

THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY

July 14, 2009

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE N.Y.C. LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION REGARDING THE PROPOSED DESIGNATION OF THE INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT POWERHOUSE AT 850 TWELTH AVENUE, MANHATTAN AS AN INDIVIDUAL LANDMARK

Good morning Chair Tierney and Commissioners. I am Andrea Goldwyn, speaking on behalf of The New York Landmarks Conservancy.

The Conservancy supports the proposed designation of the former IRT Powerhouse as a New York City landmark. This Beaux-Arts masterpiece is significant for its design, as the work of a prominent architecture firm, and as an example of an era when the civic structures were monuments of the urban streetscape.

Although there have been some minor alterations to this 1904 building, and even some since the Commission previously heard testimony on designation, the Powerhouse is largely intact, and retains substantial historic fabric. The monumental mass and form are much the same as when built, excepting the addition on 12th Avenue, and the building is in sound condition. The classical yet ornate decoration, including statuesque pilasters, monumental arches over multi-pane windows, and elaborate terra cotta ornament remain in place.

The beauty and majesty of the Powerhouse well represent the work of its architect, Stanford White. His firm, McKim, Mead and White, was responsible some of the most significant buildings of the era, including Madison Square Garden and Penn Station, and of course, the Municipal Building. Although it might now strike us as unusual to have one of the City's, if not the country's, most prominent architecture firms designing a power generating plant, this was an intentional gesture by the IRT, which, according to a 2009 Columbia University report, noted that "the exterior of the building has been designed so that it will be an attractive structure and in keeping with its surroundings, whatever development might take place."

The third significant quality is perhaps the most important. In New York, we are fortunate to have many beautiful buildings designed by famous architects. In the IRT Powerhouse, we also have a reminder of the great pride that cities can take in their own achievements. Inspired by the City Beautiful movement, the Powerhouse is like other civic buildings such as post offices, transportation hubs and utility stations constructed as cities expanded in the early 20th century; they housed practical uses in extraordinary structures. In this regard the IRT Powerhouse, which was built to represent the triumph of a transit system that allowed thousands of people to move across the City every day, is a soaring tribute to the urban experience.

We do not know what the future will hold for the Powerhouse. Although this building continues to be used to generate power, many of the other powerhouses from this era built for transportation and public utilities have been demolished. Designation would ensure that even if the existing use for the Powerhouse ceases, the structure will not be lost, and would allow for the possibility that it could even be reused for some other public purpose, perhaps in the manner of the Tate Modern in London, one of that city's most popular attractions. We hope that Con Ed will reconsider past objections and support this designation.

The IRT Powerhouse has survived the last century, and is a reminder of a past era, when civic pride and accomplishment were manifested in inspirational architecture. Designation by the Commission would allow future generations to experience the same reverence for this neo-Classical workhorse of a building. Thank you for the opportunity to present the Conservancy's views.