

**Landmarks Preservation Commission Public Hearing
On Proposed Designation of
The Former Interborough Rapid Transit Powerhouse
West 58th-59th Streets between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues
July 14, 2009**

LANDMARK WEST! is a not-for-profit community organization committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side.

The former IRT Powerhouse is a building whose significance speaks for itself, from every resplendent piece of terra cotta, every Roman brick, and every one of the forty tall-arched windows that surround this mammoth building, a landmark hiding in plain sight on the far West Side of Manhattan. And yet some people in this room will have the privilege of speaking three times in support of landmarking the Powerhouse first in 1979, then in 1990, and once again today. Let's make this time the clincher.

Some of the fresh faces you see in the audience today are those of an extraordinary group of graduate students in Columbia University's Historic Preservation Program. I had the privilege of working with them this past semester as they discovered this remarkable building for themselves and decided to come up with a plan for preserving it. They've made a compelling case, documented in the report you have in front of you ("Preserving the Former IRT Powerhouse: A Preservation Plan," Spring 2009). Their research identifies the significance of McKim, Mead & White's building not only for its distinguished architecture and its place in history as the original "engine" of New York City's first subway system, but also as part of a network of monumental civic projects including the New York Public Library, Grand Central Terminal and the late great Pennsylvania Station.

In addition, the students point out that "only two of eight [public utility] plants built in New York between 1900 and 1935 [are] still standing today." In fact, "four of New York's oldest surviving plants were destroyed between the years 2005-2008 alone, including ConEdison's Waterside plants on the East River, the former BRT plant at Williamsburg, and the former Pennsylvania Railroad plant at Long Island City" (quotes from p. 29, illustrated on pp. 16-17).

Over the past 100-plus years, the Powerhouse has survived several transitions in use and technology with physical changes that are minor in relation to its vast scale. This endurance is a tribute to the structure's adaptability and sustained value to our city. It also belies any notion that landmark designation would impede the continued viability of the Powerhouse either in its current function or any future adaptive reuse. Indeed, the most visible changes to the building—the removal of the cornice and original smokestacks—had nothing to do with its functionality. These unfortunate alterations only underscore the urgent need for protection so that more significant historic fabric is not lost as a result of indifferent stewardship.

The neighborhood surrounding the Powerhouse has changed, too, making the Commission's present review especially timely. The City Planning Commission is currently reviewing impacts and possible mitigation strategies for proposed massive high-rise development to the immediate north of the Powerhouse. Likewise, the Landmarks Commission must take into consideration the possibility of future development proposals for the Powerhouse site, especially the western end of the lot occupied by the 1952 addition. Because new construction here or anywhere else on the Powerhouse block would inevitably have a significant impact on the original McKim, Mead & White building, we recommend that the western addition, too, be included as part of the Landmark Site. The need to preserve buildings whole, and not in bits and pieces, is a lesson learned the hard way. On the other hand, the Landmarks Commission routinely includes buildings that it considers "non-contributing" in historic district designations so that it can manage future changes that affect the context of the historic resource. We urge you to treat the Powerhouse with the same sensitivity and forethought.

For 30 years, one of New York's most important works of Beaux-Arts civic architecture has dangled in "Landmarks limbo." You, the commissioners, like the public at large, have lost your opportunity to weigh in on such major alterations as the recent removal of the last surviving original McKim, Mead & White smokestack. Let's remind ourselves how the process really ought to work. The Powerhouse clearly merits landmark designation. There is no question that, as a Landmark, the building can continue to function as a powerhouse or be adapted to a new use, its overall integrity intact. The research is done, the support is here, the case is made. Please act promptly to protect one of New York's true wonders.