

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
Regarding the New-York Historical Society
March 20, 2007**

LANDMARK WEST! is a not-for-profit community organization committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side.

New York's "Triple Crown" Landmark

The New-York Historical Society is sacred ground. Architecturally, historically and culturally, it is the very definition of a Landmark. To paraphrase from the Landmarks Law, Landmarks are places that have special character, interest or value, representing the finest architectural products in our city's history, the destruction of which would be an irreplaceable loss to the people of this city and a detriment to New York's standing as a world-wide tourist center and capital of business, culture and government (Title 25, Section 25-301, "Purpose and declaration of public policy").

The Landmarks Commission felt so strongly about the Historical Society and preserving its relationship to its surrounding context, that it designated this building not only as an Individual Landmark (one of New York's first, in 1966) but also as part of the Central Park West – West 76th Street Historic District (one of the first historic districts to be designated on the Upper West Side, in 1973) *as well as* the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District (one of New York's largest historic districts, designated in 1990) encompassing almost the full sweep of Central Park West and its iconic skyline.

Also important to note is that the Historical Society is also certified for the National Register of Historic Places. Its immediate neighbors include the American Museum of Natural History (an Individual Landmark) and Central Park (a Scenic Landmark).

A Mission to Preserve History, or Revise It?

In testimony and letters sent to this Commission back in 1984, when the Historical Society proposed to make radical alterations including a tower designed by Hugh Hardy, the top architectural experts in our city rushed forward to defend the integrity of this Landmark, and to oppose the tower.

Philip Johnson wrote, "If the Landmark Law has any meaning at all, it is to prevent the defacement (really means destruction) of buildings that have historic significance," (letter dated January 18, 1984). Robert A.M. Stern called the Historical Society "one of a series of public buildings erected at the turn of the century on Central Park West which in concert form a chain of monumental gateways to the West Side...These buildings remain as a testament to the low-scale Classical urbanism of the City Beautiful movement" (letter dated January 13, 1984). Paul Goldberger asked, "What, after all, should be more a symbol of permanence than a building dedicated to honoring the history of the city?" (*New York Times*, January 22, 1984).

Yet, in information distributed in recent weeks, presumably to its entire mailing list—history lovers in our city and beyond—the Historical Society has referred to its Landmark as a “sarcophagus” and a “mausoleum.” Moreover, these stewards of one of New York’s most significant treasures persist in treating their site just as any real-estate developer would treat any property anywhere. To use the Society’s own term, they consider their Landmark “a development opportunity.”

Such words urge extreme caution moving forward on any application for any changes to this Landmark. At best, they point to an institution still struggling with its mission and identity (most of you have probably seen Kevin Guthrie’s 1997 booklet or his 1996 book, *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit’s Long Struggle for Survival*, funded by the Mellon Foundation, on the Society’s history of fiscal and administrative mismanagement). At worst, words like “mausoleum” expose an institution that has irrecoverably lost its way, pursuing change merely for its own sake, even when grave doubts are raised as to the logic and appropriateness of those changes, stubbornly refusing to learn from the lessons of the past.

The Façade Alterations: On the Merits

This application to alter the Central Park West and West 77th Street façades should be denied on the merits. The proposed changes would tamper with almost every significant aspect of the Landmark spelled out in the Commission’s designation report: its “austerely classical” feeling, “fine gray granite,” “bronze grille-work of the large side windows [on West 77th Street],” the “pedimented heroic size main portal on Central Park West.”

Furthermore, the proposed changes would undo a series of appropriate, Landmarks-approved, publicly funded renovations implemented in the 1990s under the direction of Beyer Blinder Belle, including the award-winning barrier-free access ramp on West 77th Street and restored original windows. These renovations, completed barely a decade ago, addressed many of the exact same issues the Society seeks to address today. However, they did so without imposing irreversible changes on the Landmark façade. The Society has not made a convincing case for why such radical façade alterations are now necessary. If the Commission approves them, will we face yet another “do-over” ten years from now?

We reiterate Community Board 7’s excellent, nearly unanimous resolution, which states that “the exterior changes to its classical façade proposed by the Historical Society are unnecessary overkill with respect to the functional aims that drive this proposal, apparently motivated at least in part by the inappropriate decision to seek to ‘modernize’ the façade rather than to make minimally intrusive changes, and to respect above all the very features for which it was designated a landmark.” [emphasis added]

The Need for a Master Plan

The proposed façade alterations simply make no sense. But, indeed, there is more to the story. An email circulated by the Historical Society on January 24, 2007—again, presumably to its entire mailing list—explains that “proceeds from the residential portion of our construction program would be used to help fund the Society’s internal growth plans.” Only a week later, at a “Town Hall” meeting attended by hundreds, and at subsequent community board meetings, also attended by hundreds, the Society staunchly

denied any relationship between the two aspects of their project. No, they said, their plan to build a 280-foot tower, as described in two *New York Times* articles from November and December 2006, was totally separate from the façade alteration proposal.

Such an overtly artificial separation may seem convenient from a public review standpoint, but, in terms of real-world planning, it is completely unrealistic. No institution, particularly one with as troubled a past as the New-York Historical Society, would embark on a major façade and interior reconfiguration project without a comprehensive plan for its entire facility. And, even if they would, this Commission should not allow it.

The Landmarks Commission routinely counsels property owners—whether they seek to replace their windows, add a rooftop addition or change their storefront—to adopt a master plan for “alterations that are not planned to occur all at once, but rather in increments through time” (Title 63, Section 2-02). If this is important for repetitive changes, then it is all the more important for such vast changes as those planned for this Landmark. The façade and the tower are inextricably related—the Commission and the public must have the opportunity to review them as a whole, not piecemeal as they are being presented.

A 74-711 Review?

In a February 7, 2007, email, the Historical Society explained that the “potential expansion project” (a.k.a., the tower) would be subject to Landmarks review and ULURP (Uniform Land Use Review Procedure), most likely referring to the process for obtaining use or bulk modifications established under Section 74-711 of the Zoning Resolution. Section 74-711 requires “that a program has been established for continuing maintenance that will result in the preservation of the [Landmark], and that such #use# or #bulk# modifications, or restorative work required under the continuing maintenance program, contributes to a preservation purpose.”

The Society’s ability to gain approval for a tower is entirely dependent on their “preservation” of the Landmark. If the Commission approves the current façade alteration application, it will have significantly lowered the bar for approval of the tower.

Conclusion

If today’s hearing is truly about an institution’s honest efforts to make appropriate changes to its Landmark and not about disingenuous attempts to mislead the Commission and the public into accepting—sight unseen—major real-estate development that could have long-term, disastrous effects on this and other Landmark sites (a.k.a., “development opportunities”), then let the Historical Society come forward with a unified, comprehensive, well-reasoned and well-articulated plan.

Let’s not look back and say “if only we’d known.” We do know. The Commission should not approve this application.