



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!  
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee  
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission  
2 West 67<sup>th</sup> Street  
November 21, 2006**

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

The Certificate of Appropriateness Committee wishes to comment on application to replace windows in this neo-Renaissance style studio building designed by Rich & Mathesius and built in 1919.

This application drives home how crucial it is for the Landmarks Commission to revisit its window policy, both its official "Window Guidelines" and its case-by-case decisions on public hearing items. And soon. Original windows are an increasingly rare species. On the relatively few facades where they still survive, one cannot help but wonder how, "For how long?" And if the Landmarks Commission does not defend them, who will?

This grand studio building, which Christopher Gray featured in his *New York Times* "Streetscapes" column for its significance in the evolution of the West 67<sup>th</sup> Street Artists' Colony, provides a case study in the important role that windows play in a façade *as well as* the important role landmark designation plays in sustaining the integrity of a building's window design. In the case of 2 West 67<sup>th</sup> Street, double-height steel windows play a particularly vital role in the design of the façade and link the building visually and historically with its artist-studio neighbors on the block. (This building is part of the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District as well as the West 67<sup>th</sup> Street Artists' Colony Historic District.) This building is also lucky to have many of its original wood windows, both on its primary façades and on the portion of the courtyard façade that is visible from the street.

This integrity is fragile, however, as demonstrated by the impact of several window replacements that took place prior to designation. In a few places, inappropriate aluminum windows that match neither the material nor the configuration of the original create gaping voids on the façade, interrupting its visual cohesiveness. Thanks to the building's designation as part of the historic district in 1990, the Commission now has the ability and the obligation to protect the windows from further destruction.

The good news is that, even in absence of a window master plan, many apartment owners at 2 West 67<sup>th</sup> Street have lovingly restored their double-height steel windows, one by one, in accordance with the Commission's "Window Guidelines", which clearly prioritize restoration over replacement. Where replacement is necessary, the Guidelines generally promote replacement in kind, at least for "special windows". And the double-height steel windows are the very definition of "special windows", meaning that the Commission has a particular responsibility to ensure that this window is treated with great care to achieve the highest standard of preservation. In the one case where the Commission has allowed one of the double-height steel windows at 2 West 67<sup>th</sup> Street to be replaced, a modern Hope steel window was used. The difference between the new steel window and the old steel window is barely perceptible.



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Apartment owners attest to the value of restoration not only in the difference it makes in the appearance of the windows, but also in the way the windows function. Aluminum replacement windows on the courtyard have been a source of “continuous problems”. Generally speaking, condensation, warping and jamming are common problems associated with replacement windows. John Seekircher, a leading restorer of steel windows whose work has been profiled in the *New York Times*, put it like this: such windows are “guaranteed to fail”.

Now, the Commission is presented with an application that challenges the tradition of window restoration at 2 West 67<sup>th</sup> Street. The current applicant wishes to replace several windows, including their original, double-height, steel window on the building’s 67<sup>th</sup> Street façade, with fiberglass windows. We urge the Commission to deny this application. The proposed replacement windows do not begin to replicate the texture and nuance of the original windows, especially the slender profiles and narrow sightlines of the original steel window. Even worse, the practice of allowing some owners to exchange their windows for inferior replacements undermines the efforts of those who restore their windows.

In this case, both problems will be magnified by the fact that the double-height steel window is on the second floor, in easy viewing distance from the sidewalk, and the fact that the owners of the apartment immediately adjacent area restoring their steel window.

### **Restore Rather Than Replace**

The first question to ask is, what measures has the Commission taken to ensure that these windows cannot be restored? Experts agree that very few windows are absolutely beyond repair.

In addition, experts use the concept of “embodied energy” to link historic preservation to environmental sustainability. “Embodied energy” is, by definition, the sum total of the energy required to extract raw materials, manufacture, transport, and install building products. Economic development consultant and preservationist Donovan Rypkema writes, “When we throw away an historic building, we simultaneously throw away the embodied energy incorporated into that building” (“Economics, Sustainability, and Historic Preservation,” Closing Plenary of National Trust for Historic Preservation Conference, October 1, 2005).

The same goes for any single part of a building. Architects Walter Sedovic and Jill H. Gotthelf explored this concept of embodied energy in their recent article in the Association for Preservation Technology Bulletin, entitled “What Replacement Windows Can’t Replace: The Real Cost of Removing Historic Windows” (ART XXXVI-4-05, pp. 25-29). Their main point is this: “Historic window possess aesthetic and material attributes that simply cannot be replaced by modern replacement windows.”

On many previous occasions before this Commission, LW! has made this same argument, framed primarily in aesthetic terms. Replacement windows never capture the visual nuances of the original. That in itself is enough to justify a restorative approach. The big-picture reality is that preserving and restoring windows conserves not only the authenticity of the original, but all of the energy that went into manufacturing them in the first place. Furthermore, it spares the environment the waste of replacement windows that will themselves need to be replaced in 30 years or less. (30-40 years is a typical warranty for replacement windows.)



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No one should pat themselves on the back for replacing old windows in the name of energy efficiency. The original windows at 2 West 67<sup>th</sup> Street have lasted for nearly 100 years and, with some care and maintenance, could last 100 years more. A restored window can provide comparable overall energy efficiency and savings as a replacement window.

Again, if the Landmarks Commission isn't out front, helping property owners understand the facts when it comes to restoration versus replacement, who will be?

### **Fiberglass is an Inappropriate Replacement Material for Windows**

The second question to ask when considering this application is whether the proposed fiberglass windows effectively recreate the look and feel of the original windows.

The answer is "no".

In the case of the double-height, steel window, the profiles of the proposed fiberglass windows are at least a quarter-inch thicker than the original steel profiles. This may not sound like much, but multiplied by the number of mullions in these special windows, it adds up. And one of the key beauties of steel windows is their narrow sightlines. The replacement window would be visibly chunkier than the restored originals with which it would share the façade.

The perceived need for double-glazing is the reason for thicker mullions. Laminated glass, which has the appearance of single-glazing, is a far superior alternative, long used by window restorers for energy efficiency where double-glazing is not an option.

Fiberglass is not an appropriate replacement material for the original wood windows on the courtyard either. Any property owner knows that there is no such thing as "maintenance free". And, unlike wood and steel, fiberglass lacks a proven track record, having only been used as a material for windows for a few years. In that time, specialists, including conservator John Nakrosis, have raised concerns that fiberglass windows are not colorfast; they tend to fade. This would be especially problematic at 2 West 67<sup>th</sup> Street, where the mullions are black. In addition, fiberglass is notoriously brittle in cold weather.

Sounds like a recipe for failure. And another replacement application that the Commission will have to consider in 15 or 20 years. Only, by that time, we won't have the option of restoring the original windows. They will be gone.

Again, if the Landmarks Commission does not stand by its own rules and uphold restoration over replacement, who will?