

Architects & Planners

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Mr. Robert B. Tierney
Chair
NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: **New-York Historical Society**



Dear Chairman Tierney:

Please accept this letter as a follow-up to my remarks at the hearing on Tuesday, March 20th. I am against the alterations to the exterior façades of the Historical Society for the reasons listed below. I should add, of course, that I have resided on Central Park West since 1975 and my comments should not be interpreted as 'just a voice', but rather by someone who has an interest in the building, in architecture, and in the legacy of some of the city's distinguished building inventory.

Let me first state that I am convinced that the interior of the building needs upgrading to respond to the ever-changing programs undertaken by museums. I have no quarrel with this approach. Nor do I take exception to the 'pleas' offered by the librarian, the director and the 'hired guns' who extolled the virtues of the Society, albeit speeches which contributed nothing to the issue before the Commission, that of façade alterations.

I need not go into the history of the building, nor its fine architectural qualities, for individuals have offered all of this to the Commission on previous occasions and, I dare say, Commission members are more than aware of all aspects.

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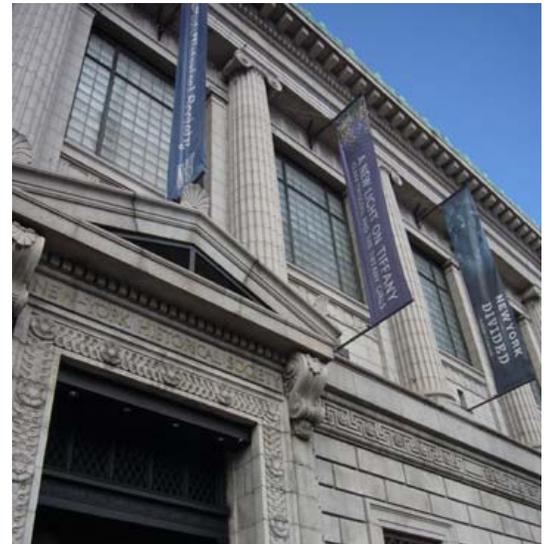
My comments are analytical, and based upon physical measurements I gathered on Sunday, March 25th, and photographs taken at the same time:

1. **Landmark designation**

It is my understanding that landmark status was given in 1966, approximately 29 years after the last renovations were made to the façades in 1937. Hence the assumption is that the building was landmarked based upon the 1937 renovations and building appearance, and nothing prior. I hence challenge the assumptions by the architects that they are restoring the façades to the 'original'. The original **is**, in fact, the 1937 landmarked design.

2. **Upper glass block windows on Central Park West**

There is contradiction in the arguments presented. The director stated that it is important to have clear glass so that sunlight can get in, and that the building will look more inviting to passers-by and people will be able to see in to the exhibits. The architects, on the other hand, have stated that they want to replace the glass block with clear glass windows, and design them as light boxes so that they glow at night, at the same time preventing sunlight from entering exhibition spaces. I must say that I have considerable experience with glass block, both in a modern and historical application (I am restoring an 1871 building in Saratoga Springs with glass block, back lit to glow at night) and know, definitively, that if the architects retain the glass block, the 'glow' idea can be fully realized.



Arguments put forward by many with regard to leaking windows, energy efficiency and conservation do have merit, but when windows leak, I say "fix them". We have technology today to accomplish this. Glass block can accomplish this. And besides, with the introduction of light boxes behind the glass block, leakage would be overcome completely.

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3. **Site lines**

Much has been made of the desire to 'open up' the façades to make the building more inviting, including larger windows so that people can see in to the exhibits and the activity within. The building dimensions are such that even if the façades were allowed to be 'opened up', the results would be as follows:

Central Park West

From the sidewalk level to the top of the 'water table stone' (that is, the curved stone on top of the flat base wall) the total height is as follows:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| a. base wall | 5'-0½" |
| b. water table stone | 1'-10" |
| Total | 6'-10½" (please refer to photos below & diagram following) |



West 77th Street

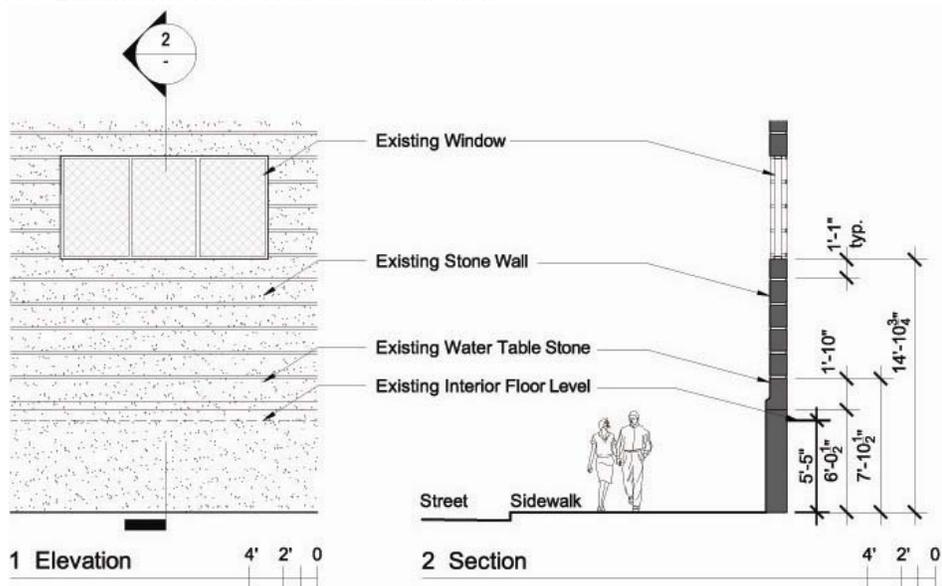
From the sidewalk level to the top of the 'water table stone' (that is, the curved stone on top of the flat base wall) the total height is as follows:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| a. base wall | 6'-0½" |
| b. water table stone | 1'-10" |
| Total | 7'-10½" (please refer to photos below & diagram following) |



The dimension in a man from the center of his eyes to the top of his head varies between 4½" to 5". For a woman, it can vary between 3½" to 4". Hence, in a 6'-0" man, his eyes would be approximately 5"-7" above the ground, or 2'-3" below the water table stone. He would be unable to see into the building, the exhibits and the people meandering about. He would see only the ceiling. This, of course, would be even totally impossible for a woman or a child. The tallest basketball player in the world could not accomplish what the director has stated publicly as an objective.

