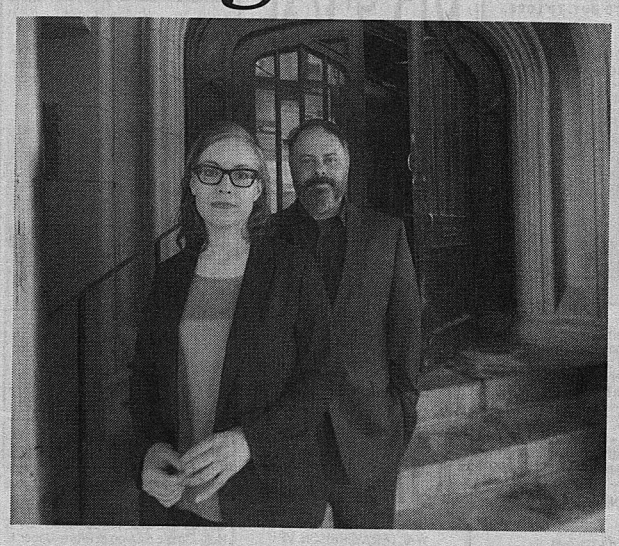
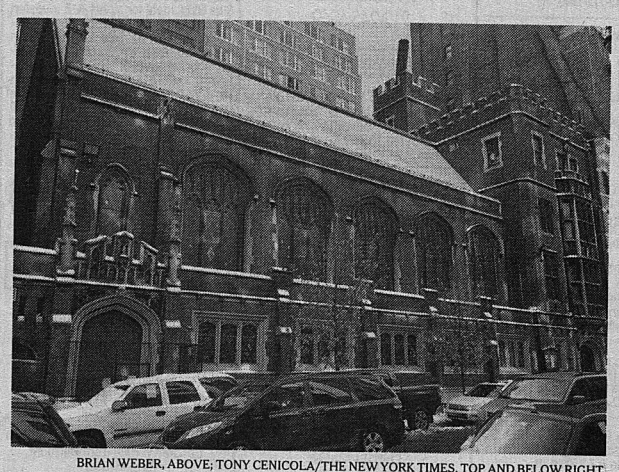
Real Estate

Going, Going — Wait!

Preservationists often decry the loss of Midtown Manhattan's historic architecture. Sometimes, a developer heeds their protests.

