

Op-ed: The erosion of New York's architectural heritage

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The public atrium at 60 Wall St.

The post-modern atrium at 60 Wall Street, an extravagant architectural gem by Kevin Roche albeit one called "[tacky](#)" and "[weird](#)" but also "oddly compelling," has been denied historic designation. This decision, both perplexing and deeply disconcerting, sheds light on a fundamental misinterpretation of the delicate interplay between urban development and historic preservation.

In a letter to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, prominent architect Robert A.M. Stern and architectural critic Paul Goldberger [have articulated a sentiment](#) that resonates with many who understand the intrinsic value of architectural history. Their powerful prose, laced with warranted criticism, mourns the myopic stance taken by the commission.

According to LPC, financial prosperity apparently trumps historic preservation. A specious view at best, and one certainly not rooted in economic reality. In the past two decades, historic districts and historic buildings have shown remarkable economic resilience. While retail vacancy rate is high in non-historic districts, SoHo, the Meatpacking and Ladies' Mile Districts, all designated historic districts, show retail strength. Three of the largest tech companies, [Google](#), [Meta](#) and [Apple](#), all have their New York headquarters in historic buildings. The credit card giant Mastercard occupies a sumptuous prewar building in the Flatiron District. Historic buildings show up on Excel spreadsheets in black ink.

There need not be a trade-off between profit and preservation. Historic

designation does not function as a straitjacket, stifling any prospect of change; instead, it stands as a custodian against reckless obliteration.

The commission's rationale is fundamentally flawed. To assert that post-modern architecture necessitates further study and is not universally understood is to overlook the essence of architectural discourse – the perennial clash of diverse perspectives. Limiting the subject of study by permitting the erasure of such structures is an affront to intellectual rigor. To take a more prosaic analogy, the hot dog is universally understood, but it is not a rationale to ban sashimi from restaurants' menus.

The wasteful approach taken by the real estate industry and the laissez-faire attitude on full display by city agencies denote contempt not only for the buildings' cultural value but also for our natural resources. Letting that full old marble-carved Penn Station, the granite, marble and brick Bancroft building, and soon the 60 Wall Street Carrera marble and granite atrium decay in a dumpster is incurably reckless.

In essence, the decision to eschew the designation of 60 Wall Street's public lobby as a historic landmark mirrors a broader predicament – an alarming proclivity to prioritize expeditious development over enduring legacy. Who is so eager to obliterate New York's character? LPC's decision betrays our collective responsibility to conserve the diverse mosaic of architectural styles that enhance our cityscape.

It also shows a total misunderstanding of the extrinsic value of our historic fabric. The good, old, tangible capitalistic basis supporting historic preservation has been enduringly demonstrated: [Historic buildings make money](#). They provide retail, housing, office space, transit access (Moynihan Train Hall). When they stop serving their original purpose (Chelsea Market), they are adaptively reused. But over the years, their robust bottom line has been continuously ignored and denied. It begs the question: How can a source of economic growth be continuously blamed for many of our city's ills? Maybe it lies in the fact that historic buildings do not benefit lenders or

the real estate industry as much as new construction does. New Yorkers need to understand that speculation does not amount to sound urban policy.

To sanction the elimination of these legacies under the banner of growth is not just nearsighted; it is an act of self- destruction.

New York's architectural resources are not expendable commodities; they are the custodians of our shared history and the bearers of our cultural identity. The loss at 60 Wall Street is a collective loss, one that New York, with its indomitable spirit, should never have to endure.

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