

The Irwin S. Chanin
School of Architecture

The Cooper Union
for the Advancement
of Science and Art

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October 1, 2016

Karen J. Freedman
Nina P. Freedman
Susan K. Freedman
Public Art Fund
One East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022

Dear Karen, Nina and Susan,

Please accept this letter on the occasion of the Storefront for Art and Architecture's "Letter to the Developer" series, recognizing key figures that have made a positive contribution to public life in New York City.

I would like to offer some words of praise for Irwin S. Chanin, whose name crowns the School of Architecture at Cooper Union, for which I have the honor to serve as Dean. As I come to appreciate my new position, I have also come to discover a new city, whose form is the result of key protagonists, whose exemplary agency has been critical in transforming and creating a distinguished environment in which to live. It is maybe fortuitous that amongst the myriad characters that have given substance to the city, Chanin created a moment of history that is very much part of what we come to think of as its golden age; however, he also offered key principles around which we can form a future. Though posthumous as a form of acknowledgement, I think the relevance of his work may serve as a model of practice today.

Though a graduate of the Engineering School at Cooper Union, Chanin went onto take the composite role as architect, builder, financier, and philanthropist, all of which contributed to his ethos as a developer—a producer with an eye not only fixed on the metrics that drive the development of the city, but the very mis-en-scene that creates the notion of a public life worthy of civic praise. It is maybe no accident that the many theaters to which he gave birth --along with his brother Henry-- bear the marks of civic institutions that celebrate the transformation of public life in a time when mass culture required not only new forms of representation, but also organizations that were indicative of a society whose ambitions were democratic and rooted in principles of equity.



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In what might seem like a benign gesture today, his simple notion of the reorganization of the entries to these theaters is only one small example of his thinking in action, radical in hindsight: the elimination of separated entrances formed the possibility of all people, diverse in their economies and origins, to come into the gallery as one, and to experience the space of the theater undivided by rank or authority. Even though many aspects of civil rights are by now part of our collective history, there are good reasons to remember their relevance today; in fact, maybe those lessons are particularly timely today.

Beyond the social principles he brought to his practices, it was his skilled understanding of the way in which cities are created –formally, spatially and materially—that helped to give rise to the agency that is produced when powerful minds come to become advocates for well-being, offering not only real-estate, but sensation, pleasure, and an enormous cultural payback that is worthy of the heritage of which they are a part. He came to practice with an ethic that extended to the very craft he offered as an expert: the very proof of his instrumentality. His buildings and spaces are a testament of a New York City that we have all come to know as part of a collective imaginary. In addition to our experiences, we have lived them in books, theater and film; effectively, they are canonical structures worthy of preservation, but also something to imagine as we project forth.

As such, beyond a letter of commendation for your grandfather, let these words serve to advance a project for the developers of today as they confront the new challenges of our time!

With my warmest regards,

Nader Tehrani, Dean
Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of the Cooper Union
Principal, NADAAA