The Bulldozer Approaches a Historic Block: Architecture
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Architecture

The Bulldozer Approaches a Historic Block

BY ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

We are back, this past week, back to square one. No one tears out the historic hearts of cities anymore for parking lots. Everyone understands that the present is a dimensionless bore without the past. We all know that the richness, the interest, the art and character of cities depends on the contrasts and continuity of new and old. We understand now about townscape and environment. We are steeped in the lessons of landmark loss and bulldozer renewal, of dull unistyle development. We accept that the spirit and the senses must be satisfied by human scale and historic anchors.

Or do we? It has been forgotten already in Lower Manhattan, where the spoilers are attacking the Fraunces Tavern block, just about the last intact, full block (with the exception of the South Street Seaport) that is left of old New York. In May, the Uris Buildings Corporation began demolition of the houses on the eastern end of the block to make way for a parking lot. This action has been stopped, temporarily, by a group of concerned New Yorkers led by the private, non-profit New York Landmarks Conservancy.

The Fraunces Tavern block is a fragile miracle. It stands now, bounded by Water and Pearl Streets, Coenties Slip and Broad Street, spectacularly surrounded by skyscrapers, a shabby but real relic of 19th-century New York, with the reconstructed 18th-century Tavern at its Broad Street end.

Its five-story brick buildings, some still with pitched roofs and dormers, minimally marred by the odd extra story or remodeled ground floor front, give the essence of an earlier Manhattan. There were once foolish ideas of "restoring back" to the 18th century, which would be a consummate bit of sophistry, because the block is just fine the way it is, with optional minor cosmetic corrections. The buildings all contain more original fabric than the rebuilt Tavern.

Fifteen years ago the Fraunces Tavern block was not a solitary example. At that time, Front, Water and other downtown streets were lined with similar plain brick commercial structures that were the simple and fit e pression of the sailing a the home of ship chandle and spice and coffee me chants and those who de with the business of the s

Renewal changed all th On the whole, it has been better-than-average renew and there are some treme dously exciting passages 20th-century grandeur Lower Manhattan. But t losses were terrible and f too sweeping; the histo waterfront is gone, a trea ury of small scale ear buildings of handmade bri and solid granite has be demolished. And it is not ju the buildings that are gone so much else went with the —another era and city, its intimacy, history and style; and what we were, as a people and a place.

It's no good to go up to the Museum of the City of New York to look at dioramas; until fifteen years ago it was all right here. A combination of a frightened and fledgling Landmarks Commission, just getting off the ground, and aggressive development did it in.

What the Fraunces Tavern block represents now, in professional urban terms, is the most valuable kind of architectural townscape; a really surviving, cohesive group of structures of a specifically related period and style that forms an incomparable dramatic foil for the present. A kind of historical and esthetic setting for which there is no substitute, and without which a city is immeasurably poorer. It is a rare island of historic authenticity. Contrary to popular opinion, it can never be reproduced. And also contrary to popular opinion, such a group is often more significant than the isolated building singled out as a "landmark."

In fact, it is not whether or not each building in such a group is of "landmark" quality that counts, but the genuineness and ambience of the whole. The parts may even be very modest in themselves, but the vital factor is the way they add up to so much more, esthetically and environmentally. New Orleans's Vieux Carrée, for example, contains a surprising number of insignificant buildings, but they reinforce the significant whole.

Popular understanding accepts the "landmark" but still fails to comprehend the much greater value of the total streetscape, with its connective tissue. The streets and spaces and buildings that form them are often more evocative than individual structures. These physical relationships make the basic culture and character of cities.

It is inconceivable that the Fraunces Tavern block, virtually the last remaining entity of its type, should not receive a landmark designation on these terms. If it is a matter of interpretation of the law, rather than hewing to a narrow line of landmark building and historic district definition, it is the Landmarks Commission's responsibility to use its tools constructively. If the possibility does not exist in the law, it should be put there.

But long before this happens, if the Uris Buildings Corporation has its way, the buildings it owns on the Fraunces Tavern block will be gone. Among other landlords are Sylvan Lawrence and the Sons of the Revolution, the owners of the Tavern and adjoining houses. Because the block is a historic unit, demolition of any part of it destroys the whole. It is vandalism.

Knocking down a piece of it for a parking lot is about the most banal and vulgar and weary of all demolitions. Creating more parking lots downtown, whether or not they are made out of historic areas, is a questionable procedure at best; certainly it is one we should forbid the practice if New York is ever to meet clean air standards or deal with its traffic problems.

"The Fraunces Tavern block, a shabby but real relic of 19th-century New York in Lower Manhattan, is one of the last intact, full blocks that is left of old New York."

Demolition began on May 20 — without a demolition permit. The city's Office of Lower Manhattan Development notified the Department of Buildings that no permit had been issued, and destruction was halted. Violation notices were served on the Greater New York Demolition Company, working for Uris.

On May 24 a meeting was held at the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, with representatives of all the property owners on the block, to consider its future. The Landmarks Preservation Commission, previously consulted, was reported sympathetic, but not supportive of block designation.

An agreement was made that Uris would hold off on demolition for six months while ways to save the block were explored. On May 29, the Sons of the Revolution met with the New York Landmarks Conservancy, which offered to organize a feasibility study of preservation possibilities. Its aims are to find alternatives to demolition that will not penalize the owners, and make plans for disposition, reuse or appropriate redevelopment of the property.

On May 30, neither Uris nor the demolition company responded to court summonses for the demolition and new summonses were issued.

To gain time, some very curious conditions have been granted to the owners. First, Uris has insisted that in return for its six-months forbearance, the demolition permit be issued immediately. Second, the firm is not to be cited for further code or fire violations caused by the initial damage. (Subsequently, knocked-out windows and open doors have been boarded up by a donation channeled through the Conservancy.)

Third, if the city's efforts are made toward landmark designation of the block this will be deemed unacceptable by the owners; they have stated that it will give them cause to demolish the buildings. Fourth, if the city violates any of these odd conditions, "the owners will commence demolition of the buildings forthwith."

There are many legal and economic problems to be explored. If the block is given landmark status there would be the possibility of air rights transfer. Complex lessons have been learned in the strategies devised to keep and restore the South Street Seaport area. There are downtown banking institutions capable of admirable financial ingenuity. Six months is very little time, but one wonders how much time New York needs to self-destruct. It is a continuous performance.