



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
117 West 81st Street
July 22, 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 alter the rear façade and to construct a rooftop addition at 117 West 81st Street, a Renaissance Revival-style rowhouse designed by Henry L. Harris and built in 1884-85.

First, we must say that we are pleased to see the applicant's plan to restore the façade of this historic rowhouse residence. A stoop restoration is a powerful gesture and often sets off a "domino reaction" – once one property owner does the right thing and restores a stoop, neighbors follow suit. On a midblock that is home to some 37 rowhouses, this rowhouse, as an anchor for the south side, sets a tone for the character of the street. With the reconstruction of its stoop, it will now also set a standard for sensitive rowhouse façade restoration in the Upper West Side-Central Park West Historic District.

Rear Yard Addition

In light of Landmark West's ongoing concerns about rear yard encroachment, we are troubled by the significant open space in the rear yard "doughnut" that would be consumed by this proposed addition. The proposed addition restores the yard's depth to the thirty-foot minimum required by zoning, but this necessitates only a two-foot withdrawal. Furthermore, this is coupled with the enlargement of the now-L-shaped extension to full-width.

Overall, 78 square feet of rear yard will 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. We urge the Commission to take this into serious consideration.

Color of Spandrels on Rear Façade

Our Committee has some suggestions for improving the currently proposed color palette and compositional hierarchy of the rear façade elevation. At present, the applicant proposes a rather somber color scheme of dark red to replicate the original brick and a black complementary brick for the spandrel panels. This harsh color contrast will be out of place with the neutral rear facades of the "doughnut." We recommend that the applicant consider a less jarring color option, such as white or a harmonizing glazed brick. Alternative materials could also provide for



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lighter tone than the black brick – slate, stone or metal, all available in various shades, should be considered.

Our Committee is aware of the Commission staff's well-placed comments to return a sense of hierarchy to the rear façade. This might be achieved, along with greater structural definition, through adjustments to the design for the spandrel panels. As currently proposed, the inset spandrel panels in black would read visually as a mass void on the rear of the rowhouse. By bringing forward the top spandrel to the plane of the outer piers, combined with our suggestions regarding the addition's color palette, the applicant can harmonize the existing building with its proposed addition. Our Committee offers the attached sketch of how this alternate design might read on the rear façade.

Rooftop Addition

Regarding the rooftop addition, we understand that the design as proposed will be minimally visible to the public and agree that it will not adversely affect this historic rowhouse.