

Date: February 8, 2007

Re: New-York Historical Society, 2 West 77th Street. Application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission for changes in the Central Park West facade and the West 77th Street entrance and windows.

Parks & Preservation Committees Vote*: 6 In Favor 1 Against 0 Abstentions 0 Present

Non-Committee Board Member Vote: 2 In Favor 0 Against 0 Abstentions 0 Present

WHEREAS, the New-York Historical Society is a “Triple Landmark”: it is an Individual Landmark and is also within both the Upper West Side Central Park West Historic District and the Central Park West -- 76th Street Historic District; and

WHEREAS, in its July 19, 1966 designation report the Landmarks Preservation Commission described the Historical Society building as “austerely classical in feeling, and displaying great dignity in its composition”, further described its Central Park West façade as “containing a colonnaded central section, which, though treated with great discipline, is nobly ornamental”, and concluded that the “pedimented heroic size main portal on Central Park West makes a very grand entrance to the building”; and

WHEREAS, in the designation report, the LPC found that the Historical Society “has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City” and that the Historical Society building “is a distinguished example of Roman Eclectic architecture, designed in the best classical tradition, that it contains much excellent architectural detail and that this imposing structure has great dignity and grandeur”; and

WHEREAS, the Historical Society forms a composition with one of New York’s greatest Individual Landmarks, the American Museum of Natural History; and

WHEREAS, the Historical Society is in the process of developing plans (“Phase 2”) for a mixed-use museum/residential building on its site fronting 76th Street, which would replace its existing library stack building, which may be as high as 280 feet; and

WHEREAS, such plans may also include a new, possibly all-glass, story over the landmark building, which, like the tower, would be visible from all surrounding public ways, and such Phase 2 plans appear likely to result in another LPC application in the very near future; and

WHEREAS, the Parks and Preservation Committee of Community Board 7, Manhattan, believes that the proposed changes to the Central Park West and 77th Street facades of the Historical Society that comprise the present application must be considered within the context of the very substantial additional changes to the Historical Society’s profile that are likely to be proposed soon in Phase 2; and

WHEREAS, the Committee is concerned that if the inappropriate elements of this proposal are approved, they will be used to bootstrap arguments that the Phase 2 design is appropriate; and

WHEREAS, numerous other institutions within Community Board 7, Manhattan’s boundaries are similarly landmarked, and similarly have unused development rights, and the Committee is very concerned that no undesirable precedent be set with this application, either

with regard to the design itself or to the bifurcated consideration of major streetscape changes; and

WHEREAS, in this application the Historical Society is proposing façade changes that are “modern/contemporary” in design and materials (most notably the tri-partite rectangular doors at the Central Park West façade, the use of bronze and glass for the walls and railings of the entrance ramps on both facades, and the proposed informational “kiosks”), an approach that the Committee believes is **inappropriate** for this magnificent classical building – regardless of whether a modernist approach might be appropriate in a different landmark context; and

WHEREAS, at the proposed Central Park West entrance, the great pair of bronze doors would be removed, as would the elegant ornamental bronze decoration over the doors within the masonry frame; and

WHEREAS, the Committee does not believe that the proposal to apply the door panels as immovable decorative artifacts flanking the new contemporary triple door element would in any way make up for removing the doors from their original, functioning, position; and

WHEREAS, the proposed Central Park West entry, by making two new door openings of equivalent size and emphasis to the original door opening, would seriously abrogate the hierarchy of the grand pedimented entry that (as described by LPC in the designation report) forms the single most notable element of this great classical façade; and

WHEREAS, the Committee believes that in the proposed design the grand pedimented door surround -- stripped of its bronze doors and trim, with a modern rectangular glass and rectilinear metal door inserted in its denuded opening, and flanked by new glass and metal doors in a tri-partite modern idiom – reads more like a Post-Modern pastiche element imposed on the façade than as the noble unifying element it has always been; and

WHEREAS, the applicant proposes to remove the four historic torcheres (two on each façade) and “preserve” them by storing them in the Historical Society’s basement; and

