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NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A Statement Submitted to the New York City  
Landmarks Preservation Commission in Opposition  
to the Proposal to Build an Apartment Tower  
Above the New-York Historical Society

Central Park West Preservation  
Committee, Inc.  
January 1984

The New-York Historical Society, founded in 1804, is the second oldest historical society in the country. In its early years this private institution occupied quarters in a number of buildings. In 1857 the Society moved into its first permanent home--a new building on Second Avenue and 11th Street in a somewhat fashionable residential neighborhood. Throughout the nineteenth century the Society's collections were open only to members, including such prominent Americans as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Robert Fulton, James Fenimore Cooper, Samuel Morse, William Cullen Bryant, and Washington Irving. As early as 1887 a building drive to replace the outmoded and overcrowded Second Avenue building began, but it was not until 1891 that the site on Central Park West between 76th and 77th Streets was purchased. A financial panic in 1893 halted building plans, which were not revived until 1898. It was only in 1902 that ground was broken for the new Historical Society building.

The design commission was awarded to the architectural firm of York & Sawyer. York & Sawyer was, according to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, "one of the most prestigious firms, both in New York and nationwide, working during the first 30 years of this century" (Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report, Vol. II, pp. 1374-75). The firm was known for its staid and conservative designs, particularly for banks. Although the New-York Historical Society is one of the firm's earliest works, it exemplifies their design sensibility. The austere grandeur of the Historical Society is reminiscent of the great monuments of ancient Rome.

York & Sawyer designed a building for the entire Central Park West blockfront, but finances permitted the construction of only the central portion. In 1922 York & Sawyer drew up plans for the completion of the building, but money was not in hand until 1936, eight years after Edward York's death.

The firm of Walker & Gillette was asked to complete the building. Their work closely followed York & Sawyer's ideas. Walker & Gillette was an appropriate choice for the completion of the building since they worked in styles similar to those favored by York & Sawyer.

In 1937, with great foresight, the board of the Historical Society purchased Nos. 7-13 West 76th Street. These buildings were demolished and the land set aside for an addition when it should prove necessary. Never did the board intend this addition to be a highrise apartment house that would crouch on top of the new building of which they were so proud.

The New-York Historical Society is unusual in that it is one of the few buildings in New York City that has been designated a landmark twice. In 1966 it was one of the first buildings honored with landmark designation, and in 1973 it became a part of the Central Park West-76th Street Historic District, one of the first two historic districts to be designated on the Upper West Side (the Riverside Drive-West 105th Street Historic District was designated simultaneously). In addition, the building is just to the south of the landmark American Museum of Natural History and is across the street from Central Park, a designated scenic landmark. Any addition to the Historical Society must be judged regarding its suitability to the Historical Society itself and to the Historic District, particularly West 76th Street. Also, the addition should be judged in its relationship to the Museum of Natural History and to Central Park. I would like to examine briefly each of these issues.

#### American Museum of Natural History

The Museum of Natural History is a lowrise structure with a strong independent identity. Construction of a highrise atop the Historical Society

would have little effect on the Museum, but it must be noted that the Museum, Historical Society, and Universalist Church of the Divine Paternity (southwest corner of 76th Street and Central Park West) form the only lowrise unit along Central Park West and that the unique character of this section of Central Park West would be severely compromised by the proposed Historical Society tower, which would alter the rhythmic quality of Central Park West as we know it.

### Central Park

The question of lowrise scale is of importance in the relationship of the proposed building to Central Park. There are several highrise apartment buildings on Central Park West that are quite dramatic when viewed from the park. However, when Olmsted & Vaux planned Central Park, their idea was to create plantings that would screen out the city; no buildings were to be seen from inside the park. On Central Park West it is only the stretch between 76th and 81st Streets that retains a semblance of Olmsted & Vaux's vision; it would be tragic to lose this rare lowrise area.

### Central Park West-76th Street Historic District

The Central Park West-76th Street Historic District is composed largely of a harmonious group of low-scale row houses designed by several different architects at the turn of the century. West 76th Street retains its architectural integrity to a high degree, with most cornices and many stoops intact and no visible rooftop additions. The street is unique among the row house blocks emanating from Central Park West in that both Central Park West corners are anchored by architecturally distinguished lowrise buildings. The Historical Society and the Universalist Church are both in scale with the neighboring row houses. These buildings are major contributors to the

street's special character and combine with the row houses to form a unique ensemble that would be destroyed by the proposed tower. The building would loom over the row houses and its bulky entrance pavilion on West 76th Street is to be massed in a manner unrelated to the residences. The rear wall of the proposed building would become the visual focal point all along West 76th Street and would add an inharmonious element to this low-scale row house street, damaging the special relationship between the 76th houses, the Historical Society, and Central Park.

