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Turning Up the Heat on a Landmarks Agency

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Someone has stolen one of my buildings! That was the panicked reaction of Beverly Moss Spatt, then the chairwoman of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, after the cast-iron facades of a building by James Bogardus were spirited away from a downtown lot in 1974. The 1849 facades, supposedly protected by official landmark status, had been disassembled and stored for eventual relocation at another site. But thieves broke into the lot and sold most of them off as scrap metal.



Landmark West

2 Columbus Circle on a Web site devoted to architectural

Three decades later, Ms. Spatt, now retired, is one of the people fighting to save 2 Columbus Circle, a 1965 building by Edward Durell Stone, in one of the biggest preservation uproars in a generation. But this time it is the commission itself that seems to have been hijacked.

Once considered the most powerful agency of its kind, the commission has lost the confidence of many mainstream preservationists by repeatedly refusing to hold a public hearing on the building's fate. At the urging of those preservation advocates, a city councilman, Bill Perkins, has introduced a bill that could force the commission to hold public hearings on potential landmarks. The implication is that the commission cannot always be trusted to protect the public interest.

The bill, which is to come before a City Council



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preservation.

subcommittee that meets at 11 this morning, would require a public hearing on any building that has been determined eligible for listing on the state register of historic places. It would also allow the City Council to demand such a public hearing in a majority vote.

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The bill probably comes too late to save 2 Columbus Circle, where scaffolding began to rise this month. (The building has been sold to the Museum of Arts and Design, which plans to remake the interior and clad its white marble Venetian-style façade in terra-cotta tiles.) The aim is rather to ensure that similar debacles can be averted in the future.

But the bill does not specifically address the sad reality that the commission no longer seems willing to fulfill its role as a defender of the city's architectural legacy. This is not solely the fault of its chairman, Robert B. Tierney, on whom much of the controversy has focused. It has to do with a subtle but crucial shift in how the commission does business. Founded in 1965 in response to the tragic razing of Penn Station two years earlier, the Landmarks Preservation Commission has traditionally been made up of independent voices with deep roots in the preservation community.

The commission's power to protect a building in virtual perpetuity - and its willingness to use that power - made it the most powerful such agency in the United States. Its chairmen were often willing to stand up to the mayor when they felt a principle was at stake.

The gradual shift away from those convictions had its seeds in the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970's, which spurred the rise of public-private partnerships with developers. Developers gained increasing power over how the city was shaped. Playing on the public's fear, many politicians argued that the only alternative was a descent into blight and crime.

That attitude reached its apogee during the Giuliani administration, which often appointed commission members more for their political ties than for their records as advocates for architecture. Jennifer Raab, the commission's chairwoman from 1994 to 2001, was a real estate lawyer who had worked as a campaign aide on [Rudolph W. Giuliani's](#) staff. Mr. Tierney, an appointment by Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), is a former lobbyist with deeper political ties than preservation experience.

The shift toward political expediency has been aggravated by soaring real estate prices in almost every corner of the city. Significant but little-noticed works of architecture that are now standing on valuable land, making them that much more vulnerable to demolition. Among the buildings preservationists are worried most about these days are the 1964 New York State Pavilion, designed by Philip Johnson, in Queens, and the Domino Sugar plant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, from the 1890's. Neither building has yet to receive a hearing by the Landmarks Commission.

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If passed, the Perkins bill would shift the balance of power somewhat. Requiring the commission to hold a public hearing on any building that is being considered for the state historical register would at least prevent travesties like the commission's stonewalling on 2 Columbus Circle. And it would add a dose of transparency to the commission's decision-making process.

But in the long run, what is needed is a ruthless analysis of the landmark designation process. The commission's research staff has been cut in half over the last decade because of budget reductions. This makes it difficult for the commission to identify buildings that deserve consideration. And if the bill succeeds, the commission's workload is certain to expand.

Of course, more City Council input would not necessarily help the preservationist cause. The council has its own political agenda. It recently overturned the commission's decision to grant landmark status to the 1969 Jamaica Savings Bank in Queens, and preservationists fear that it intends to do the same to the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse, a 1915 building in Williamsburg, designed by Cass Gilbert, in a council vote scheduled for Nov. 22. The vast structure, admired for its Egyptian Revival motifs, stands on the site of a proposed residential waterfront development; the local city councilman, David Yassky, has already declared that the building doesn't merit landmark protection.

The only hope to be derived from this struggle is that the fate of 2 Columbus Circle will harden the resolve of a younger generation of preservation advocates who are less willing to accept the status quo. The drive to save 2 Columbus Circle, after all, was led by Landmark West, founded in 1985 and led by Kate Wood, rather than more established institutions like the Municipal Art Society, which opposes the Perkins bill.

This new generation of advocates seems eager to discuss what parts of our city's heritage deserve protection, and they have clearly not hesitated to lead the charge against an inexorable political process, filing one legal appeal after another to save Edward Durell Stone's building. Vanquished on that front as the scaffolding went up this month at Columbus Circle, Landmark West set up a streaming Webcast of the building titled "Shame Cam" (landmarkwest.org/webcam/javlw.html).

Not everyone, it seems, is satisfied with business as usual.

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