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WELFARE FOR BUILDINGS!

Freedom, the absolute right to live one's life free from coercion, is it worth sacrificing for the preservation of a landmark? A loaded question you say? Not to some people. Although one might think that an individual is entitled to value the style of architecture he prefers, whatever the failings of his taste, there are those whose sanctimonious mission it is to save us from ourselves by regulatory coercion if need be! And there are those who would halt the demolition of a structure by virtue of its age or its association with famous events. Even if we won't recognize the historical, architectural or cultural value of a structure, these civic minded paragons of collectivist virtue will preserve them in spite of our indifference and if need be through the sacrifice of our expropriated property rights. So that unborn generations of the future, whose architectural, cultural and historical preferences are unknown and unpredictable, may have the dubious pleasure of gazing upon the enshrined, functionless mediocrities of the past, these self-styled assessors of truth and beauty would have us sacrifice the very values that give meaning to our way of life.

Exaggeration you say? Seattle's Landmark Ordinance has a set of designation criteria so vague that it could cover, without forcing the issue, nearly every structure in the city. The strictures of the ordinance apply to private as well as public property. But these guardians of the public good who would treat property owners as just so many beggars unworthy of their purple-robed, patrician clemency, not merely content in identifying the collective taste and values of this city, are attempting to dictate these to the inhabitants and their posterity. As is always the case, those who institute themselves as 'the voice of the people' become, in effect, 'the people'.

If one listens to the tedious deliberations of the Landmarks Preservation Board, ensconced in the Mayor's conference room on the twelfth floor of the Municipal Building, one hears contradiction piled upon contradiction. In one case, the Board will decide that although virtually nobody in the city values a particular structure, that this is precisely why this structure must be preserved. The logic being that the Board has insights which inhabitants of the city do not. Or further, that prevailing values are so corrupt, that what most people do not value, must be, by inference, valuable. However, in the very next case, the Board may recognize widespread sentiment to preserve a structure, that is to say if this view concurs with the Board. One could suspect that the Board is not so much interested in preserving landmarks of undeniably objective historical, architectural or cultural value to the city's inhabitants but is more interested in jealously preserving the capricious prerogatives of its own power.

Among the many great monsters produced by the increasingly paternal socialist drift of this nation's politics, the Landmarks Preservation Board is indeed a little but ever-menacing monster. Its mission was based on the implied assumption that the state must interpret esthetic values for the vast mass of individuals who by inference cannot. However, even this unsound premise has devolved further into a game of bureaucratic infighting e.g. the City v.s. the University with the taxpayer and the property owner always losing.

The taxpayer losing because the designated public buildings due to their depreciated state and failure to meet evermore stringent fire and safety codes cannot efficiently perform required functions without costly renovation. The building becomes an extremely costly albatross around the taxpayer's neck. Costly because it no longer provides effective service, costly because it often occupys a prime location and costly because it ultimatly compels the dislocation of a higher intensity use structure to a peripheral location (inducing urban sprawl). In effect, we first had state welfare and featherbedding for people, now we have it for buildings.