



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society  
Before Landmarks Preservation Commission  
By Lisa Kersavage, Kress/RFR Fellow for Historic Preservation  
Regarding proposed alterations to the New York Historical Society  
March 20, 2007

The Municipal Art Society is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to advocate excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art.

I am Lisa Kersavage speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society's Preservation Committee. We are very enthusiastic supporters of the mission of the New York Historical Society, and appreciate the dilemma the Society faces in terms of creating inviting entrances; barrier free access and adjusting the space to better meet their programmatic needs.

The preservation committee reviewed the proposal on February 15, and the following comments are based on that presentation. Yesterday we received the revised proposal, which the committee did not have time to review, although it does seem to be moving toward a greater retention of historic fabric and also more appropriate proportions. The preservation committee would be happy to review the revised proposal at their next meeting.

The committee did not find the proposal as presented to them, to be appropriate yet, and was particularly concerned about the extensive amount of historic materials that would be removed. The Historical Society was designed as a reliquary for New York's sacred objects. That is manifested in the design with the solid base and more openings at the upper level than below. In the attempt to animate the base, the proposed alterations, especially the openings in the masonry base, invert that proportion.

The committee did not object to the concept of moving the primary entrance to Central Park West, but did not yet find the design to be appropriate. The committee had objected to the extensive removal of masonry that had the effect of isolating the portico, which the revised proposal no longer does. The committee also found the removal of the bronze doors to be inappropriate. Some of the committee members found the kiosks to be inappropriate as they are a very strong presence and block the views of the building. Others felt that as they were reversible and not touching the historic fabric, they were an appropriate and clever means to addressing the needed signage. There was also some division on the appropriateness of the granite stairs with lit glass reveals.

The proposed alterations to 77<sup>th</sup> Street were found to be inappropriate due to the extensive amount of historic materials that would be removed. The substantial lowering of the window sills, and the removal of masonry, dramatically alters the façade. Furthermore, the committee felt strongly that historic details like the light fixtures on 77<sup>th</sup> Street ought to be retained. The committee was not given enough information to fully understand the impact of the proposed alterations to the second story windows.

The New York Historical Society has recently mounted some excellent exhibits, particularly those on slavery in New York, and we applaud them for engaging all citizens in their shared history. As they work to make their building more accommodating, we urge the Society to develop a design that better strikes the balance between fulfilling their programmatic needs and respect for their own historic building.