WHEREAS, the applicant did not present to the Committee any material samples or similar means for the Committee to evaluate important details about, most notably (1) the proposed windows (glass and framing elements), (2) the high-tech “kiosks” and (3) the bronze and glass ramp walls and railings; and

WHEREAS, the Committee is sympathetic to the Historical Society’s desires to reorganize and maximize the utility of its internal exhibition and other space, to meet standards for emergency egress and handicapped accessibility and to appear more “transparent” and “inviting” to the public; and

WHEREAS, the Committee believes that changes to the Historical Society’s façades made to meet such desires should be minimally invasive to the historic fabric and grand classical design of the building; that they should be made to the full extent possible in the same classical idiom as the existing building, including the use of masonry where possible; and should involve the removal of a minimum of historic fabric; and

WHEREAS, although the Committee is generally receptive to the removal of the 1930’s glass block windows in the central bay of the Central Park West façade and the lowering and enlargement of the first floor windows on the 77th Street façade, it is not able to judge the appropriateness of the proposed replacement windows because it has not had the opportunity to see samples of either the glass elements or the metal framing elements of either set of windows; and

WHEREAS, the Committee appreciates that the proposed informational “kiosks” are free-standing, and would not directly impinge on the building fabric, but has reservations about their size, placement and operation as affecting the visual experience of regarding the building

itself, and is not able to judge the appropriateness of the kiosks because it has not had the opportunity to view samples or images of similar kiosks; and

WHEREAS, the Committee is concerned about the additional encroachment of over one foot eastward onto the narrow Central Park West sidewalk by a substantially widened set of entrance stairs, and is also concerned about the extreme north-south length of the proposed ramp, and is not convinced that a less intrusive and more compact design might not be designed for those features; and

WHEREAS, the Committee is concerned that replacing the interior handicapped lift at the 77th Street entrance with an external lift of several more feet in height is likely to be problematic functionally; and

WHEREAS, the Committee believes that the present ramp and stairs at 77th Street, enclosed in a masonry wall, while of quite recent construction, are nevertheless appropriate to the historic building, and questions the utility of removing this functional and appropriate entrance for the sake of gaining very limited same-grade interior space at the 77th Street rotunda area; and

WHEREAS, the Committee believes that several elements of the proposed design are **inappropriate** to this important classical landmark: most notably (1) the removal of the great bronze doors in the entrance on Central Park West, as well as the bronze grill that is above the doors and within the door frame; (2) the tri-partite glass and metal rectilinear doors in contemporary idiom at Central Park West, with the flanking doors being of the same size as the central door, and of far greater size and prominence than the window openings that they replace; (3) the use of bronze and glass, rather than masonry, for the walls and railings of the new ramps on each of the affected facades; and (4) the removal of the four historic torches; and

WHEREAS, although the Committee appreciates that the Historical Society met with it on several occasions prior to the Committee's formal meeting to consider this application, presented elements of its proposal and heard comments from Committee members, the Committee nevertheless regrets that in response to such meetings the Historical Society neither produced sample materials nor, most importantly, a proposed design that the Committee considers appropriate to this major classical landmark; and

WHEREAS, the Committee believes that the exterior changes to its classical façade proposed by the Historical Society are unnecessary overkill with respect to the functional aims that drive this proposal, apparently motivated at least in part by the **inappropriate** decision to seek to "modernize" the façade rather than to make minimally intrusive changes, and to respect above all the very features for which it was designated a landmark,

The Parks and Preservation Committee of Community Board 7, Manhattan, **disapproves** the proposal by the New-York Historical Society for changes to its Central Park West and 77th Street facades, urges the Landmarks Preservation Commission similarly to **disapprove** the application, and further urges the LPC (should it not **disapprove** this application) to withhold action on this application so that it may consider these changes together with the additional very substantial changes anticipated with Phase 2 as part of a unified scheme with very major streetscape impact.

*** Subject to Full Board vote on March 6, 2007**