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## The Day the Richest City on Earth Tore Down its Opera House: A Case Study in Leadership, Values, and Indifference

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# The Day the Richest City on Earth Tore Down its Opera House

## *A Case Study in Leadership, Values, and Indifference*

— Emilio Iodice, Rome, Italy



*Metropolitan Opera House of New York, c 1960's Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey/Jack Boucher*

*The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything.*

— Albert Einstein

*Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph.*

— Haile Selassie

*The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity.*

— George Bernard Shaw

It was January 1966. New York was freezing and filled with snow. Vehicles inched their way along the streets. Countless cars were covered in white.

My brother Ralph owned a trucking business. He delivered textiles throughout the city. I helped him to earn money to pay for my university education.

We drove up to the rear of an old building at 39<sup>th</sup> street and Broadway. Ralph pulled out a large roll of cloth. "Bring this to the receiving clerk," he said. The roll was of precious red velvet. It was fifteen feet long and weighed one hundred fifty pounds.

I threw it on my back. It was heavy and painful. I entered through the loading dock.

The building was filled with people racing back and forth. It looked like a giant ant colony.

Some carried boxes, others banged nails into walls and wooden boards. Ropes and wires hung from the ceiling. High above was a platform which looked like something from a circus. Spotlights ran along a structure high into the roof.

Costumes hung on racks along corridors and props of horses, trees, the sun, the moon, wooden staircases, windows, and balconies were scattered everywhere.

"Take that upstairs," commanded a worker in jeans with a hammer in his hand.

I weaved my way awkwardly up a thin metal staircase. I did not know where to go. I turned toward an open space on one of the floors.

It was a stage.

Exhausted, I dropped the roll. My mouth opened in awe. I was in a magnificent theater. It was gorgeous with crystal chandeliers, marvelous frescos lining the sides, gold decorated boxes, statues, and endless rows of red velvet seats.

I could not believe my eyes.

A guard came up to me. "Bring that fabric to the office in the back," he insisted. "Where am I," I asked? He looked at me as if I were a Martian.

"This is the Metropolitan Opera House," he said.

I was astonished.

**Metropolitan Opera House of New York,  
(1937)**



I was standing on the stage where Enrico Caruso and Maria Callas sang. It was where Arturo Toscanini and Leonard Bernstein conducted.

I was in the most famous opera house on earth. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. It was filled with thousands of lights like stars ringing the galleries and surrounding the ceiling and walls.



*Courtesy, Bloomberg and "Family Circle standee area," May 1966. LOC, HABS/ Jack Boucher*

I felt I was in a grand cathedral created by God and man for a special purpose and a divine mission.

***Twelve months later it was torn down!***

I wept when I heard the news.

I was shocked. How could this happen in New York City. The Big Apple was known for power, wealth, culture, art, and music.

I watched in horror as the walls, windows, roof, doors, stage, and the elegant boxes of “The Diamond Horseshoe” were crushed and pulverized by cranes with giant metal balls and bulldozers.

Centuries of history and sacred tradition disappeared in dust and powder.

“The Metropolitan Opera was one of the most renowned opera houses in the world, having featured some of the greatest classical singers and musicians since its founding in 1880. The Met was home to some of the most iconic productions in the history of opera.”<sup>1</sup>

“At its beginning, the opera house featured almost exclusively European artists and composers — dominated Wagnerian and other German operas — but as it grew, it showcased many distinguished Americans. The list of artists and conductors includes the famous Enrico

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.broadwayinbound.com/blog/the-met-opera-for-student-groups>

Caruso, Madame Schumann-Heink, Kirsten Flagstad, Lauritz Melchior, Walter Damrosch, Arturo Toscanini, Leopold Stokowski, Sir Thomas Beecham, Bruno Walter, Dimitri Mitropoulos, and Giulio Gatti-Casazza. During Gatti-Casazza's period, the Metropolitan Opera House hosted the world premieres of Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West* and Humperdinck's *Goose Girl*.<sup>2</sup>

New York City's Metropolitan Opera House opened on October 22, 1883. "It was the largest opera house in the world on opening night and the Horseshoe was populated by a consolidated wealth of more than \$500 million. Christine Nilsson sang the role of Marguerite in *Faust* as Vianesi conducted."<sup>3</sup>

Critics acclaimed the new home for New York opera as the pinnacle of beauty and wonder.

"*The New York Times* was concerned that the auditorium was 'on a scale of *possibly* too great magnitude.' The newspaper promised that it would 'dazzle the eyes' of operagoers used to 'the primitive surroundings' of the Academy of Music. The scope of the theater would be monumental with 5,780 seats, a stage 92 feet deep and 150 feet wide and the proscenium 'the largest in America,' according to Henry Abbey. The auditorium was five feet longer and three feet wider than La Scala in Milan."<sup>4</sup>

**Courtesy, Bloomberg**

**A general view of the auditorium looking towards stage, May 1966. LOC, HABS/Jack Boucher**



In my mind I still heard the voices of the tenors and sopranos and imagined the scenery, colors, music, and lights.

All gone in the name of *progress*.

People of good faith tried to preserve the opera house. Artists, intellectuals, and thousands from across the country appealed to save the building.

It had no effect.

