

Landmarks and preservation: worksheet n°6

Landmarks and preservation in New York City

Source 1: 'The Destruction of Penn Station'; A 1960's Protest That Tried to Save a Piece of the Past

A new book on New York's most famous demolished building -- "The Destruction of Penn Station", a series of demolition photographs by the late Peter Moore -- brings back memories of the failed effort to save the renowned structure. These days, four decades later, there would be no shortage of bodies to sit in front of the bulldozers. If there had been as much support in 1962, that era's small group of young, earnest and optimistic protesters just might have won. The architectural firm McKim, Mead & White's Pennsylvania Station was the last word in modernity -- in 1910. (...) Although the Pennsylvania Railroad made some improvements, it lost interest in its giant Classical structure, and in 1961 announced plans to demolish the old station for office buildings and a new Madison Square Garden with a swooping, circular roof and a new station below. The magazine *Progressive Architecture* was immediately critical of the project and especially of the proposed loss of Penn Station. At that time there was no landmarks law in New York City, no mechanism for protecting structures of public interest. (...) In early 1962 a meeting of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects led to continued protest. (...) At 5 p.m. on Aug. 2, 1962, at least 100 people joined a picket line with signs reading "Shame" and "Don't Amputate -- Renovate." An advertisement in *The New York Times* boldly stated that the group was formed to "serve notice on present and future would-be vandals, that we will fight them every step of the way." THE unusual protest attracted broad press coverage, even on television, but the organizers had trouble moving from goals -- like persuading the Port of New York Authority, as the agency was then known, to take over the station -- to actual results. (...)

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY, Published: May 20, 2001, *The New York Times*



Pennsylvania Station



Destruction of Penn Station in 1963

Source 2: The Landmarks Preservation Commission

The Landmarks Preservation Commission is the New York City agency that is responsible for identifying and designating the City's landmarks and the buildings in the City's historic districts. The Commission also regulates changes to designated buildings. The Landmarks Preservation Commission was established in 1965 when Mayor Robert Wagner signed the local law creating the Commission and giving it its power. The Landmarks Law was enacted in response to New Yorkers' growing concern that important physical elements of the City's history were being lost despite the fact that these buildings could be reused. Events like the demolition of the architecturally distinguished Pennsylvania Station in 1963 increased public awareness of the need to protect the city's architectural, historical, and cultural heritage.

From the Landmarks Preservation Commission website, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/html/about/about.shtml>

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Source 3: What is a landmark?***What is a landmark?***

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission defines a landmark as a building, property or object that has a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, state, or nation. New York City has more than 23,000 landmarks including individual, interior and scenic landmarks and historic districts.

What minimum criteria must a building or site meet to be designated a New York City landmark?

A building or site must be more than 30 years old and have historical or architectural significance as determined by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

What can be a landmark?

Since our history is defined by more than just buildings, a landmark can be many things that are reflective of history and convey significance, including building interiors, cemeteries, bridges and landscapes.

What is an historic district?

An historic district is an area where a group of buildings and sites have a distinct sense of place or character. The buildings and sites that make up an historic district represent a specific period or style of architecture that represents the city's history.

What is a National Historic Landmark?

A national historic landmark is designated by the Secretary of the Interior because of its *exceptional* value as demonstrating the heritage of the United States and its meaning to all Americans. There are 2,500 such sites that meet this high standard. The Statue of Liberty, Rockefeller Center and the Metropolitan Museum of Art are examples of local sites that are National Historic Landmarks.

From: <http://gvshp.org/blog/2011/07/11/historic-preservation-101-what-is-a-landmark/>, the blog of Greenwich Society for historic preservation

Source 4: Origins of Heritage Preservation in the United States

As in many countries of the New World, early preservation in the United States was closely linked to the establishment of a national identity by focusing on those sites that were linked to the early settlement and independence movement, especially sites associated with the life of George Washington and to a lesser degree with other important figures of that period. Unlike other countries, however, the will to conserve and monumentalize such sites did not issue from either the central or the local government, but rather, from local citizen groups who valued the cultural, historic and patriotic sites that lay in their immediate community.(...)

