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Remarks: A Symposium on Historic Preservation Law

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Remarks

KENT L. BARWICK*

It is curious that during this conference many points to be made on behalf of intelligent preservation have been made quite eloquently by those who have previously imagined themselves critics or opponents of historic designation. They turned out not to be opponents at all. For practical as well as aesthetic reasons, for reasons that relate to finances as well as to patina, the critics have discovered that reuse of the past is not a sentimental exercise but a useful, important tool in the reconstruction of the City of New York and of other cities of this country.

I have the good fortune to be the Chairman of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission at a propitious time: it was particularly reassuring that the Supreme Court affirmed the City in the matter of Grand Central.¹ I have been associated with the Commission only since my appointment on March 1 of this year, but I have watched the Commission for years. They have been reasonable, deliberate, and careful in choosing and designating those buildings that are most important. The ten commissioners who serve without salary with me have inherited an extraordinary record of tact, common sense, diplomacy, scholarship, and, above all, intelligence and fair play that have prevailed in the administration of this pioneering legislation in past years.

Another pleasure that belongs to the Landmark Commission at the present time is that which derives from the success of our landmark statute. The fears that occupied the real estate community at the inception of the law have proved to be largely unfounded. The complaint that six percent is not a reasonable return is significant as an intellectual debating point, but no decision has ever turned on that. Circumstances in history have proved that the act has not turned out to be an imposition, but merely a conservative act.

Another reason why it is good to be the Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission at this time is that the

landmarks law has changed, as indeed zoning has changed, from a series of negative strictures to a highly effective, cost efficient, and largely nonpublicly funded tool for urban revitalization. That it is largely unfunded by the public is important in the context of our fiscal crisis. Landmarks preservation, the preservation movement, and the individual homeowner or the private businessman thus have little to fear from this municipal crisis because they have not received any financial assistance in the past. The best the City has been able to do in the past is to get out of the way of communities in New York City that have improved themselves, such as the brownstone communities, the red brick communities, and the Soho warehouse district.

Not only has there been no public support, but there has been only infrequent public acknowledgment. The federal, state, and local housing programs, the public assistance programs, and the policies of private lending institutions and insuring organizations have not contributed significantly, if at all, to the revitalization that is visible in this city. While it would be hasty and injudicious for the City to rush into a massive investment in urban revitalization, it would be a mistake to ignore the evidence before us. It is not being ignored. The number of people here today testifies to that, as does the extraordinary popular response that came forward at the time of the Grand Central Station controversy. Both are evidence of a deep-felt need in our society for preservation.

The task of the Commission today is to take advantage of the extraordinary collection of assorted and largely uncatalogued opportunities that exist and to assist in the rediscovery of neighborhoods, of great structures, of scenic landmarks, and of whole areas of the city. For the price of acknowledgment alone, these neighborhoods can be made to prosper. I was struck recently with the testimony of the president of an association from Eastern Parkway. Eastern Parkway is in Crown Heights, an area of this city that is torn asunder with groups that frequently do not get along very well. It is marked with poverty. It also happens to be the site of Frederick Olmstead's and Calvert Vaux's first invention, the first parkway in the United States and an extended strip of parkland.

The communities in this area agree on little, but they did agree that it would be a wonderful idea for the City to acknowl-

edge the value of Olmstead's creation, the ragged park along which they live. They came forward as a body — the Jews, the West Indians, the American-born blacks, and the other members of that community — to plead for a designation that brought with it no loans, and no grants, only acknowledgment.

I had a lesson the other day on the dilemma of conflicting needs in an urban society. At West Bathgate Avenue in the South Bronx, there is a precinct building, built by Horgan and Slattery, who were the architects of the Hall of Records downtown. Even in decay, the precinct building is a wonderful structure, a little Renaissance palazzo located in the middle of probably the worst crime area in this state. I was taken up on the roof of the precinct building by an Irish immigrant named Skelly, who had purchased a neighboring warehouse. From the roof I saw evidence of crime, the likes of which I could not believe: thieves had somehow broken through masonry walls with acetylene torches and steel bars. Skelly was pleading with us to do something with the precinct building because it was on that building that people climbed to reach the fire escape of the warehouse to break into his building. He was bankrupt because of this. He was forced to sleep in his warehouse to protect his goods. He said that we must do something with the precinct building. Then he said that we could not, of course, destroy something as lovely as that precinct building. Skelly is a man who has reckoned in a direct way with conflicting needs in the City and has made the right judgment, that he would rather see some thread of civility and of hope preserved in the Bronx, even at some inconvenience to himself, than to acknowledge defeat. Occasionally, and especially in conferences that are technical, the human affection and the human economic reckoning are overlooked.

We have identified the benefits of preservation: the increased real estate tax assessments, the jobs, and the rehabilitation of older structures. The percentage of hand labor in rehabilitation is much higher than it is in new construction. We can make our case about the value of historic preservation in attracting federal and state grants when we meet with the President of the City Council and the Mayor on the budget. We can demonstrate the ability of preservation to assist in stabilizing neighborhoods.

There is another benefit which relates to the question of potency in a city. An environment which is amenable to change and preservation may provide the spark to begin that change. Consider the South Street Seaport as an example. While the South Street Seaport is a financial failure today, awaiting the opportunity to become a success with federal help and with the help of the Rouse Corporation perhaps, in many ways it is already a success.

It was interesting to see the human reaction as most of lower Manhattan was destroyed. 20,000 people came forward in three or four years to join in the Seaport project, making it overnight the largest history museum membership in the United States. It was the ability of the Columbia radicals, the aged sailors from Staten Island, the office clerks from Wall Street, and the presidents of Wall Street firms whose mutual support created the project. Even William F. Buckley and Pete Seeger were able simultaneously to tie up their boats there. There is a lesson in this, and the price of potency should not be left unrecorded in any economic reckoning we may make.

In general, it is a mistake to portray amenities in the City as being at odds with essential services. It is essential to have a fire department and a police department; it is also essential, if we are to have a publishing industry or an advertising industry, to have a New York Public Library. It is essential, if we are going to continue to derive an extraordinary number of dollars from the sale of art objects, that we have an art industry, that we have museums where works of art are displayed, galleries where they are sold, critics publishing in papers, and houses where artists live and work.

These needs are being given begrudging acknowledgment as economic issues, but any reckoning of the future of the City must look to our particular strengths. All cities have trouble paying for policemen and firemen. All cities do not have extraordinary public libraries and an unparalleled cultural establishment of a wonderful collection of museums and a huge population of artists, publicists, lawyers and printers.

We have to look at what attracts and holds people in our city, what middle management amenities play a role in the decision to locate a plant or a factory or a white-collar institution in Greenwich, Connecticut, or Houston or in New York City. Cul-

tural institutions and libraries, linked to historic preservation, are essential to the life of this city.

The wonderful thing about New York and about the Commission is that preservationists here are not antiquarians — they are New Yorkers; and the real estate moguls are New Yorkers, too. The great hope for this city is that we recognize, as a commonality of our received environment, the good sense, although we cannot quantify it in economic terms, of maintaining the library, Lincoln Center, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission. We will not merely survive, but we will prevail as a city.

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