

Dear Mr. Tierney:

I wish to express my opposition to the application by the Trustees of the New York Historical Society to perform the first phase of their overall plan to permanently alter the museum and the skyline. They pretend that only the renovation of the museum is being considered, and that "they have the money for that." However, Trustees have fiduciary responsibilities, and cannot simply spend all their assets on a renovation of the building whose cost they are greatly under representing. Instead, the real aim of these Trustees is to sell their air rights over the building for a large sum of money, and erect a large tower over it. The renovation proposed is simply the sugar coating they put in this overall plan.

At the first meeting about this, I pointed out that the opposition to the renovation plan is chiefly--if not entirely--our sense that the real plan is the tower, and we believed that this renovation of the building was simply an opening wedge. When they have permission to do it, they will "discover" that the costs are greater than they thought, and that they need the tower to pay for the renovation. I asked the chair of the board of trustees to agree to abandon any plans for the tower, and to say that it would be presented as a separate plan only after the renovation of the building was completed. SHE REFUSED TO DO SO. After this revealing answer, Bill Moyers spoke and pointed out that based on what he had heard, he was now against the renovation plan.

Trustees have rights, but they also have responsibilities. For many years I was a Trustee of Rockefeller University. While we had the legal right to sell the place to developers, it was our responsibility to strengthen the institution and to leave it in better shape than we found it. Owners have the right to do what they are allowed to, by law, with their properties. Trustees are not the same. These Trustees of the Historical Society seem to confuse their roles with those of owners--several times the chair of their board has referred to themselves as the owners of the museum. The museum, and the citizens of New York, need you to protect us from their irreversible folly. We hope that a new Board of Trustees will have a better idea of their role to preserve, not to destroy, the part of New York for which they have responsibility.

Sincerely,  
Ronald Breslow  
University Professor, Columbia University

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