The emphasis on the associative patriotic values linked to the early independence movement and the colonial period acquired a new sense of urgency with the large immigrations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the prevailing Anglo-Saxon and protestant ethic of colonial and earlier settlers were perceived to be endangered by the massive influx of eastern and central Europeans, plus Catholics, Jews, Orthodox and others. Heritage sites were recruited for their didactic potential in inculcating the newcomers with the values of a dominant culture whose carriers were dangerously diminishing in their proportion to the overall population.

Certainly, there were a number of governmental efforts during this period, including the establishment of the National Park Service, the declaration of a number of national monuments by presidential decree and the passing of several federal protective laws mostly dealing with archaeological sites. While they may seem weak by today's standards, they set up a strong foundation for the work that was to follow.

Other important actions of the 1930s had a profound pioneering impact on the preservation movement. Local preservation ordinances were established in New Orleans, Charleston and Alexandria. At the federal level, President Roosevelt's economic recovery programs put unemployed architects to work documenting historic buildings all over the country, an initiative that gave rise to popular awareness of our traditional architecture and established the Historic American Buildings Survey.

From: <http://www.usicomos.org/preservation>, us national committee of the international council of monuments and sites

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Source 5: Failures and success of historic preservation in New York City

Singer Building, New York, NY, World's Tallest Building in 1908. Demolished in 1968.

Failures

Each year countless historic buildings and neighborhoods in metropolitan and rural areas throughout our country are lost either to neglect or demolition. With each building's collapse goes some of the character and craftsmanship that used to define our cities' main streets and town centers. The intricate columns, detailed sculptures, arches and ornaments that defined the office buildings, homes, theaters, banks and churches of our country are fewer and fewer. Demolished by developers with the approval of local governments, these historic buildings are often replaced by high rise condominiums and apartments, cookie-cutter chain stores, nondescript retail buildings and parking lots. The result is not just the irreplaceable loss of architectural treasures but the historic ambience the buildings brought to the communities where they were located. What replaces them usually lacks any unique architectural quality and provides little cultural value for the future. Attacks on historic buildings are nothing new. For decades they have fallen at the hands of developers who find it more cost effective to rebuild than rehabilitate.

In New York City, the demolition of Penn Station in 1963 attracted national attention to the need to preserve our architectural heritage and helped make the case for Federal protections. Since then, America's one time tallest building, the Singer Building built in 1908 and located in New York City's financial district was demolished due to a perceived lack of functionality in today's business environment. In addition, five historic Broadway theaters built in the 1930s died an untimely death when they were demolished to accommodate a new hotel. Famous New York City buildings lost forever: Astor Theater , Bijou Theater Gaiety Theater , Helen Hayes Theater , Morosco Theater, Penn Station, Savoy Plaza Hotel , The Singer Building.

Success

In 1978, Penn Central Transportation Company applied to the New York City Landmarks Commission for approval of the construction of a 55-story addition to the 1913 Grand Central Terminal Building. The Landmarks Commission denied approval, and Penn Central attempted to have Grand Central's historic designation overturned. The New York Court of Appeals upheld the Landmarks Commission ruling, and the case went to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Landmarks Commission ruling was upheld at the federal level in a six-to-three decision. The case has become an important benchmark for the cause of preservation, as it supported the legitimacy of historic preservation as a governmental goal and responsibility and showed that historic ordinances function as the methods to accomplishing the goal and the responsibility.

From <http://www.architecturaltrust.org/historic-preservation/historic-preservation-in-the-united-states/failures-a-successes>, *The Trust for Architectural Easement, organization that strives to be a leading force in the protection of America's architectural heritage.*

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Questions

1) Present 'Penn Station'. Explain when and why it was destroyed. Who opposed its destruction? Why were the protesters unable to stop the destruction? What was the impact of its destruction on historic preservation in New York City? (Sources 1, 2, 5)

2) What is the Land Preservation Commission? When and why was it created? (Source 2)

3) What is a landmark? What are the differences between a New York City landmark and a National Historic Landmark? (Source 3)

4) What were the original aims of historic preservation in the USA? Who first encouraged the preservation of historic sites? What was the role of the federal state in historic preservation (Source 4)

5) What are the current aims of historic preservation in New York City? (Sources 2, 3, 5)

6) Has historic preservation been a success or failure in New York City? (Sources 2, 3 and 5)