

Artless Plaza

There is only a borough and a landmark designation between the Oak Room at the Plaza and Gage and Tollner's in Brooklyn; both restaurants are survivors of New York's belle époque. Both used solid oak and mahogany as if they were going out of style. Which they did, with the twentieth century.

Now the Gage and Tollner interior is up for landmark designation, with a hearing on Jan. 28. The Oak Room, or at least part of it, will be up for grabs on Jan. 29. That is the day the Hotel Plaza, Oak Room and all, changes hands, from the Sonesta Corporation to Western International Hotels.

It seems that the Everett Shinn murals in the palatial Oak Room do not go with the building's sale, through some legal technicality. It also seems that Western International is seriously considering removing them and giving them away for a tax deduction instead of purchasing them and keeping them in place. Someone at Western thinks they look better on the books than on the hotel's walls.

Only the exterior of the Plaza has landmark status. The interiors, which are among the most splendid public spaces in the city, do not. Those interiors have been repeatedly attacked and reprieved as they have come under the control of various corporate chains. Frank Lloyd Wright is said to have saved the Palm Court from further desecration after a stained-glass ceiling had been replaced by pink-lit plaster.

The Plaza, like Mount Everest, is there. To New Yorkers it is a social, cultural and artistic monument at 59th Street. But unlike Mount Everest, it is vulnerable. The removal of the Shinn paintings as the new owners' first act would be a peculiarly outrageous form of sabotage. And a dreadful omen for the future.