



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
137 West 74th Street
December 9, 2008**

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 construct a rear yard addition at 137 West 74th Street, a Renaissance Revival-style rowhouse designed by Edward L. Angell and built in 1890-93.

Stoop Restoration and Rooftop Addition

Though the stoop restoration and rooftop addition are not included in the scope of this application, our Committee would like to comment briefly on both.

First, we applaud the applicant's decision to restore the stoop of this historic rowhouse residence. Such an undertaking is a powerful gesture and often sets off a "domino effect" – once one property owner does the right thing and restores a stoop, neighbors follow suit. With only four original stoops extant on the block, this project could be the spark needed to encourage the restoration of other stoops, one by one returning rowhouses to their original elegance. That being said, this stoop restoration should use the historic images available – namely, the c. 1940 tax photo clearly showing the original stoop at Number 139, neighbor and twin to Number 137 – to reproduce the appropriate stoop design for this rowhouse.

Regarding the rooftop addition, we understand that the design as proposed will be invisible to the public and agree that it will not adversely affect this historic rowhouse. This should serve as example to other applicants that modification to rowhouse residences can be made while operating within the lines of the Commission's *Rules*. Regrettably, we cannot say the same of the applicant's rear yard proposal.

Rear Yard Addition: Reviewing LPC Rules

Section 2-16 of the Commission's Rules establishes that when a proposal for a rear yard addition exceeds the purview of the staff, necessitates full-Commission approval. Of the eight criteria in this Section, this application transgresses at least three – and perhaps four.

Presently, a feature of this building's rear façade is a cantilevered wooden projection at the first floor level. Upon review, our Committee noted that this structure bares strong resemblance to the tea parlors seen in the West Village and in historic neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Before the Commission is asked to evaluate this application, the applicant should provide a more accurate account of the building's history vis-à-vis its historic footprint as well as subsequent additions.

Whether or not this appendage is original or a later addition is an elementary question which should be answered. The Commission must ensure that if it is genuinely significant historic fabric, the structure is not mindlessly destroyed. Instruct the applicant to undertake additional research to determine the date of construction and intended use of this space. If it was in fact built as a tea parlor, for example, it is an important – and rare – layer of Upper West Side history to be protected and preserved. Its destruction could be premature and, as a significant architectural feature, transgress criterion “b” of Section 2-16.

The applicant proposes to increase the rear yard projection to full-width and to remove the entirety of the rear façade building fabric. This would result in a loss of a tremendous amount of original material. This fully disregards criterion “h,” which says that the rear façade should not be removed from the entire width, so as to retain original fabric.

In addition, this application breaks with criterion “e.” The design, if realized, would entirely erase the punctuated fenestration of the rowhouse and replace it with an aesthetic not at all in keeping with its type. In short, and in contradiction to criterion “e,” the rear of the building would *not* retain the character of an individual rowhouse. Further, it would break the continuity of the rest of this row. We recommend a wholesale rethinking of the design for this rear façade.

What’s more, removing the existing rear façade elevation’s crowning corbeled brickwork is in direct opposition to criterion “g.” It states that rear additions must “not rise to the full height of the building” so as to preserve corbeled brickwork and other distinctive roof silhouettes.

Rear Yard Addition: Encroachment

Not only would the simple punched-masonry fenestration that characterizes this rear façade and those of its neighbors be eliminated with the approval of this application, so would additional rear yard space with the intrusion of a rear yard addition. We wish to reiterate our point, made at other hearings in the past and to be made again here today, that midblock rear yards are an historical element worthy of preservation. Encroachments by additions which reduce the area of open space in the rear yard, such as this one does, are fundamentally inappropriate.

The expansion of the rear yard addition to full width would mean that approximately 196 square feet of rear yard would be taken over – not an insignificant amount, considering the small size of this and other rowhouse rear yards. Such an addition would perpetuate the steady erosion of the historic footprint and openness of rowhouse midblock interiors. Further, it would be irresponsible stewardship of our historic built environment. As with all rear yard additions, this proposal would generate additional non-permeable surfaces. We urge the Commission to take this into serious consideration.