

Elizabeth Blair Starkey
109 West 77th St., Apt. 1
New York, New York 10024
(Home)Tel: 212-724-8936
(Office)Tel: 212-465-8840

March 20, 2007

Hon. Robert B. Tierney, Chair
NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, New York 10007

Re: New York Historical Society

Dear Chair Tierney

As a near neighbor of the Historical Society for more than 30 years and a member of the Society, I write to state my strong opposition to the present application by the Society to alter the facade of its magnificent building on Central Park West.

I am also a longtime member of Community Board 7, former chair of the Board at the time of the Society's near-meltdown in the mid-1990's and former co-chair of CB7's Park Committee. The Board's comprehensive resolution, passed by a 40-2-0-0 vote at the full board deserves your very careful consideration and I urge you to follow its recommendation and reject this application.

Because CB7's resolution and the statement from Landmark West! address directly the technical reasons that this application should be denied, from the stand-point of appropriateness, I will confine my remarks to other issues.

Ordinarily, programmatic issues and questions about the governance of the Society would not be considered by LPC in connection with an application for alterations. However, I urge the Commission to consider both in connection with this application. At early meetings with the community on the proposed plans, the Society put forth as a principle consideration their need for enlarged gallery space. Yet, in response to questions, the Society admitted that they have no master plan for the use of their considerable interior space and furthermore, plan to devote substantial ground floor space on West 77th St. to a café.

Since those early public meetings, the Society has shifted its principal rationale for demanding substantial changes to the building from providing a more welcoming access to first floor gallery space to providing better handicap accessibility. I am frankly disturbed at what appears to be a gaping hole in the Society's institutional memory. It was only a decade ago that the Society, with public funding and widespread support from its neighbors friends and elected officials, constructed its most elegant and appropriate handicap accessible entrance to the museum on West 77th St. In so doing, they announced that the Central Park West entrance would be closed and the West 77th St. would be its main entrance.

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One of the reasons given by the Society at that time for those changes was to make better use of interior gallery spaces. The present application which would reverse that decision after only a decade should be viewed with great skepticism by the Landmark Commission.

During the public process, the Society has often put forth the desperate need for additional space to house, preserve and make available to the public its valuable library collection. Indeed, the preservation of the library is the Society's most daunting mission. Those of us who love the Society agree with those goals. It is therefore surprising, to say the least, that the Society proposes to spend \$15 Million on what can only be described as cosmetic changes to the facade and building, changes which do absolutely nothing for the library.

On reflection, it is obvious that the present application is only Phase 1 and that the Society will move ahead quickly with Phase 2, the application to develop its property on West 76th St. I urge the Commission to reject this obvious ruse and demand that the Society present a Master Plan that encompasses both projects. The public, who has long loved and supported the Society, deserves an open, transparent process.

One last point. Five years ago, my husband and I submitted an application to LPC to restore the brownstone stoop to our home between Columbus and Amsterdam. I was surprised at the detail of the plans demanded by LPC before the application was approved. The oversight included two site visits from LPC staff in order to meet with me and the contractor to discuss the composition and color of the brownstone.

I bring this up because I was shocked at the application that came before the Community Board. There were no architectural drawings. No materials were shown to us for our approval. With such an incomplete application, we were unable to determine the extent the new steps would infringe on the already narrow public sidewalk along Central Park West. Without plans, we had no way of judging the width of the ramps, the height and width of the steps. Without material samples, we could not determine the appropriateness of the proposed glass, metal framing or bronze railing or the composition of the stone that would make up the new steps.

I ask you to deny the application, demand a Master Plan and greater transparency from the Society; require a single application for any near future plans for the development of its real estate as well as changes to the facade. Make sure we have architectural drawings and plans and materials.

This application has nothing to do with the rights of a private owner to modify or change its property. As one member of the public put it elegantly, the Society's board of trustees holds this building and its collections in trust for the future. We call on the Landmark Preservation Commission to act as public watchdog and reject this application because of its detrimental effect on the Triple Crown landmark, as well as the two historic districts of which it is a part.

cc: Elected Officials

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Blair Storker