

The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

# New York City's Landmarks Law at 50

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD APRIL 17, 2015

New York City's landmarks preservation law turns 50 on Sunday. Any who doubt its continuing significance should head to the West Side of Manhattan, to the building it came too late to save. Pennsylvania Station in 2015 is a monument to civic suffocation, a basement of low, dust-blackened ceilings, confusing corridors, beer-and-popcorn dealers, yowling buskers and trudging commuters.

Only the dented brasswork on some Long Island Rail Road stairways and some old photos in the Amtrak waiting area point to the half-forgotten memory of something far better that used to occupy the space.

The old Penn Station's destruction, unthinkable until it happened in 1963, galvanized public support for a law to slow the city's blistering pace of architectural erasure. But even that crime wasn't enough; it took the demolition in 1965 of the Brokaw houses, a set of grand old mansions on Fifth Avenue at 79th Street, to propel the bill off Mayor Robert Wagner's desk and into law. It created a preservation commission with teeth, to guard the city's memory.

Half a century later, how are those teeth holding up? The answers are contradictory.

Thousands of buildings, from brownstones to modernist skyscrapers, irreplaceable historic interiors and entire neighborhoods from Staten Island to the Bronx enjoy the law's protection. In Manhattan, 27 percent of buildings have landmark status, though the percentage is far lower in the other boroughs.

The administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, while on a mission to make the city denser and taller for affordable housing, says it is committed to finding and saving the architectural legacy citywide. It points to its recent designations, including: a children's library in Brownsville, Tudor Revival townhouses in Flatbush and early 20th-century working-class housing in Ridgewood.

Despite these successes, the law is not being used aggressively enough, has never met its potential, and has let too many precious buildings languish or be leveled while saving architectural mediocrities. The Landmarks Preservation Commission, with one of the tiniest budgets and staffs of any city agency, has had a bush-league reputation. Mr. de Blasio and his landmarks chairwoman, Meenakshi Srinivasan, have pledged to revitalize it, but have not yet shown how they will reconcile the commission's mission with the administration's broader goals of enhancing equality and diversity in the flesh-and-blood city.

Real estate developers remain a potent enemy of historic preservation, while the commission struggles with improving day-to-day efficiency. It spends nearly half its time handling paperwork for existing landmarks, and it operates under a bureaucratic conundrum: The more landmarks it makes, the more work it has. How it will improve its range and effectiveness with limited money — \$5.7 million in the 2015 fiscal year — remains uncertain.

The city is going to have to live with those contradictions. Demolition can be both evil and essential in New York, as in any great city. Mr. de Blasio is right to seek a blistering pace of new construction, to try to build his way out of the affordable-housing shortage. Preservationists are right to resist him, in pursuit of the ideal — a city where wisdom guides planning, to avoid future lamentation over what we could have saved.

Mr. de Blasio has the primary responsibility to make this all work. He appoints the landmarks commission and its leader; it is she who decides what the commission considers. Ms. Srinivasan is a talented architect and planner, though she dismayed preservationists last year by proposing to summarily strike dozens of properties from the commission's long list of potential landmarks in the name of efficiency. Faced with fury over lack of consultation, she retreated and invited months of public comment.

The administration says the commission has already designated as landmarks almost 1,700 buildings and sites this fiscal year, but some preservationists still say they worry that the administration is not fully committed to the spirit of the preservation law. To prove them wrong, Mr. de Blasio needs to keep the commission adequately funded. Ms. Srinivasan needs to guard the commission's independence and strengthen its connection to the community. The goal above all should be a city that knows and honors its past, but does not live under glass.

That delicate balance was shattered by the wrecking ball at the old Pennsylvania Station. It was "a public object, in the realest sense," The Nation's architecture critic once wrote. "Little pieces of thousands of lives can be recalled there." In the neglected dungeon that replaced it, little pieces of thousands of lives are bruised every day.