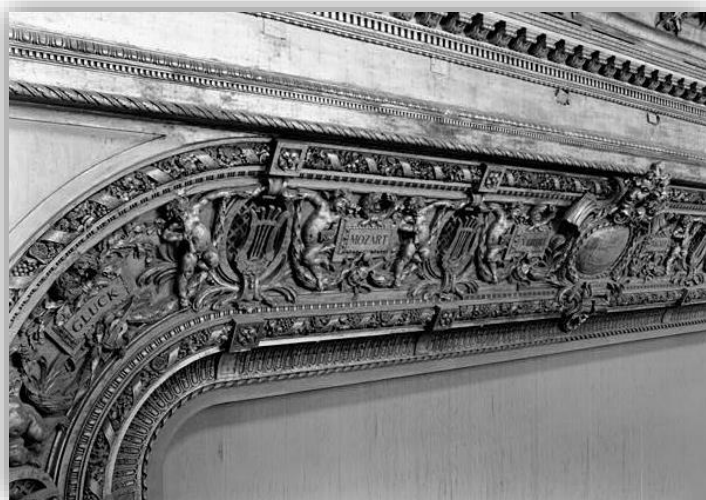
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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/metropolitan-opera-house.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2012/05/lost-1883-metropolitan-opera-house.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2012/05/lost-1883-metropolitan-opera-house.html>

By the time New York Mayor John Lindsay and Governor Nelson Rockefeller got involved it was too late.



Details of Stage, 1966.  
Courtesy, Untapped New York and [The Library of Congress](#)

Some argued before the law about the opera house's magic and fought bravely to save it against the onslaught of ambition and avarice. The courts were indifferent, cold, and silent, unwilling to hear reasons why a symbol of humanity should not be destroyed.

Justice failed to save one of the most wonderful theatres on earth.

The Metropolitan Opera Association, which owned the structure, was determined to demolish the building, and rent out the space for a forty-story office tower, entitled The World Apparel Center.

The Association's plan was to construct a new, modern opera house elsewhere in Manhattan. Even so, it was inconceivable that a city as large, as prosperous and eclectic as New York could not keep alive the original Metropolitan Opera House.

On the thirtieth anniversary of its demolition, the *New York Times* explained what happened.<sup>5</sup>

*The 1883 building was among the first structures to be considered by the (New York City) commission for landmark status. But it was later torn down with the commission's consent, after a battle that left bitter memories.*

*The case of the sprawling, Romanesque-style building is an interesting one, because the main force against its preservation was no rapacious developer but the Metropolitan Opera itself...*

*At its first hearing, in September 1965, the new Landmarks Preservation Commission considered the old Met along with other disputed properties, like the old Astor Library on Lafayette Street and the Friends Meeting House on Gramercy Park.*

*According to Gregory Gilmartin's new book, 'Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society' (Clarkson Potter, 1995), the Metropolitan Opera Association 'played with a stacked deck,' requiring demolition in their lease with Keystone (the developer of the site)*

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<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, April 23, 1995, Section 9, p. 7



*and claiming that any delay or alternative solution to save the old building, by delaying the lease payments, would doom the opera company itself.*

*Mr. Gilmartin wrote that the Landmarks commissioners voted 6 to 5 not to designate, a very close vote considering the questionable quality of the architecture and the opposition from the opera company. "It was a lovely form of blackmail -- 'Please me or I'll kill myself' - - and it was very difficult for the commission to call that bluff," he said.*

*All this occurred long before the well-organized preservation campaigns of later years, and the real battle only began the following year. On April 6, 1966, as the last night in the old house approached, a group including Leonard Bernstein, Gian Carlo Menotti, Tony Randall, Marian Anderson, and others announced a plan to raise \$8 million to buy the hall from the Metropolitan, and an additional \$12 million to \$14 million to renovate it. But the opera company said the lease payments would equal \$12 million, a figure it later raised to \$15 million.*

*On closing night, April 16, the conductor Leopold Stokowski made an unexpected plea from the podium. 'I beg you to help save this magnificent house,' he said. But the Metropolitan Opera Association, planning on moving to its new \$45.7 million house at Lincoln Center in the fall, adamantly resisted preservation, in part because it feared competition from another opera company.*

No champion, with power, and influence or enough integrity was willing or able to lead a campaign to save it.

A lack of leadership, indifference, greed, and disrespect for tradition destroyed that ancient structure filled with memories, ideals, and history.

A year later the clothing center rose in the new skyscraper on the site where once stood the Metropolitan Opera House of New York.

***How was it possible that in an area of 19 million people, the only way to build a new building was to demolish a world-famous monument to music, beauty, and art?***

The old Met went to its grave along with other New York City houses of music like Astor Opera House, Academy of Music, the Harlem Opera House, and the Grand Opera House.

The people of the wealthiest and most influential city on the planet did not care enough to preserve landmarks that represented the soul and heart of a metropolis of culture.

They lacked the honesty, courage and determination to do the right thing.

A country, a state, a city that disregards its history and traditions, will eventually no longer have them.

***If you don't have integrity, you have nothing. You can't buy it. You can have all the money in the world, but if you are not a moral and ethical person, you really have nothing.***

— Henry Kravis

***In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.***

— Martin Luther King Jr.

— Emilio Iodice, Rome, Italy