In addition, it should be noted that although plans call for the "restoration of the row house at 15 West 76th Street, no such restoration is actually planned for the designated exterior of the building. The application is for a Certificate of No Effect on Designated Architectural Features. It does not call for the removal of the white paint that covers the original brick facade, nor does the application call for the restoration of the missing stoop. What is planned is not a restoration of the designated property, but merely a modernization of the interiors into one or more apartments.

New-York Historical Society

Of greatest importance is the effect of the new building on the Historical Society itself. Despite its construction in two building campaigns, the Historical Society building is a cohesive, unified structure. Typical of Classical Revival buildings, it is strongly rectilinear and cubic in its massing. Its ornament and the arrangement of windows, columns, and doors are strongly horizontal and it is crowned by an emphatic cornice that provides a firm termination to the building.

Although it picks up design elements from the Historical Society, the proposed building would severely compromise the integrity of this landmark structure. The extraordinarily bulky mass of the building crouching atop

the Historical Society would counteract the cubic massing of the old building, and the new building's vertical height would negate the horizontal massing. The cornice termination would become a mere ornamental feature. In fact, the Historical Society would not remain an independent building, but would become merely the base for a tall masonry apartment house.

The design submitted to the Landmarks Preservation Commission also calls for the "restoration" of the windows of the Historical Society. These were altered during the 1930s. The plan, however, does not call for the restoration of York & Sawyer's central pavilion to its original condition. Instead, the present architect has chosen to second guess York & Sawyer by returning not to the design as built, but to that proposed on the original drawings. Many aspects of York & Sawyer's original design were changed prior to or during construction. The proposed design ignores the importance of the Historical Society as a carefully planned and executed structure and takes great liberties with York & Sawyer's intentions. Similarly, no cresting ever ran along the peak of the Historical Society's roof. The proposed cresting is merely a spurious historical addition designed not to add to the buildings historic quality, but to hide the juncture between the landmark and the tower rising above.

It is important to consider whether there have been precedents that can be followed in this case. Only once has the Landmarks Preservation Commission been faced with the issue of a highrise on top of a landmark. This was the famous Grand Central case. The Commission denied permission for this building and the Supreme Court upheld the decision.

There are two other cases that should be considered. In 1975 the Commission permitted the construction of the Palace Hotel behind the landmark

and critically endangered Villard Houses, a complex then owned by the New York Archdiocese. This was a controversial decision of which then New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote, "A way has been found to save New York's Villard Houses,...but the solution is dreadful" (January 5, 1975).

A more instructive and more recent precedent and one that has many aspects in common with the Historical Society proposal is an application submitted to the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1981 for the construction of a fourteen-story tower designed by Mario Gandelsonas behind 20-22 East 71st Street in the Upper East Side Historic District. The apartment building was to be set behind a townhouse erected in the 1920s. The new tower, although generally thought to have been an extremely fine design, was found to be out of scale with the older buildings on 71st Street and inappropriate to the Historic District.

It may be helpful to note some of the points made by the Commission in its denial of this application since many of them are appropriate here as well. The Commission wrote that "the proposed tower while an interesting and beautiful design in the abstract, was an inappropriate and inharmonious addition to the existing historic building." It was noted that the building "detract[ed] from the original design...by disrupting [the architect's]...design concepts, and by relegating the building...into the mere base or part of a base for the proposed tower." Further, the Commission said that it would "destroy the definition of...the termination of the building" and that "while it would formally retain and preserve the physical features of the building...the proposed addition would disrupt the unity of the design concept and detract from the scale of the design elements,...both qualities valued in terms of the architectural character and coherence of a neo-classical building." In

addition, they found the new building to be "inharmonious with the cohesive unity and design qualities..." of the lowrise buildings on the street.

Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for the New York Times, noted on December 25, 1983, that the Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer design for the proposed Historical Society tower "proves that it is not just insensitive modern architecture that can threaten landmarks--sometimes a building designed in the current mode of historical recall can raise questions just as serious." I trust that the members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission will consider the serious questions raised by this project and will vote to deny a Certificate of Appropriateness to the proposed apartment tower addition to this great landmark structure.