



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
Comfort Station; Riverside Park Scenic Landmark, at 102nd Street
May 4th, 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 replace masonry infill and construct a barrier free access ramp at a comfort station and recreation building in Riverside Park, designed by Clinton Lloyd and built in 1937. Riverside Park is an English Romantic style park and parkway, built in 1873-1902 and was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, with modifications and additions built in 1934-1937 and designed by Clinton Lloyd and Gilmore Clark.

Student design in “real world” projects

We recognize that this project is a joint effort between the Dept. of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and architecture students from Parsons School of Design. While we appreciate the opportunity for learning and collaboration, the community depends on the students’ mentors—both university faculty and the staff of the DPR—to recognize when a design falls short, and to make the necessary modifications. The 102nd Street comfort station is a historic structure in a Scenic Landmark, Riverside Park, so changes must meet the same standards of appropriateness to which other DPR projects are held. The recent restoration of the Carrère Staircase at 99th Street is an example of thoughtful restoration undertaken by the DPR of which our Committee was very supportive.

Metal-and-glass infill

The broad arches of the comfort station should be this design’s inspiration. Regrettably, the applicant reported to our Committee that students looked to the proposed door dimensions for their infill design cues. As a result, the design calls to mind generic catalogue images of commercial storefronts, with too-wide, too-thick frames in a crude pattern. These frames could easily be eliminated, as is standard in many storefronts, for a negligible cost. Rather than adopting a rudimentary and uninspired approach, the applicant should endeavor to provide a closure that is as unobtrusive as possible and does not create patterns that conflict with the design of the arches.

Security gate

Discussion of this storefront aesthetic brings us to the proposed solid metal roll-down gate. In light of recent (December 2009) legislation to ban solid roll-down gates on streetfronts, we were disturbed to see this exact element feature so prominently in the presentation made to our Committee on April 27, 2010. As they do in the urban landscape, solid metal doors create an

Over, please

overall hostile aesthetic. An open-weave roll-down gate would address the need for security while maintaining a friendly, open, park-like façade. By mounting the security gate inside the comfort station, behind the glass, they could further preserve the building's welcoming quality. It would seem that for Public Review on April 30, 2010, the gate design has been modified to depict an open-weave gate.

Barrier free access ramp

The limitations of the site (here, change in grade and a tree) are perceived as having a singular design solution. The result, however, is a stiff, rectilinear ramp system that encloses the tree in a prison. Our Committee believes other design solutions are possible, and encourages the applicant to be inventive so as to arrive at a design that takes advantage of these limitations. Why does an access ramp have to be orthogonal? How about a sinuous, curvilinear design to play off the tree?

Windows to replace terra-cotta jalousies

The windows proposed are inappropriate, as are the proposed window grilles. Seize this opportunity to return to the original design intent of terra-cotta jalousies! This element likely served both functional and aesthetic purposes originally, providing ventilation to the lavatories in the absence of mechanical ventilation. Aesthetically, their red tone enriched the stone of the comfort station. There is no reason why we, now, must choose between exact replication and stark contrast, sacrificing authenticity and sound preservation for thriftiness, as is currently proposed. If these dual function jalousies were a common treatment in 1930s park comfort stations, every effort should be made to reintegrate them into this proposal. Direct replication is not the only solution—a variation of the terra-cotta design should be explored.

Lack of specificity: Materials and finishes

The materials and finishes for this project were incomplete when presented both to our committee and on the day of Public Review preceding this public hearing. The public must have adequate opportunity to review all aspects of the design prior to review by the LPC. Leaving these decisions to the last minute demonstrates a lack of concern for substantive public comment.

Conclusion

As proposed, the design seems to place the schedule of the students and concern for budget above authenticity and innovation. The suggestions made here, which we urge the applicant to explore further, would make a major difference on the quality of this design while only minimally impacting the project's bottom line. We urge the Commission to deny this proposal.