

April 7, 2009

Hon. Robert B. Tierney, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Dear Hon. Robert B. Tierney,

I write in ardent support of one of the architecturally most distinguished and historically most important of Manhattan's surviving Nineteenth century churches, the West-Park Presbyterian Church.

Anyone can speak up for the prominence of the West-Park Presbyterian Church in the landscape of the Upper West Side. It's distinctive neo-Romanesque tower, with its lofty and beautiful lines and strong and original detailing, controls vistas on both the great north-south corridor of Amsterdam Avenue and along the stately expanse of West 86th Street, where the picturesque profile of the church is part of one of the city's most distinctive and continuous masonry block fronts. I write less about the church's strong place in the topography of the city, and of its brilliant handling of issues of scale that make it such a key element in relating the scale of mid-nineteenth century brownstones to early twentieth century apartment houses. For these are not facts that any resident of the neighborhood could express, even if perhaps these are not eh layman's terms for appreciating the urbanisitic brilliance of architect Henry Kilburn's 1889 design. Rather it is from my vantage point as a historian of 19th century architecture that I want to remind you how important your efforts are to preserving an extremely fine example of one of the most innovative and creative moments of American architecture.

For several generations now, historians of American architecture have celebrated the broad based appeal of neo-Romanesque as one of America's first great contributions to international architecture. The revivalist styles set in motion before the Civil War, such as Greek and Gothic, and even Egyptian, Revivals, largely took inspiration from English and Continental revivalist styles. But in the late 1870s and 1880s, following the lead of Henry Hobson Richardson in Boston – notably in his Brattle Street Church and the great Trinity Church on Copley Square – Americans began to find in the study of the sturdy models of the French Romanesque a stylistic idiom less rule bound. The broad lines and bold massing of Romanesque models, its stony primitivism and expressiveness, was more conducive, they felt, to creative modern development, as one can see in Kilburn's brilliant exploitation of European motifs to create a powerful treatment on the corner of one of Manhattan's notoriously difficult corner grid-plan sites. Exploiting the clean lines, play of light and shadow by successive reveals – witness the brilliant detailing of the attenuated bell tower – and the flexibility of proportions, the Romanesque became a matrix for design creativity which soon led to novel solutions not only for churches and residences but for the great push skyward of tall business buildings. Despite the rustic power Kilburn captured in the walls of rusticated stone – a veritable geological portrait

of American materials – the Romanesque seemed uniquely suited to massing and composition for making a memorable place for a church building even in a crowded and gridded city.

In the American Richardsonian Romanesque, church and skyscraper entered their complex tango of stylistic intimacy even as they sought to outshine one another on escalating skylines. It was Richardson and then Louis Sullivan's experiments with neo-Romanesque models in a warehouse and office building design that proved the seed bed for the development of the great skyscrapers of the 1890s in New York and Chicago. West Park Presbyterian stands as a landmark then not simply on the West Side, but in the history of one of the great evolutions of American architecture. One of the finest of the Richardsonian Romanesque churches built in Manhattan, and one of the most brilliantly situated urbanistically. By the early 1890s the American Romanesque was being studied by European architects for inspiration, particularly Scandinavian and the north German architects. As the architectural historian Leonard Eaton demonstrated brilliantly some years ago, it was with this style that the cultural tide began to change. For the first time America sent aesthetic lessons abroad. American architecture had not only come of age, it had become an exemplar. While Kilburn is not a household name, even among architectural historians, West-Park Presbyterian Church is one of the very finest examples of this vital moment in American architectural history still standing in New York, and the fact that it stands in a place so important to the architectural order of the city makes it a crossroads both of a neighborhood and of a key chapter in American architectural development.

I enthusiastically support the proposed landmark designation of the West-Park Presbyterian Church.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barry Bergdoll". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Barry Bergdoll
The Philip Johnson Chief Curator, Architecture and Design, MoMA
Professor of Art History, Columbia University