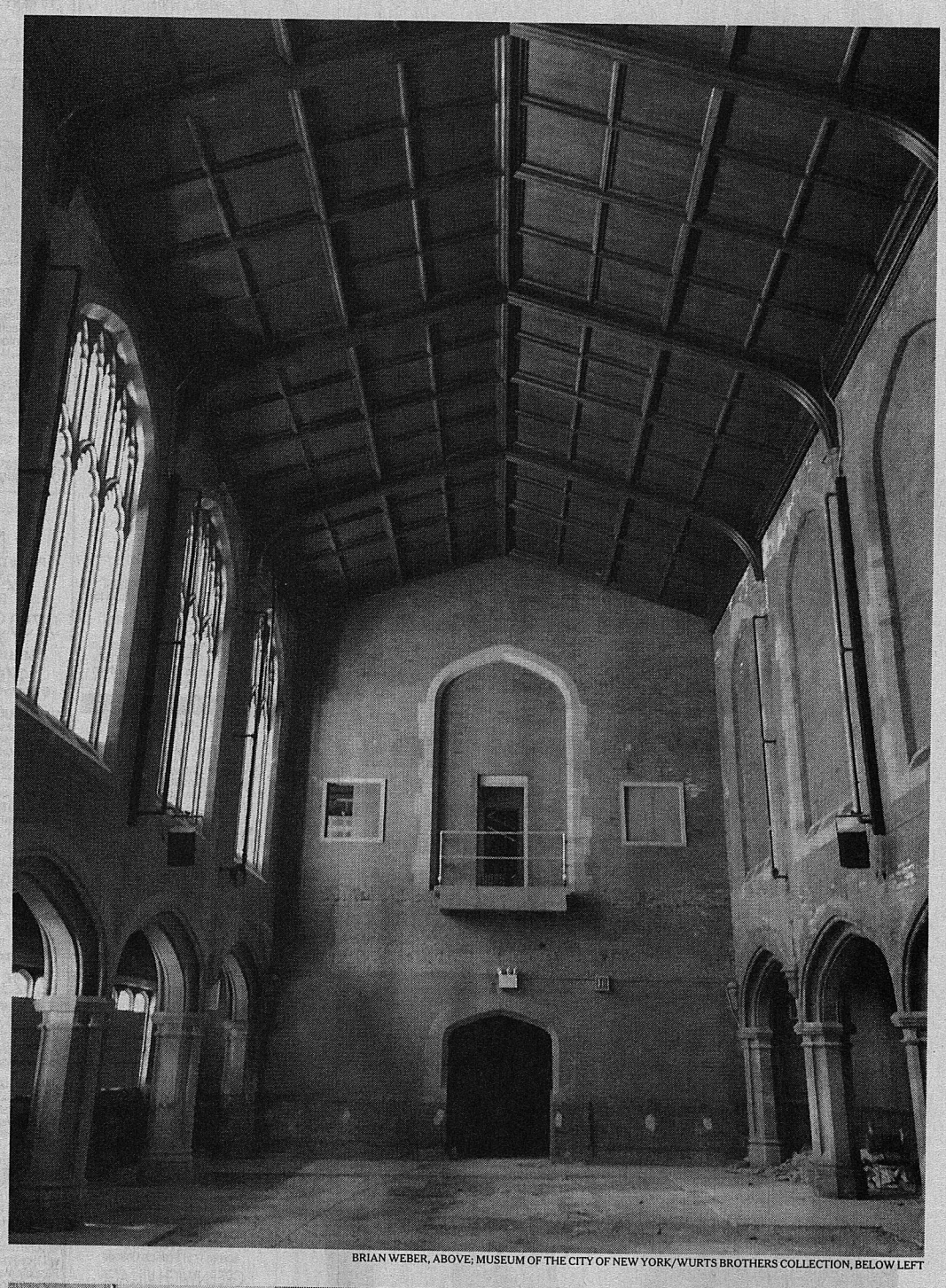
By RONDA KAYSEN



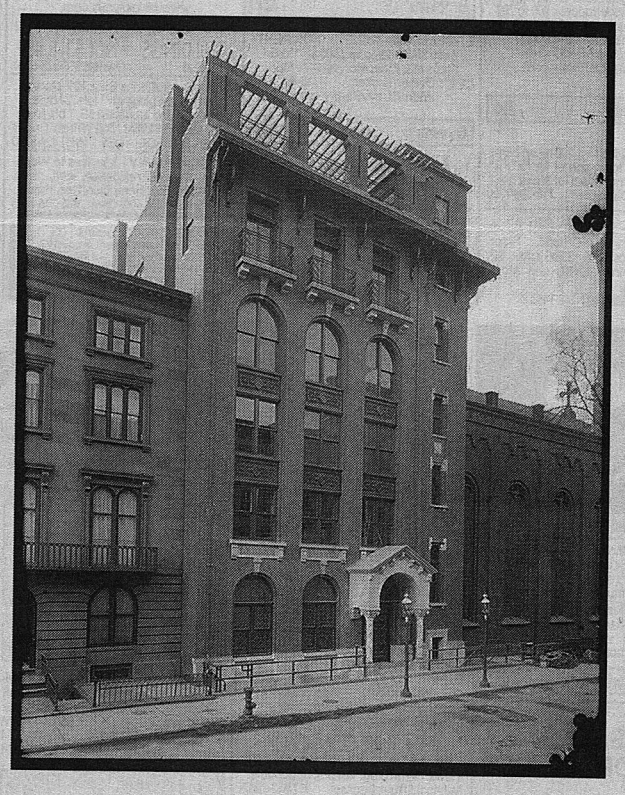


BRIAN WEBER, ABOVE; TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES, TOP AND BELOW RIGHT

Top, Lucy Lieberman and Brian Weber were among those who were dismayed that a hotel was to replace a 1905 church, above and right, on West 36th Street. Demolition had already begun when last week the hotel's developer, Sam Chang, presented plans to preserve the facade and some of its architectural details. Below left and right, a 1907 parish house on East 31st Street, under construction and now, on its way out.



BRIAN WEBER, ABOVE; MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/WURTS BROTHERS COLLECTION, BELOW LEFT



The Rizzoli bookstore on West 57th Street. An automobile showroom designed by Frank Lloyd Wright on Park Avenue. And the Bancroft Building, a 19th-century red-and-white-striped limestone office building on West 29th Street. All three of these structures were gutted or leveled within the past two years, despite attempts to preserve them.

None of these sites were designated New York landmarks, but for many people, they were nevertheless among the treasures that define the city's neighborhoods — the mix of terra cotta and stone amid the glass and steel that makes the city unique.

