

Landmarks Statement: 3/17/07

My name is Allen Staley, and I am a retired professor of Art History at Columbia University. I speak as a former museum curator, who has some understanding of the Historical Society's practical needs; as an art-historian, who has written catalogue entries about the paintings by Benjamin West in the Society's collection; as a teacher, who, in the past, brought classes to the New-York Historical Society, and assigned works from its collection as research projects for my students; as a member of the Historical Society; as a neighbor and frequent visitor; and as someone who wishes that he could give that worthy institution his unquestioning support.

In early January Linda Ferber, the director of the Society's museum, wrote to me about their plans, stressing the Society's need for more space for showing works of art from its large and distinguished collection, but providing no detail about what the plans entailed.

However, when the architect presented his plans to the public in a meeting on January 31, they included no provision whatsoever for any expansion of the spaces allotted for the permanent collection. What they did show was a radical diminution of the space on the Society's first floor that it uses for temporary exhibitions. For as long as I have been visiting the Society, the main place it has employed for changing thematic exhibitions has been the suite of large galleries running along the entire length of the eastern side of its first floor, behind the façade on Central Park West, and continuing around the corner on the south side of the building. Now, the plans propose putting a restaurant in the northeast corner of the first floor, taking valuable prime space away, and converting most of the rest of the gallery space on the eastern side of the building into a large foyer, behind the proposed expanded entrance that is under discussion. That foyer was euphemistically called an "orientation gallery" at the January meeting, and it is called an "entrance gallery" on the architect's plans. But what it can not be is a sympathetic place for contemplating works of art, or paying serious attention to the content of more historically focussed exhibitions, as was possible in the galleries being displaced. By its nature, as an entrance hall, it will be place of bustle, coming and going, meeting people, putting things on and taking them off; and, as acknowledged by the architect in his presentations, and shown in his renderings, it will have to accommodate a coat check facility, ticket desk, and information desk, hardly welcome features in the middle of a serious exhibition. Making that space

even less like a proper gallery, is the architect's proposal to replace much of its back wall by an arcade. That should open up the spaces in a nice airy way, and, if the architect's renderings are to be trusted, will allow possibly even a view through the proposed glass entrance on Central Park West to the main stairway and the door to the auditorium. But it will do so at the expense of wall surface on which pictures can be hung -- and the need for places to hang pictures is a fundamental need of any museum, as well as one which I naively believed underlay the proposal under consideration. The space that realistically can be used for temporary exhibitions will be confined to the south flank of the building, and will be less than half the amount of space now available for that purpose. And, as I have noted, no consideration is made for additional space for the display of the Society's own collections.

From my art-historical and curatorial perspective, this makes no sense. Substantially reducing the Society's already inadequate gallery space, for any purpose, good or bad, should be a non-starter. I cannot seriously believe that any of the responsible persons at the Society truly want to do that. If they do, and if they insist that this proposal stand alone, without reference to related plans, I urge you to reject it as a bad plan, which is not in the Society's own best interest. On the other hand, if the proposed diminution of exhibition space is to be offset by the creation of new galleries, presumably to be made possible by new construction, what we have before us might well make sense. But to decide if it indeed does make sense, I think that we must be allowed to see how this scheme fits in the larger whole. At present, the Society seems adamant about not letting that happen.