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4. **Sidewalk kiosks**

I think the kiosks are a good idea. They appear to be tasteful and well thought out. The Metropolitan Museum has them as does Lincoln Center. They abound in Europe in and around historic buildings. This aspect alone would go far in achieving some of the Historical Society's goals of bringing more people into the building. It is disrespectful, however, of the museum staff and some of their 'hired guns' to treat members of the Commission and interested residents as though they are ill informed about cultural organizations by offering that the building is alienating and threatening to the public and therefore attendance is not what it should be. Disrespect was layered on by using words like 'tombstone' and 'sarcophagus'. One speaker stated that he brought a group of children to the Society and they were frightened to enter.

To the contrary, if any museum were intimidating in its bulk and hulk, The Museum of Natural History and The Metropolitan Museum of Art would surely qualify.

5. **Entrances**

The architects have designed an entrance by enlarging the Central Park West façade to accommodate more through-put. On close examination, it is strictly cosmetic since the proposed 'enlarged' entry way, which is currently 8'-0" wide at the exterior, with a pair of large doors in the vestibule that have an opening of 7'-10", has but one entry door, and that is a revolving door. It is a known fact that revolving doors, while performing as vestibules, slow down entry into buildings and hence the argument of facilitating greater numbers of visitors more rapidly and efficiently has little if any currency. To the contrary, it contributes to the problem.



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6. **Attendance**

Attendance, in numbers **and** in volume at the Historical Society cannot compare to those of its neighbor, The Museum of Natural History, nor The Metropolitan Museum which has only two active doors for the hordes that enter. Perhaps the Historical Society's physical circumstances are more akin to the Neue Gallery on East 86th Street. As an additional example with regard to entrance size and available capacity, thousands pour into the Metropolitan Opera each evening through two controlled entrances, each with two door leaves.

7. **Handicap Access**

The issue of handicap access does currently exist, and is well situated and executed on West 77th Street. Instead of aggravating the access by raising the exterior stairs an additional 6 risers (3'-3", ±) on West 77th and thereby using that argument to rearrange the façade through the necessity of raising the floor that same amount, close examination reveals that an interior ramp can easily be accommodated within the West 77th Street' vestibule/foyer, certainly far more economical than raising the exterior stairs an additional 2'-2", recalibrating the ramps and rebuilding associated stone work.



Comment:

It is interesting to note that I spent slightly over two hours this past Sunday observing the Society – from 11:13 a.m. to 1:11 p.m. With the exception of a few people entering off CPW, most entered on West 77th Street. (There were hundreds entering The Museum of Natural History during the same period.)

8. **Queuing**

With regard to inclement weather and the need for a dry place to stand just before entering, the line to MoMA extends to 5th Avenue. The lines to The Metropolitan Museum trickle down the stairs. And given the need for security at these institutions, and the slow-down for bag examination, the Society's aspirations to get people in, in greater volume, does not synchronize with its small attendance, nor the revolving door, nor the legal capacity of the facility.

9. **Exiting**

Statements were made with regard to a 400-seat auditorium and the legal exit requirements. The requirements are there. But the architects did not discuss options available nor the studies made to legally accommodate those requirements. Did they examine relocating the auditorium, for example, or show us plans for accommodating such?

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10. **Tower & the prejudicing of valuable museum exhibition space**

The issues put forward are suspect knowing that the desire and direction to pursue a 280' tower to the rear of the Society, and over it, would lead one to believe that certain parts of the floor plate of the Historical Society, on all levels including the 1st floor entry level, are being reserved to accommodate the lobby, elevators, stairs, mailroom, etc. of the intended tower. The tower is lurking in the wings, as are the financial benefits to facilitate the current renovation program.

11. **Conclusion**

It is my observation that the cosmetic changes to the façades have little if anything to do with attendance, nor upgrading interiors or any of the other related or contingent issues. Rather, it is an argument for change for change's sake. Additionally, the funds allocated to façade changes are considerable, given the skill sets necessary to dismantle, cut, restore and whatever to existing stone work. The funds should be put to better use in upgrading interior galleries, lighting, circulation, etc.

Much was said with regard to increasing the Society's attendance and giving more transparent exposure to the public. While the arguments presented were contradictory, as you may recall, I used the example of the whole new aura surrounding The Metropolitan Opera and the freshness and excitement Peter Gelb has developed and engendered into the programs, including web sites, breathtaking programs and catalogues, e-mail confirmation of tickets with opera notes, etc.

This is perhaps an approach the Historical Society should investigate and undertake in suitable and appropriate measure, and redirect the unnecessary resources associated with bricks-and-mortar to such an endeavor. The cost of such a direction pales in comparison to the very, very costly cosmetic façade changes, including ramps, stonemason work, material-matching, raising of floor levels, exterior ramps, new windows, and on, and on, and on. I submit that the entire approach to the redesign of the façade is irresponsible, and unnecessary.

Respectfully,



Michael Fieldman, FAIA