Nowhere is this loss of historic architecture felt more acutely than in Midtown Manhattan, where billions of dollars are driving development in an area with virtually no vacant land left. From Hudson Yards to the rising Billionaires' Row along 57th Street to the hotels going up north of Madison Square Park, construction is seemingly everywhere in Midtown.

But once in a while, development halts in its tracks for an old building. Last week, the developer Sam Chang heeded requests to preserve the facade of Christ Church, a 1905 relic in the garment district, unveiling a rendering that incorporated part of the historic structure in the design of a 28-story hotel. "Everybody was pleased, there was not one negative word about what we proposed," said Patrick Jones, special counsel to Mr. Chang's McSam Hotel Group.

This was an unusual twist to an old, old story. As it is, many preservationists worry that Midtown could soon reach a tipping point in which the architectural mix of old and new is lost to a wash of sparkly glass. Of about 36 recently demolished sites that the Historic Districts Council deemed worthy of preservation, 12 were in Midtown.

"What we're seeing now is an enormous amount of real estate pressure and it's only been mounting as we continue to recover from the economic body blow" of the last recession, said Simeon Bankoff, the council's executive director. "There is such a hunger for space and so much money to be made."

Efforts to expand the Madison Square North Historic District failed late last week. The Landmarks Preservation Commission rejected the application, which would have protected many buildings in Midtown.

For many New Yorkers, preservation has taken a back seat to matters like the proliferation of supersize luxury towers casting shadows over Central Park and housing prices that are out of reach for many residents. And the city has been encouraging commercial development in Midtown, with the redevelopment of Hudson Yards and the rezoning of a swath of Midtown East allowing for substantially taller towers.

Opposite Grand Central Terminal, the developer SL Green plans to replace several early 20th-century buildings with One Vanderbilt, a 63-story office tower. (Warren & Wetmore, among Grand Central's architects, designed one of the condemned buildings, 51 East 42nd Street.)

"At the moment there does seem to be kind of a mindless exuberance for anything tall and shiny," said Anthony C. Wood, the author of "Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks" (Routledge, 2007). "There does seem to be a 'boys with their toys' mentality in Midtown."

Midtown does not generally top most lists of picturesque historic destinations, save for tourist attractions like Grand Central, the Chrysler Building and St. Patrick's Cathedral. But look around and there is plenty to see in a neighborhood rich with decorative molding, ornate latticework and handsome masonry facades.

One such building was the 10-story Bancroft Building at 3-7 West 29th Street, which met its end in February after a failed effort to save it. Completed in 1897, the building once housed Alfred Stieglitz's camera club. But in 2013, the Landmarks Preservation Commission rejected an application to preserve the building. HFZ Capital Group, the developer, is also demolishing several neighboring properties for a new project.

"We actually thought about taking a picture a week as kind of a deathwatch, but it was too depressing, none of us wanted to watch it," said Leslie Hendrix, the executive vice president of the 29th Street Neighborhood Association. "It was a universal, 'Oh, my God, if this goes then everything goes.'"

Even New York YIMBY, a website that champions new development, seemed rattled by the news, describing the Bancroft Building as "a definite gem" and calling for its facade to be integrated into the new development.

HFZ Capital declined to comment for this article.

With more buildings facing the wrecking ball, including a 1907 parish house on East 31st Street, preservationists attempted a substantial expansion of the Madison Square North Historic District, which currently lies between 25th and 29th Streets and the Avenue of the Americas and Madison Avenue.

Under the proposal, the district would have extended north to 34th Street between Avenue of the Americas and Park Avenue, more than doubling its size. But the Landmarks Preservation Commission turned it down, saying that "the larger study area does not warrant designation due to the large number of buildings that make little contribution to a sense of place."

Mario G. Messina, the president of the 29th Street Neighborhood Association, was dismayed by the decision, which he said ignored the many beautiful buildings in the area deserving of preservation. "The more they deny this, the more that we won't have anything to preserve because the developers are butchering everything."

The NoMad proposal had been met with criticism from the real estate community, which balked at protecting the congested blocks surrounding Penn Station. A report commissioned by the Madison Square North Property Owners Coalition dismissed the area as a "'Seinfeld Region' — a region that is largely about nothing."

"It can't be Lake Wobegon where every building is above average," said Kenneth K. Fisher, a land-use lawyer with the firm Cozen O'Connor and a former member of the City Council, referring to the fictitious town on the radio show "A Prairie Home Companion." If preservationists "want the public to continue to support the idea of designation at all, they not only need to be able to say what a landmark is, but what a landmark isn't."

