditions of our compromises, failures and defeats, our sense of community and worth. And that is art and history in the most comprehensive sense.

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