

The Brooklyn Bridge,
completed in 1883

the landmarks of new york

BY STACEY GOERGEN

A SPECTACULAR
BOOK CELEBRATES
MORE THAN
A THOUSAND
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OUR RAPIDLY
CHANGING
METROPOLIS.

The history of New York can be told through its architecture. This is the premise of the book *The Landmarks of New York*, written by Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, a leader in the historic preservation movement in the United States for almost 40 years. She currently serves as the chair of the Historic Landmarks Preservation Center and vice chair of the New York State Council on the Arts, experience that makes her uniquely qualified to write the definitive catalogue raisonnée of New York's protected buildings and neighborhoods. The author describes it as "a book you can spend hours with at one sitting, or just dip into for specific information."

This fifth edition of *The Landmarks of New York* includes descriptions and images of all 1,276 landmarked buildings and 102 districts in New York City. An accompanying exhibition, which includes 90 photographs and descriptions from the book, opened at SUNY Albany in September and will travel to 10 additional venues over the next year and a half. Southampton's Parrish Art Museum will host the exhibit next summer, and it will make its Manhattan debut in December 2012. The arts curator at SUNY, Joe Hildreth, says the exhibition grabs people's attention. "When I was putting the show up, people were stopping by in record numbers to engage with the work—this is before it was even up on the walls."

Both the book and the exhibition are organized chronologically. “The architecture unfolds as New York unfolds,” explains Diamonstein-Spielvogel. “The structures begin by reflecting a society based on agriculture, then they move through merchant, industrial and postindustrial phases to our modern day. It shows the evolution of our contemporary society through the story of these buildings.”

Using the history of architecture to tell the story of the city, Diamonstein-Spielvogel provides a lens into how New Yorkers live. In her preface she notes, “Historic preservation is more than the desire for permanence expressed through architecture; it is an embodiment of the relationship between urbanism and populace.” New Yorkers’ connection to real estate is an endlessly fascinating, even obsessive, narrative on our small island. Here, Diamonstein-Spielvogel stresses the importance of the process involved in the preservation movement. “I believe in those with more taste than funds,” she asserts. “All preservation can



Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel began her 45-year career as an advocate for the arts and historic preservation as the director of New York’s Department of Cultural Affairs. She is credited with bringing public art to Bryant Park and the performing arts to Central Park. She has served on the national level as vice chair of the US Commission of Fine Arts and as a board member of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The cultural crusader has authored 19 books and curated seven international museum exhibitions.

start locally, with your apartment, your neighborhood. It’s a local movement.” By encouraging citizens to be involved with their communities, landmarks preservation is not just beneficial for the end result, but for bringing people into the civic process.

Preservation as a movement gained steam relatively recently in the United States. After a few fits and starts at the federal level to initiate landmark preservation, effectiveness was more readily apparent at the local level. Community organizations began to emerge, and their expansion was explosive. In 1966, 100 communities in the US had established preservation committees; 20 years later this number had risen to 6,000. By Diamonstein-Spielvogel’s estimation, almost 90 percent of the buildings worth preserving that stood in 1920 have been destroyed; those that survived did so largely by luck.

Ironically, in New York City it was the destruction of a magnificent building that led to widespread support for the preservation movement. In 1963, amid great, albeit belated, controversy, demolition began on the original Pennsylvania Station, a masterpiece of neoclassic architecture designed by McKim, Mead, and White. Philip Johnson, the noted architect, observed, “In our history there was never another building like Penn



The Central Park Conservatory Garden



Construction of Grand Central Terminal was a 10-year undertaking.



The US General Post Office on Eighth Avenue, now known as the James A. Farley Post Office, was built from 1885 to 1891.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Station. It compares with the great cathedrals of Europe.” So great was the outcry that Mayor Robert F. Wagner signed legislation in 1965 creating the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, which helped position New York to become a leader in preserving the architectural past.

Diamonstein-Spielvogel views preservation as a dynamic process. Civic participation is essential, and landmarked buildings do not simply become staid historic monuments. The 72nd Street subway kiosk and control house, one of three remaining structures of its kind, was landmarked in 1979. In 2003 it was extensively remodeled to better serve the traveling public. Similarly, many old buildings have been refitted for purposes different from their original ones, a practice termed “adaptive reuse.” The Astor Library on Lafayette Street, a structure that draws on early Renaissance forms, was the first free public reference library in America. In the mid-1960s it was under threat of being torn down, until Joseph Papp’s

Landmarks on Tour

Landmarks comes to life as the exhibit travels the state through June 2013. Pay it a visit at one of these stops on the tour.

First Destination:

Buffalo History Museum
October 14–31
25 Nottingham Court,
Buffalo, 716-873-9644;
bechs.org

This Summer:

Parrish Art Museum
June 25–September 5, 2012
25 Jobs Lane,
Southampton, 631-283-
2118; parrishart.org

And Finally:

New-York Historical Society
December 1, 2012–
February 17, 2013
170 Central Park West,
212-873-3400;
nyhistory.org

initiative to found a public theater saved the structure. The original building is now a hub of downtown cultural activity.

While many registered landmarks are recognizable—Grand Central Terminal, Brooklyn Bridge, the Chrysler Building—others hold great significance yet are practically unknown. The oldest surviving house in Queens, the Bowne House, is a rare example of early Anglo-Dutch design and was an important center for diverse worship and religious tolerance. It is named for John Bowne, a Quaker who was forbidden to

practice his faith by Governor Peter Stuyvesant. He was tried and eventually acquitted, and the ruling became the basis for the principle of religious freedom later enshrined in the Bill of Rights.

