

URBAN STORIES

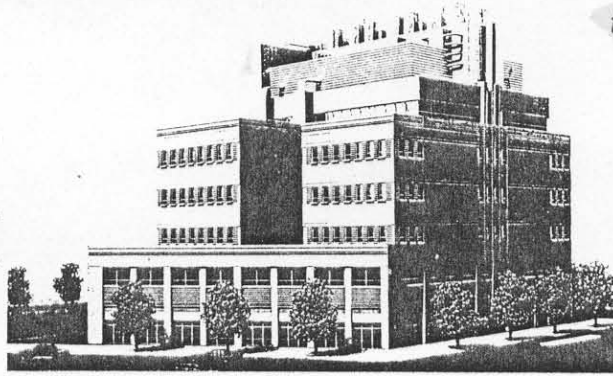
by Suzanne Beilenson

Decisions, Revisions, and Collisions



Richard Schaffer

Stanley Seitgson



AUDUBON
THEATER +
BALLROOM

Project, Audubon
Research Building,
Perkins & Will with
Bond Ryder and
Associates

Audubon Theater and
Ballroom, Broadway
at 166th Street,
Thomas Lamb, 1912

Slow Selection

What becomes a City Planning Commissioner most? In 1990 the answer would have to be patience. Mayor David Dinkins slid past the March 1 deadline and coasted into April before at last selecting Richard L. Schaffer as chairman of the City Planning Commission. Schaffer, an urban planner, is currently the dean of the Graduate School of Management and Urban Professions at the New School for Social Research and previously served as chairman of the Urban Planning Division at Columbia University's School of Architecture.

In spite of the efforts of the mayor and the various search committees he employed, complications and confusion surrounded the planning chief's appointment. According to Deputy Mayor Barbara Fife, it was not clearly communicated to the mayor's scouts that Dinkins was committed to having a planner, rather than a lawyer or other professional, in the chief's position, a commitment that seems valid when the new city charter is taken into consideration.

In addition to enlarging the commission (from seven to thirteen members), the revised charter charges the planning commission with "developing 'fair share' criteria for locating city facilities" and with guiding communities in planning their own futures. The expanded responsibilities for the planning chief brought about by the charter revisions made the choice for the post even more difficult. Theodore Liebman, an architect with the Liebman Melting Partnership and a one-time candidate for the chairperson's post, believes that "the administration was correct in taking its time" to find a planning and architectural visionary who also possesses the leadership and political skill to realize the charter's goals. Architects nominated for the position included Lo-Yi Chan of Prentice & Chan, Olhausen; Peter Samton of Gruzen Samton Steinglass; and Max Bond of Bond Ryder and Associates.

The appointment process may also have been slowed by the charter's amendment concerning the conflict of interest between public responsibilities and personal practice. It is considered a conflict of interest for a City Planning Commissioner or chairperson to appear directly or indirectly before the Department of City Planning or the Commission. Deputy Mayor Fife does not think the conflict-of-interest specifications interfered in the selection process. However, Linda Davidoff, executive director of the Parks Council, co-chair of the

mayor's now-adjourned search team, and a former nominee for chairperson, holds that the strict requirements favor "retired people, academics, or not-for-profit people."

In addition to Schaffer, academics nominated for the chairperson's post included Elliott Sclar, a professor of urban planning at Columbia. Yet in spite of the mayor's directives, lawyers constituted the majority of the candidate list. Lawyers nominated for the chair included Philip Howard of Howard, Darby & Levin; Carl Weisbrod, president of the 42nd Street Redevelopment Corporation; Stephen Kass of Berle Kass & Case; Ed Costikyan of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind; and Edward Sadowsky of Tenzer Greenblatt.

Richard Kahan, managing director of the Continental Development Group Inc., was also mentioned frequently as a possible choice for the position.

Unmarked Landmark

The battle between preservation and development forces in the city continues to rage. One of the recent conflicts has centered on the Audubon Theater and Ballroom, the site of Malcolm X's assassination, a building located on a city-owned lot between West 165th and 166th Streets and bounded by Broadway and St. Nicholas Avenue. Cultural groups such as the December 12th Movement and preservationists view the building as an unofficial landmark because of its historical and architectural significance. However, Columbia University was recently granted certification for its proposal to replace the theater with the Audubon Research Building, a six-story biomedical laboratory designed by Perkins & Will in association with Bond Ryder and Associates.

Columbia promises that a laboratory on this

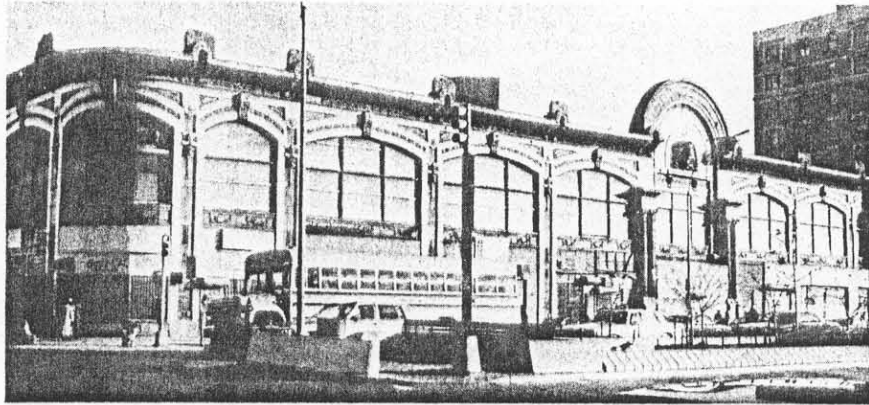
site will attract further high-technology industry to the city and provide economic stimulus as well as jobs to the Washington Heights neighborhood. The city and state seem convinced of the benefits and will supply \$18 million in funds for the \$25 million project.

These economic benefits comprise the major obstacle to saving the Audubon Theater. Michael Adams, a preservationist, asserts that in communities like Washington Heights or Harlem, "there's generally such poverty that any development, no matter how ill-conceived, is welcomed by the establishment."

In this case, what will be sacrificed is a cultural landmark of the African-American experience. In addition, the Audubon, designed in 1912 by eminent theater architect Thomas Lamb, is seen as having distinct architectural merit. Edward Kaufman, associate director of the Municipal Art Society, points out the exceptional use of polychrome terra-cotta, a material in vogue at the time.

According to Bernhard Haekkel, director of office project development and coordination, the university originally planned to restore the entire building in 1983 and at one point even backed a drive to landmark it. Later, engineering surveys concluded it would be prohibitively expensive to repair and restore. Just restoring the facade, Columbia contends, would cost \$9.5 million.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has never designated the Audubon Theater and Ballroom, although the building was considered at the staff level several times in the late 1970s and early '80s. Some critics see the decision not to landmark it as representative of the prejudice against landmarking buildings in low-income neighborhoods. Yet Robert Nieweg, executive director of Landmark West, an



Ruby Washington/NTT Pictures

Preservationists in Washington Heights will have to organize quickly if they want to deter the construction of the Audubon Research Building. Columbia's project is scheduled to go before the Board of Estimate for approval this August.

Upper West Side preservation group, believes the Audubon's history at the LPC simply typifies the slow landmarking process. "Communities have to stand up for themselves and organize" in order to force a project over the hurdles, he says.