Restricting development, particularly in the middle of Midtown, could stymie growth in a place of intense economic activity, according to developers and their advocates. "We should be careful about what we keep forever, because forever is a long time," said Michael Slattery, a senior vice president of the Real Estate Board of New York. "We need to build new and we need to build to the needs of our city."

New York is a city that is constantly reimagining itself. The Empire State Building, for example, replaced the original Waldorf Astoria Hotel, which was considered a magnificent structure.

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"New York is not finished. It's not over. The whole thing is not a landmark district," said James von Klemperer, the president of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, which is designing One Vanderbilt, the tower next to Grand Central Terminal.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission, which has a meager $5 million budget, oversees 114 historic districts and 33,000 landmark properties, 1,412 of which are between 14th and 59th Streets. While many developers view the list of protected properties as bloated, preservationists worry about undesignated sites languishing on the commission's calendar for months or years. If a property owner receives a demolition permit from the city's Department of Buildings before a property is designated, city rules prevent the commission from stepping in to preserve it.

Nevertheless, the Landmarks Law, which is 50 years old this year, is among the strongest in the country. "The current system works remarkably well," said Meenakshi Srinivasan, the chairwoman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, in an email. She noted that her office has made recent changes to expedite the designation process.

For some New Yorkers, tucked-away gems are part of the city's allure. When Brian Weber and Lucy Lieberman began apartment-hunting in the garment district last year, they were taken by 110-year-old Christ Church at 334-344 West 36th Street. Squeezed between tenements, the brick church with leaded-glass windows and ornate stone arches seemed to them to bestow charm on the industrial block.

"It's so cool that stuff like this exists in this neighborhood," said Ms. Lieberman, who works in advertising. "It feels like old gritty New York. It's not the slick, polished tourist scene that a lot of Manhattan has become."

Soon after the couple moved into an apartment near the church in January, they noticed construction workers demolishing the interior of the church, preparing for the erection of a 28-story, 550-room hotel. At one point, Mr. Weber went into the building and snapped photographs of the interior, which had stone columns and a vaulted wooden ceiling.

"I just couldn't believe that this was happening," said Mr. Weber, who directs commercials, but studied architecture in college.

The building was not a designated landmark. But Mr. Weber and Ms. Lieberman, neither of whom had ever been involved in community advocacy before, set out to save the little church, which had over time been used as a theater and a mental health center. The couple contacted the local community board, which organized an April meeting with Mr. Chang, who agreed to halt demolition of the facade, a move that surprised some who attended the meeting.

"I know a lot of preservationist stories are preservation versus developer, but I don't think that's the case here," Mr. Weber said.

Last Tuesday, at a meeting in the Community Board 4 office, Mr. Chang presented a new rendering of the hotel that would preserve the facade and reincorporate parts of the original six-story parish house in the new design as well.

Mr. Jones, the special counsel to the McSam Hotel Group, credits the community board's overture for the developer's decision to respond to the outcry. "It's a dynamic that we don't see that often," he said, "but it's certainly refreshing."

Preserving Christ Church's facade will cost "north of $1 million," said Mr. Jones, who doubts the historic features will influence the company's clientele, mostly tourists looking for budget accommodations. "Maybe we preserve enough that we get nice reviews at TripAdvisor," he said.

Few developers, however, have much interest in preservation, said Andrew Scott Dolkart, the director of the historic preservation program at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at Columbia. "You need to want to do it," Mr. Dolkart said. "People want to do things in the most efficient way possible and from the developer's perspective, tearing the building down is the most efficient way."

On the corner of Fifth Avenue and 33rd Street stands the handsome five-story Demarest Building. It was designed in 1890 by Renwick, Aspinwall & Russell, whose founder, James Renwick Jr., designed St. Patrick's Cathedral. At the moment, it houses a Wendy's fast-food restaurant on its ground floor.

"That's one of those buildings that whenever I pass by, it makes me smile," Mr. Dolkart said.

The website of the building's owner, Pi Capital Partners, notes the site's development potential, pointing out how much buildable space is available. Pi Capital Partners declined to comment.

Tourists rushing across Fifth Avenue to the Empire State Building could easily miss the diminutive Demarest Building, but it is precisely that study in contrasts that makes the city interesting.

"One of the reasons that we are flooded with tourists is because we are a unique city," said Peg Breen, the president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. "This is still New York. This is still a unique place to visit. It's because we have this incredible mix of architecture and layers of history that keep us as a unique center."