



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
129 West 86th Street
December 15th, 2009**

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 the application to alter the basement entrance and to install an areaway fence at 129 West 86th Street, a Northern Renaissance Revival/Queen Anne style rowhouse designed by John G. Prague and built in 1887.

The Domino Effect

Number 129 is one of a row of four houses by architect John Prague still standing on West 86th Street (there were originally two more to the West of Number 129, which have been replaced by a large apartment building). All four remaining rowhouses have been significantly altered over time: stoops have been demolished, layers of paint have been applied over and over again, and other modifications have occurred which detract from the buildings' original splendor.

It seems that 129 West 86th Street is the first of these four buildings to make strides towards remedying these conditions. This is a golden opportunity for Number 129 to be a catalyst for what our Committee regularly refers to as the Domino Effect. That is, the phenomenon of one person doing the right thing—restoring the stoop to a rowhouse, for example—and others seeing the benefit to the streetscape and following suit. Number 129 is poised to kick off a wave of restoration work on West 86th Street. Knowing that others will look to this rowhouse as an example of appropriate restoration, it is imperative that we get it right.

Fence

When in search of inspiration, we caution applicants that hunting and pecking for design elements to their liking is not an appropriate approach. Randomly selecting, as in this case, a fence from another building for strictly aesthetic purposes does not address concerns of style, vintage, material, and overall appropriateness. As the architect's historical photograph indicates, a metal fence is not a facet of this rowhouse's original design. And as the circa 1940 tax photo shows, neither was a metal fence part of the substantial 1922 Herbert Lippman redesign of this property. As such, no metal fence—and certainly not one measuring seven feet in height—is appropriate at this location. Any barrier should be constructed in stone to recall the original stoop and fence.

Over, please

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Paint

Stone and brickwork have an innate beauty all their own. Another coat of paint will only add to the layers already suffocating the brick and stone below. Stripping the existing paint layers and restoring the underlying façade is the appropriate action to take.

Door

In the case of color and finish, a wood door is no different than a stone façade or brick detailing. The door of Number 129 should not be painted but in fact left with a natural wood finish.

Awnings

Our Committee is pleased to see the proposed return of awnings to a residential landmark building. With so few building owners yet to undertake this restoration, it is important that this project be executed with strict attention to historic detail. The precedent that this would set must set the bar high.

In reviewing the historical pre-1900 photograph provided by the architect, it looks as though the awnings were mounted inside the stone frame of the parlor and second floor windows. Their look valance drop and lax pull lend a sleepy quality that brings softness to the façade. The proposed window valances capture none of these qualities. Mounting the awning above the transoms puts the stone façade at risk while also masking the special transom windows. We recommend that the applicant continue to explore options in terms of awning location and configuration.