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LANDMARKS PRESERVATION  
COMMISSION

January 26, 1984

Gene Norman, Chairman  
New York City Landmarks Preservation  
Commission  
20 Vesey Street  
New York, N.Y. 10007

Dear Chairman Norman:

Since the strict enforcement of a three minute speaking rule at the public hearing on the issue of constructing an apartment tower above the New-York Historical Society did not allow the opposition to the proposal time to fully rebut many of the points made by Hugh Hardy and John Zuccotti I have written this letter to be appended to my longer statement submitted to the Landmarks Preservation Commission on behalf of the Central Park West Preservation Committee.

Messrs. Hardy and Zuccotti made several, incorrect or misleading points that I would like to comment upon:

A. A comparison with the Merchants' Exchange (now Citibank) at 55 Wall Street. At the hearing on January 24, 1984 Mr Hardy attempted to draw a direct parallel between his addition to the New-York Historical Society and McKim, Mead & White's addition to Isaiah Rogers' Merchants' Exchange, a designated New York City Landmark. Equating the Historical Society project with the Citibank building shows a lack of understanding of McKim, Mead & White's intensions on Wall Street. In 1907, when the First National Bank (now Citibank) purchased the former Merchants' Exchange (built 1836-42), it was expected that this venerable structure would be demolished since there were no zoning or landmarks laws which might have aided in the preservation of the structure. Instead, the bank commissioned McKim, Mead & White to build an addition that would preserve the spirit of the old building, but at the same time would also be financially viable. This was considered to have been a novel, if not radical, plan. As the Architectural Record noted in 1908, "when the decision was reached to crown the edifice with a superstructure only as high as itself, instead of 'steen' stories of skyscraper the directors had a right to stand astonished at their own moderation and to invite the applause of their fellow citizens." (Vol 24, December 1908, p.442). McKim, Mead & White's addition was designed in direct proportion to the old Merchants' Exchange following the strict rules of Classical hierarchy, harmony, and decoration. So successfully was this done that today most people cannot tell that the building dates from two distinct periods.

The same cannot be said for the present Historical Society proposal. The proposed tower will not be in scale with the Historical Society; it will overpower the old building by its sheer mass and bulk. The modern tower addition, with its mere applique of Classical forms,

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cannot be equated with McKim, Mead & White's sensitive Classical addition to Isaiah Rogers' Merchants' Exchange. The Wall Street building still reads as a cohesive structure, while the proposed tower will turn the Historical Society into a base that is only tangentially related to the tower that would rise above.

B. The validity of the Historical Society design. As is well known, the Historical Society was erected in two building campaigns, but it is also clear that the building, in its present form, is a unified and cohesive structure. In its designation report for the Historical Society the Landmarks Preservation Commission notes that the structure is "austerely classical." It is clear that this "austerely classical" structure was the building thought worthy of designation. The argument by Mr. Hardy that it is the buildings' simplicity itself that invites an addition is spurious at best. Mr. Hardy argues that York & Sawyer (the original architects of the Historical Society building) originally planned a much more ornate structure which, if it had been built, would not have been appropriate for an addition. This ornate structure was not built by the Historical Society, which instead opted for the present simpler design. Mr. Hardy seems to be equating good architecture and architecture worth preserving with ornament and decoration. This ignores that fact that some of the world's finest buildings are chaste and austere Classical structures. It should also not be forgotten that the Landmarks Preservation Commission chose to designate an "austerely classical" structure and not the shadow of a more ornate Beaux-Arts building.

C. The relationship of the tower to the landmark. The Commission asked Mr. Hardy to elaborate on how the proposed tower related to the design of the landmark structure. Mr. Hardy was unable to do this in a satisfactory manner because his building relates in only a minimal way to the Historical Society. Much of its design is related to that of such nearby apartment buildings as the St. Remo and the Beresford. These apartment buildings are not landmarks. It is the proposed buildings relationship to the Historical Society and to the Central Park West-76th Street Historic District that is in question and it seems evident that the proposed tower does not adequately relate to those landmarks.

D. The rear of the proposed building. Among the most astonishing statements made by Mr. Hardy was that the rear elevation of the proposed tower would only be visible from a block away and would not be seen from within the Historic District. A building of this scale rising above lowscale row houses would not simply disappear, but would be highly visible. The banal rear elevation with its blank elevator shaft would replace the sky and Central Park as the eastern focal point of the Historic District.

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I hope that this statement will be added to the public record and that the views elaborated above will be given careful consideration by the Commission. Thank you.

Sincerely,

*Andrew S. Dolkart*

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cc. Lenore Norman