



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
20-30 West 94th Street – Columbia Grammar and Prep School
January 19, 2010**

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 demolish existing rear yard additions and to construct rooftop and rear yard additions at 20-30 West 94th Street, the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School, a row of six Queen Anne style houses, with Romanesque Revival and neo-Grec elements, designed by Increase M. Grenell and built in 1888.

LANDMARK WEST's commitment to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side extends not only to the bricks and mortar resources of our neighborhood's historic architecture, but to the open spaces—including streets, parks and rear yards—planned in tandem with them. Rear yard “doughnuts” are significant historical and environmental resources deserving our mindful stewardship. LW!'s initiative “Urban Forests in Our Midsts,” makes this very case. The project was recently endorsed by the Municipal Art Society, who honored “Urban Forests” with the Elliott Willesnky Award. With this city-wide acknowledgement of the integral role historic rear yard play, the current proposal by the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School raises serious concerns.

First, the positives: LW! recommends approval of the proposal to strip the rear façade of the six West 94th Street brownstones of their garish red paint, as we recognize that the school is attempting to restore and preserve the rear facades of these row houses. The proposed system of stairs and ramps on the rear façade will make sense of what is currently a hodgepodge of egress, and be less intrusive in the rear yard than the present stair system. We find these various proposed modifications to the rear façades to be appropriate.

Our Committee's greatest concerns pertain to the proposed build-out in the rear yards. An existing pool facility, also owned by Columbia Prep, on West 93rd Street which abuts the rear of the 94th Street properties creates an atypical rear yard condition. Coupled with two large Central Park West apartment buildings acting as an end cap to the east and tall wooden fencing to the west, the school is effectively nestled into its own micro-environment. However, that does not mean that modifications made to the school do not reverberate to the large rear yard “doughnut” of which it is a part. At present, the yards of Nos. 22 through 28 are one continuous play surface; the yards of Nos. 20 and 30 separate garden and play spaces. The poorly planned rear yard environment created by the obtrusive pool building is not a brand of growth that should be perpetuated on the Upper West Side.

Over, please

LANDMARK WEST!

THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

Paved over but not excessively built out, the rear yards remain largely intact and would be in no way improved by the proposed full-depth, three building-wide, 16-foot tall rear yard addition. Rather, the build-out would exacerbate the hardscape condition by not only maintaining built space in the rear yard but raising its height and enclosing the space. Plantings and “living walls” may be proposed to mitigate the negative impacts of this build-out scheme, but they are “green” in name only. A green-colored roof of artificial turf appears as merely visual dressing to soften the blow, no truly impactful environmental benefit.

Members of LW’s Committee, in discussing the proposal with the school’s headmaster and project architect, raised the question of building underground. By excavating—even a couple of feet, lowering the height from sixteen to eight feet—the school might achieve the desired interior space while minimizing the impact of this substantial built out. Test holes should be drilled to ascertain the feasibility of such an alternative. The school cites time constraints as making this alternative prohibitive, but it must be noted that other New York City schools such as the Spence School and Claremont Preparatory School have expanded their facilities by excavating and building underground as recently as 2002. As the school’s administration openly acknowledges the desire to expand the campus through acquisition of additional row houses, rear yard excavation—to meet programming needs while preserving the open space and integrity of the rear yard—seems a worthy capital investment to take priority above purchasing new properties. We cannot fail to remember that any modifications made here will set a precedent for how the school handles potential future expansion in newly acquired rear yards.

While progress has been made in developing this project in response to concerns from immediate neighbors, significant landmark issues persist. Knowing that the school seeks to use this opportunity to improve not only its facilities but also its curriculum by adding environmentally sustainable elements to its design, we believe that further design development could lead to an appropriate solution. Our Committee cannot approve of Columbia Prep’s proposal and urges the Commission to deny this application.