

**New York Chapter
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Landmarks Commission Hearing
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New York Historical Society

My name is George Lewis; I am executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Surely most people will agree that the architects' design has many strong attractions, most notably its skillful proportions, subtlety of materials, and its humanity as a place for people to live. Would that apartment houses all over town were done half so well!

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But even more intriguing -- and more pertinent to the decision which you, the Commission, will make -- is the reasoning which underlies the proposal. The architects' argument springs from the premise that Manhattan is an ever changing place, and that freezing the appearance of buildings in the Landmarks Commission's care can stand in the way of beneficial progress. "Manhattan," they say, "has long symbolized the vertical city to the world, and its exaggerated land values continue to generate tall buildings. But if this century-old tradition is confronted by a steadily increasing number of untouchable structures, many important buildings will be lost, to the detriment of all. Unless one can imagine an equally judicious process in which designation is waived, the city's growth will

be contorted by increasing bulk and congestion on one hand and an advancing number of museum-like preserves on the other."

Specifically, the architects argue "that the severe plainness of the Historical Society and the simplicity of its organization permit its incorporation as an element in a new composition." They go on to say, "We suggest this can be accomplished without compromising the integrity of the original structure." Several existing examples are cited, notably the 1907 colonnade which McKim, Meade and White superimposed over the original colonnade of the Isaiah Rogers Merchant's Exchange on Wall Street. Whether the success of that effort is sufficient precedent for the present proposal is a good question.

The architects then maintain that their design would complete, in terms of urban design, the setting for the Museum of Natural History. They point to the high rise apartment house turning the corner at 81th Street which sets off the open space surrounding the Museum, an effect not matched to the south, where "The Historical Society and an adjacent truncated apartment house form an incomplete termination to the street wall which faces the Museum..."

It is also advanced that the proposed design would be an appropriate addition to the Historic District, an argument interesting to those of us at the Chapter who felt so strongly that the Agrest Gandelsonas design near the corner of 71st Street and Madison Avenue would have enhanced the East Side Historic District. But the issue here is not the same: at 71st Street the question was one of appropriateness to a Historic District; here we are dealing with an individually designated landmark building, with the Historic District being a secondary factor.

Curiously -- at least within the hearing of the Chapter -- there has been little said about economic necessity. Certainly there has been nothing like the economic case advanced by the Museum of Modern Art when its apartment tower was at the center of so much public discussion about the survival of cultural institutions.

Now, the Chapter, in reviewing this admirable design, so beautifully presented with such carefully considered arguments in its support, finds itself confronted by one essential question: Is this design appropriate to the landmark? We all agree that each time an application is made for a Certificate of Appropriateness, the individual situation must be examined, and that it is imperative that the Commission act with reasonable

flexibility regarding the factors at hand. A rigid adherence to a policy of no modification of a building at all, ever, would violate the intent of the Law and lend fuel to those currently so anxious to undermine the Law itself.

But in the present instance matters of urban design are not primarily pertinent to the issue, nor is the matter of appropriateness to the Historic District.

The issue is, simply, this: If this design were executed, would it transform the essential architectural character of the landmark? We think it would, drastically. One would still be able to see the facade and the roof, but they would have become a secondary component of an overall new building form. We recommend that you deny certification. To certify this proposal as appropriate would open the doors for developers to begin imagining the possibilities in major alterations of landmarks all over town.

We disagree with the architects when they say, "The city's growth will be contorted by increasing bulk and congestion on one hand and an advancing number of museum-like preserves on the other." The Commission's power of designation is a very heavy responsibility, but once it has acted, let the city grow around the designated building unless compelling considerations call for its major modification. We do not think there is any such need here.