

The Historical Memory of Architecture in New York City

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In 1963, former New York Pennsylvania Station was demolished to build in its place a large sports field, Madison Square Garden. The train station was a symbol of the Art Deco city, one of its most emblematic buildings that no one had imagined could be destroyed. The New York Times, in an editorial at the time, called it "an act of vandalism."

Two years later, in response to the indignation of many for the loss of the Pennsylvania Station, Mayor Robert F. Wagner created the New York City Landmark Preservation Commission, a committee to designate, protect and retain the buildings, sites and neighborhoods of iconic New York for their architectural, historical and cultural value.

Yesterday, April 19, marked the 50th anniversary of the adoption of this law; it also marked a before and after in the rebirth of the city. In 1978, for example, with the help of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and the Commission, Grand Central Station was saved from the same fate suffered by its neighbor on the west side. Since then, "there are 134 historic districts, and more than 32,000 protected properties," explains Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, president of the NYC Landmarks 50 Alliance, comprised of 177 organizations and created to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary (of the NYC Landmarks Law). "Does it seem like too many buildings?" She, author of *The Landmarks of New York*, which is now finishing the sixth edition. "What if I tell you this number represents less than 3.2% and commercial real estate in New York? It no longer seems so much, right?"

The designation of new landmarks and historic districts are great achievements. Historic districts have moved from "two dozen to 134" confirms Simeon Bankoff, director of the Historic Districts Council. In the 30 years since the founding of Landmark West!, centered on preserving the architecture of the Upper West Side, the list of designated buildings has increased from "337 to more than 3,000," says its president Kate Wood. More than 1,100 buildings have been added to the inventory of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, says its director Andrew Berman.

However, despite the numbers, awareness of the preservation of buildings and emblematic areas of the city is still not settled. All organizations agree that challenges have grown due to the strong pressure of real estate development. "There are always questions and challenges," Diamonstein-Spielvogel, who began working at the Commission in 1972. "There is a healthy tension between community development and community preservation", she explains, and it's time for a new approach. "So we must come together again for a constructive dialogue to solve the problems we all have. Because in the end we share a common goal: preserving a city we love. "

A message transmitted and shared with neighboring communities in seminars and lectures. "We could not be effective without them," says Bankoff. Therefore, much of their work is to train people to recognize the value of the emblematic buildings where they live; to train people who can care for them, protect them against development, and preserve them for the tourists who come attracted by the skyline of the city. And, above all, preserve them for the New York City of the future. "We need to continue to inspire the public, which is being harassed by the real estate industry, and making it difficult for the average New Yorker to cope," confirms Bankoff.

Finding the balance between the existence of affordable housing for New Yorkers and community preservation is key, as noted by Tara Kelly, executive director of Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts. In fact, one of its concrete struggles right now is to get Mayor Bill de Blasio change to ensure that a proposed new law on the rezoning is addressed. Although the law promises to "promote the creation of affordable homes and foster diverse and livable neighborhoods" there is real concern that it will be exploited by private builders as a backdoor for just the opposite: to continue to build upscale neighborhoods.

Given this challenging present and future, the NYC Landmarks 50 Alliance was founded to remember why this law was created 50 years ago and to reinforce the historical memory of a city, so that it would not repeat mistakes like the one made in 1963, which destroyed one of its most emblematic places.