



# The Battle of St. Bart's

*Brent C. Brolin*

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## **The Battle of St. Bart's** Brent C. Brolin

The Battle of St. Bart's started as a conflict between two factions within one of the largest and most socially prestigious Episcopal churches in the United States. Soon it escalated into a full blown war between Church and State with basic constitutional issues at stake. But what Brent C. Brolin shows in this book is what took place behind the public debate is a story worthy of a vintage Louis Auchincloss or James Gould Cozzens novel. St. Bartholomew's Church, community house and garden sit on prime real estate on Park Avenue in midtown Manhattan. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has designated the entire complex as a landmark. In 1978, the Reverend Thomas C. Bowers became rector of the church after brilliant ministries. Young, energetic and extremely charismatic, he proposed tearing down all or part of the complex to erect a skyscraper with a projected annual income of \$5 million, the profits to be used for charitable purposes. Backed by an enthusiastic vestry, the rector at first ignored the dissident minority within his church who opposed the tower. Their leader was J. Sinclair Armstrong, a former head of the SEC and deputy secretary of the navy, with as many connections to service organizations as to the Wall Street community. But what could not be ignored was the opposition of the city's landmarks commission, which exercised its right to veto the skyscraper as visually inappropriate. The church's only recourse was to show financial hardship, a plea the commission also rejected. While the specific case involves only New York City, the issues it raises have national reverberations. To whom does the architectural heritage of a community belong? What if, as claimed, a church cannot survive without additional income? Are churches entitled to take part in real estate speculation? Is the bishop of New York right in advising the parishioners of St. Bartholomew's that they have a God given vocation to fight landmarks laws?

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