

BACKSTORY

COMMISSION ACCOMPLISHED

By Jim Lochner

THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION CELEBRATES 50 YEARS OF SAVING HISTORICAL NEW YORK—BUT NOT WITHOUT ITS SHARE OF CONTROVERSY.



Whenever I walk by the monstrosity that is Madison Square Garden or have to travel through the black hole transportation hub beneath it, I bemoan the destruction of the original Penn Station in 1963. But there is some consolation in the obliteration of its fallen Beaux-Arts beauty. Rising out of the ashes, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr. established the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) to ensure that the city's landscape would be preserved.

Comprising a panel of 11 commissioners appointed by the Mayor, and supported by a staff of approximately 67 preservationists, researchers, architects, historians, attorneys, archaeologists, and administrative employees, the LPC is the largest municipal preservation agency in the country and considers designations in all five boroughs. The four designations—individual, interior, scenic, and historic—encompass everything from the iconic main branch of the New York Public Library and the interior of the ornate Loew's Paradise Theater in the Bronx to Central Park and a street in Brooklyn Heights. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Commission, whose task to safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic, and cultural heritage has certainly had its ups and down.

At the LPC's first hearing in September 1965, the city's first major public library was proposed for landmark designation. The 19th-century Astor Library in the East Village opened in 1854, and later merged with the Tilden and Lenox collections to become the New York Public Library. When the library moved, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), a charitable organization founded to help the exodus of Jewish emigrants from Imperial Russia, bought the Romanesque revival building at 425 Lafayette Street. But in 1965, HIAS no longer needed the building, five new uses had been proposed and rejected, and the structure was scheduled for demolition to make way for the construction of an apartment house. (Sound familiar?) Enter theatrical producer Joseph Papp, who had founded The Shakespeare Workshop in 1954. The enterprising and persuasive Papp successfully negotiated with the apartment

developers and acquired the property, giving birth to what eventually became The Public Theater. But other buildings weren't so lucky.

On April 16, 1966, conductor Leopold Stokowski addressed the audience at the old Metropolitan Opera—"I beg you to help save this magnificent house." The Met had leased the property at Broadway and 39th Street to architectural firm Keystone Associates, with the explicit requirement that the building be demolished. At the LPC's first meeting, the building had lost by a vote of six to five, when the LPC caved in to pressure from the Met, which feared that a rival opera company would put them out of business. Though Leonard Bernstein, Marian Anderson, Mayor John Lindsay, and even Governor Nelson Rockefeller intervened, the building was razed in 1967. Today, an undistinguished corporate skyscraper stands on the site, with yet another ubiquitous Chase Bank branch on the ground floor.

Imagine Christmas in New York without the Rockettes... It almost happened. Radio City Music Hall had been an economic failure from the start and, in 1978, Rockefeller Center announced plans to tear down the iconic structure. The public ran to the theater's defense and a hearing attracted more than 100 speakers, including a kick line of Rockettes dancing on the steps of City Hall. The LPC granted the theater's interior landmark status, thankfully preserving its beautiful 1932 Art Deco design and charming retro bathrooms.

Today, there are more than 31,000 landmark properties in New York City, located in 111 historic districts and 20 historic district extensions in all five boroughs. The total number of protected sites also includes 1,338 individual landmarks, 117 interior landmarks, and 10 scenic landmarks. While the LPC's decisions have not always met with widespread approval, I shudder to think what the landscape of the city would look like if the Landmarks Preservation Commission didn't exist. On their 50th anniversary, let's raise—not raze—a glass in appreciation.

Top to bottom: The Public Theater, formerly the Astor Library; the Beaux-Arts beauty of the former Penn Station prior to demolition; the Gilded Age glamour of the former Metropolitan Opera House.