



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
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Designation of the Former IRT Powerhouse (now Con Ed Powerhouse), 600 West 59th Street, Manhattan
July 14, 2009

I am Melissa Baldock, speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society's Preservation Committee in support of the designation of the former IRT Powerhouse in Manhattan. The Municipal Art Society is a private, non-profit membership organization that fights for intelligent urban planning, design, and preservation through education, dialogue and advocacy.

The Preservation Committee of the Municipal Art Society wholeheartedly supports the designation of the IRT Powerhouse. The Powerhouse stands as a reminder of an extraordinarily important time in the history of New York City's development – when the first subway lines opened to bring New Yorkers quickly and cheaply from one end of Manhattan to another. This monumental building, composed of two great halls, was designed to generate and supply electrical power for the IRT, the city's first subway line. In spite of its purely utilitarian function, the lavishly detailed Powerhouse was designed by acclaimed architect Stanford White, of McKim, Mead & White. The ornate Beaux-Arts details on the exterior of the building extol not only the progressive ideals of the contemporaneous City Beautiful movement, but they also pay tribute to the sophisticated technical uses of this great industrial building.

Without a doubt, the city's subway system, which this building made possible by supplying power, helped New York City become a modern world city for the 20th century. The building's architectural and historical significance is irrefutable. Its protection as a landmark is critical to the recognition of the role this building had in the 20th century growth and development of New York City.

In the past several years, the city has lost two equally noteworthy historic powerhouses, the Waterside No. 2 Power Station on Manhattan's East Side and the Kent Avenue Power Plant in Williamsburg. Con Ed's recent demolition of the IRT Powerhouse's last-remaining original smokestack illustrates just how vulnerable the building is without landmark protection. In order to fully ensure the building's protection, we recommend that the entire block and lot be considered for landmark protection, including the 1940s addition. Although this addition does not have the architectural and historic significance of the original 1904 building, it is important that the LPC have jurisdiction over this part of the building to ensure that any future changes to it do not impede on the integrity of the 1904 building.

MAS has made a longstanding commitment to the preservation of New York City's industrial heritage. Industrial buildings like the IRT Powerhouse provide great opportunities for adaptive reuse should they no longer be needed for industry and production. Across the globe, old powerhouses and other large industrial buildings have been transformed into amazing new facilities. The Tate Modern museum in London is an obvious parallel to this building, but there are many others. In Chicago, the Homan Square redevelopment of the former Sears and Roebucks world headquarters involves, among other plans, the adaptation of the complex's powerhouse into a high school and learning center. In countries like Germany and Italy, large industrial facilities that were formerly steel plants or coal complexes have been given new life as business parks, museums, performance arts spaces, etc. The flexibility that our Landmarks Law affords in adapting old buildings for new uses could someday provide a great opportunity for the IRT Powerhouse should it no longer be needed for steam or electric production.

After three hearings spread over thirty years, please make this third time a charm, and vote without delay to make the IRT Powerhouse a NYC landmark.