Commitment to public service and the arts is an obligation Diamonstein-Spielvogel takes very seriously. Her curriculum vitae reads like a most-valuable-player list of cultural preservation. Among her many previous roles: She was the first director of the Office of Cultural Affairs in New York City, the longest-serving Landmarks Commissioner and, more recently, a founding director of the High Line. She ranks preservation of our country's history as one of its most important movements, second only to the human rights movements of the 20th century (specifically civil rights, women's and gay rights). Effectively working pro-bono, she is motivated by the impact she has made. "You get to listen to the public, you get to serve," she says. "Each of us is a temporary custodian of all we occupy. Our obligation is to transfer it in at least as good, and I hope better, condition than we receive it."

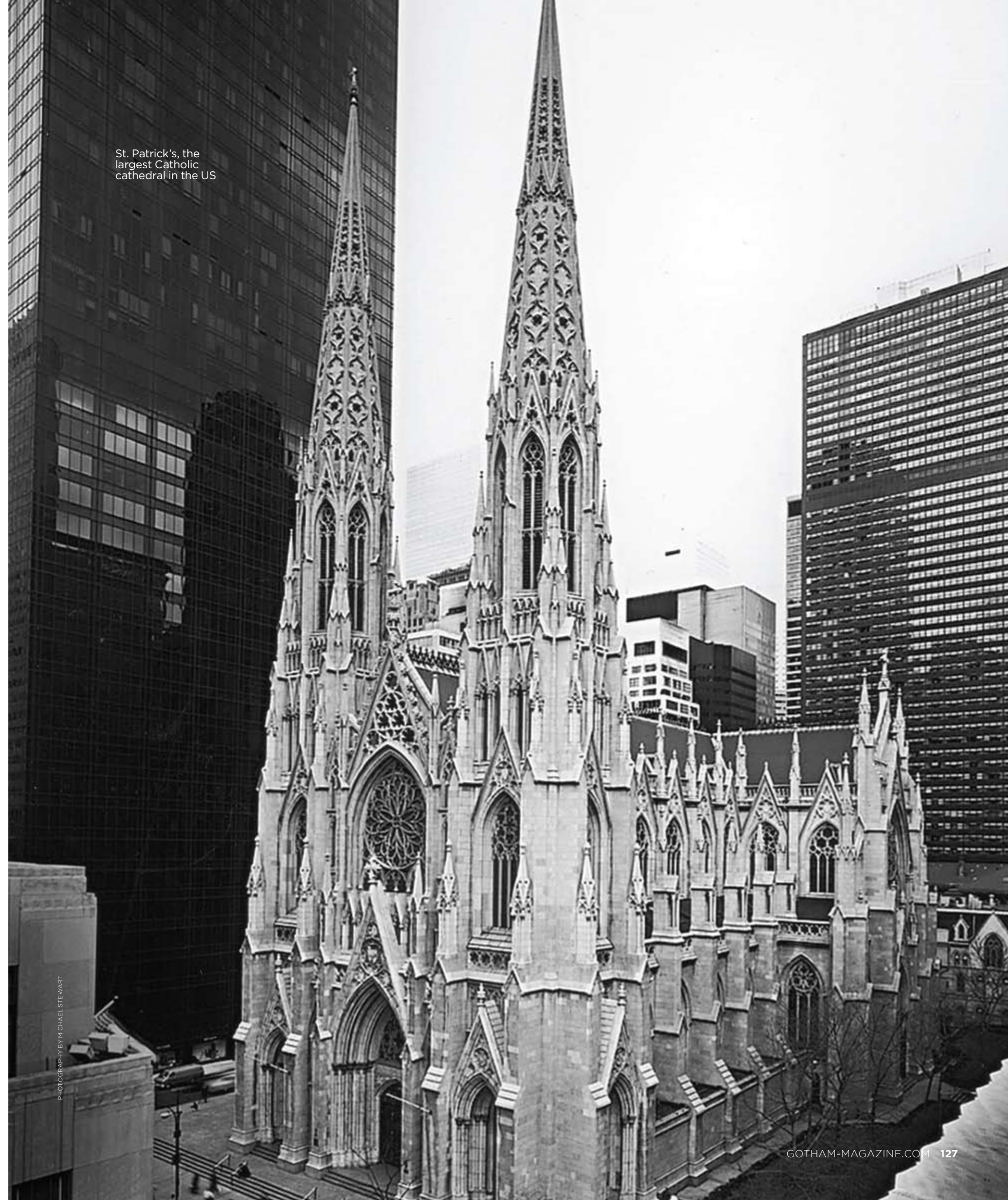
In her book, Diamonstein-Spielvogel reproduces a quote from *The New York Times* regarding the destruction of Penn Station: "That New York would permit this monumental act of vandalism... Any city gets what it admires, will pay for, and ultimately deserves." In the almost 50 years since the demolition of Penn Station spurred New Yorkers to action, the dedicated and tireless work of such pioneers as Diamonstein-Spielvogel has proven that New York City cares deeply about its past and its connection to the present and future. **G**



Lever House ushered in a new era of architecture on Park Avenue.



Rockefeller Center brilliantly merges art and architecture.



St. Patrick's, the largest Catholic cathedral in the US

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STEWART (ROCKEFELLER CENTER); LAURA NAPIER (LEVER HOUSE)

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