

# Commerce Cathedral—A Landmark Case?

by OSCAR JOHANNSEN

TEAR down that towering structure known throughout the world as the Woolworth Building? Not if it is given official status. The fact that it *looks* like a cathedral of commerce has led to attempts to designate it a landmark, much to the distress of its owners. If that occurs alterations will be forbidden unless permission is granted by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The owners apparently have been seriously contemplating leveling it some time in the future for they have assembled two adjacent parcels which, together with the Woolworth site, would be used for construction of a modern building.

In recent years various cities, including New York, have passed landmark laws to prevent the destruction of buildings of historical note or architectural elegance. Certainly it seems a fine idea to preserve buildings which give a sense of history and recall a more gracious past. But the Woolworth owners have attacked this relatively new law, claiming that a landmark owner is discriminated against, denied equal protection of the law, and effectively deprived of rights of possession without compensation. It would appear that they have a good case.

Once a building becomes a landmark its marketability probably diminishes. Few wish to own a structure which cannot be altered without the consent of bureaucrats who have no conception of the owners' problems or the state of the market. The Landmark Law is an invasion of the rights of

owners, no matter how noble the initial motive may have been.

Should such a designation be made without the consent of the owners? There is no substitute for the democracy of the marketplace in making a decision about which buildings to preserve. If enough people are interested a company or non-profit organization might put up the necessary funds to acquire the property.

It is true, of course, that cities like New York are being cluttered with those banal glass boxes whose architecture, if that is the word, betokens an almost complete lack of imagination. But this is more likely due to the tax laws than to the indifference of owners and builders. A few years ago a modern structure was built in New York by men who had an eye for beauty. The penalty for such presumption was that the property taxes are higher because it was valued higher than similar buildings of the same square footage. Investors are willing to spend more money as a one-shot proposition to build an attractive building—but if it means their taxes will continue to be higher they will think twice. Ergo, modern characterless structures will remain an affront even to the aesthetically dull, though they may be functionally superior to older ones.

The Woolworth Building may become a "landmark case" if its owners succeed in overturning this new law. The sooner it happens the better, for implicit in the law are all kinds of abuses if buildings of doubtful historical value are added to the list to satisfy the demands of pressure groups.

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Science gives us knowledge, but only philosophy can give us wisdom.

—Will Durant