

Thank you, thank you. I appreciate this honor not just because it acknowledges my work, but from where the honor comes: the Landmarks Conservancy. Founded 50 years ago, the Conservancy has enriched the quality of life for everyone living in New York, through its advocacy for landmark preservation, sensible real estate development, its voice, its loans, grants and expertise, and it is just about the last one standing of what used to be several diligent organizations who could be counted on to be strong advocates for the interests of the people of New York.

There are not enough loud voices pushing back on all kinds of terrible development. You all should not only be angry, you should find ways to really show it. Today, developers control the argument and the city — and sadly, some of you are putting them on your Boards, guaranteeing all but a muted civic community.

But the Conservancy has been dependable and steadfast in the most critical issues of today.

It has been loud and forceful in defending the remaining truly urban neighborhood around Penn Station while the governor was ready — and still is — to turn it over to another, but bigger, Hudson Yards-type of development.

The Conservancy was early and steadfast — along with City Council member Gale Brewer — in fighting the demolition of the extraordinary 1889 West Park Presbyterian Church. The leadership of the same Landmarks Commission that once called it “the best example of a Romanesque Revival religious structure in New York” was ready to de-designate it and pave the way for the Presbytery to tear it down for a new 30 story luxury apartment tower. But vigorous community opposition helped enough Commissioners to indicate an unwillingness to go along with that agenda and the proposal for removing the designation was withdrawn. Thank you, Commissioners. The church is now undergoing restoration.

The Commission continues to be a formidable adversary. The four-story 1832 Old Merchant House on East 4th Street, one of the city’s most important and fragile landmarks, was so important that it was designated a landmark on the very first day after passage of the 1965 Landmarks Law, and after crowds of school children marched on City Hall in its behalf. Both the exterior and interior are designated, highly unusual. The elaborate, delicate plasterwork throughout the house is beyond extraordinary, and in

2014, 10 years ago, an ornamental plaster specialist issued a report stating that any adjacent new construction would, without question, at a minimum cause the historic interior plaster to collapse. That original plaster cannot be replicated.

But recently, The Landmarks Commission approved construction for a 10-story new building adjacent to the Old Merchant House. No surprise. The Commission has **often** approved new construction requiring serious excavation work, adjacent to landmarks that experts testify will jeopardize the landmark. Inevitably the damage occurs, but then it is the owner's problem to deal with it. Moreover, scores of landmarks across the city are falling apart or torn down due to lack of enforcement, a power the commission has, but is reluctant or unwilling to exercise.

The Commission missed a deadline to designate and protect an extraordinary Victorian house on Willoughby Street in Brooklyn that was a valued landmark to its adjacent Black neighborhood. A miscommunication with the Buildings Department was blamed, but the commission has been using that excuse since I started writing about preservation 50 years ago. The leadership of the Landmarks Preservation Commission seems to forget that Preservation is its middle name.

But it's not just the Landmarks Commission that has gone off the rails. So has the Planning Commission, approving one up-zoning after another, bringing new towers to low and modest-scale neighborhoods and losing the existing affordable units that get torn down in the process. The excuse is always the need for new affordable housing and a promise that the neighborhood will not be upscaled and become more expensive. Two private studies, however, have proved that inevitably the opposite is what really happens. And according to the Community Service Society the city lost 526,800 affordable units between 2002-2021.

There is a full block of tenements and small apartment buildings currently with more than 60 plus units of occupied affordable housing destined to be torn down to make way for yet another tower. I assure you it will not have 60 affordable units.

Developers for years have been wanting to build in the Garment District. And for years, the Planning Commission has given them an inch here and a foot there, always claiming the garment industry was dying or gone anyway, which it definitely is not. Now, with a new up-zoning

proposal, developers will be given a huge new green light with the Midtown South Plan, larger than what remains of the garment district — 42 blocks between W. 20th and W 40th Streets — 7,000 businesses, 135,000 jobs, 2,300 homes, according to the Commission's figures.

Are we diminishing the city and losing affordable housing in even more ways? Sure. Go after Air B & Bs. Go after private equity. Private equity is buying up the country and wreaking havoc. Recently, it was reported that private equity is buying up apartments around all the highly rated public schools, raising the rents so inevitably only the privileged will be able to apply. Plenty of remedies exist that haven't been tried. The Administration gives the appearance of being hell bent on new so-called affordable housing built by developers, but shows no interest in protecting the existing occupied or unoccupied truly affordable units. Hypocrisy is embedded in the City of Yes.

So, we're automatically called NIMBYS if we don't agree, but we are ready to be YIMBYS, if the proposals were just reasonable. It is often just wrong, plain wrong, to stick a high-rise pencil tower in the middle of a modest rise neighborhood, landmarked or not.

I learned years ago from a master citizen advocate, Jane Jacobs, that if you say "yes—but," your "but" gets lost, you are counted as a "yes" and you lose all negotiating strength. First you say "no," and when the proposal is off the table, you agree to negotiate a new appropriate plan. Jane won more battles than any "yes—but" neighborhood or organization ever did, so her wisdom should remain a beacon for all of us. In fact, there are two bills right now at the state legislature that would lift the height cap on buildings all over the city AND dedesignate historic churches so they can be demolished for housing. Kill those bills and then invite us to the table to help write a proposal we can all say yes to.

It is now 2024. Sometimes it just doesn't seem possible, that for 50 years I have been writing about and championing the voice of Preservation and Community in many cities but especially in the city I care so much about. Through that time, it has been my distinct privilege to have been associated with the Landmarks Conservancy. They have been inspiring, they have been supportive, and they have been steadfast. I am truly humbled to be honored by them this evening. Thank you.

- ROBERTA GRATZ