



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
Apthorp Apartments
390 West End Avenue
October 21st, 2008**

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

The Certificate of Appropriateness Committee wishes to comment on the application to install rooftop mechanical units and an acoustical screen on this Italian Renaissance-style apartment building, designed by Clinton and Russell and built in 1906-08.

As the *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide* wrote in its July 4, 1908, edition, "the two features which impress one before entering the [Apthorp apartment building] are, first, its massive appearance from the street and, second, the beautiful court in the center of the site."¹ This proposal places these two seminal design components of the palatial residence at risk.

Visibility: From Broadway

The Apthorp apartment building was designed with monumentality in mind. Commanding impressive views along Broadway, the Apthorp is representative of a small handful of grand apartment houses centering on interior landscaped courtyards. Along with its comrades the Belnord, the Dakota, and the Astor Court, the Apthorp adds architectural richness to both the Upper West Side and Manhattan at-large. With such few examples of this building type in New York City, any proposals made for the Apthorp must be examined with strict scrutiny.

The silhouette of the Apthorp calls out to onlookers from ten or more blocks away. Any rooftop mechanical equipment that is visible from the public way compromises the architectural integrity of the building. As the applicant stated at the October 16th, 2008, Parks and Preservation Committee meeting of Community Board 7, the proposed cooling towers are visible along Broadway from as far South as West 71st and as far North as West 91st Street.

Because of this prominence, the placement and height of the mechanical equipment should be designed and selected with the lowest possible visibility. We recognize that the cooling towers will need to be placed on dunnage for support; this is often between two to three feet high to allow for pipe connections and maintenance. Additional height is added by steel framing and finally there is the height of the cooling tower unit itself. These combined installation factors add up to a large piece of equipment. Therefore, the applicant should look for equipment that has both a low profile and is made up of multiple smaller units rather than single larger unit.

Over, please

¹ "What a Tenant Gets for \$6,000 a Year: Conveniences in the Largest Apartment House on This Continent." *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, 4 July 1908. p. 19.

Visibility: From the Interior Courtyard

Pushing the proposed cooling towers westward closer towards the courtyard is no quick-fix solution. This may mitigate the visibility of the rooftop equipment from Broadway, but it perpetuates the problem of the equipment and screen's visibility from the courtyard itself.

The courtyard is a hallmark of the Apthorp's design. A respite from the busyness of the city waiting just beyond the massive coffered archways, the garden courtyard was originally designed with "a display of horticulture that would grace a select botanical garden."² Indeed, the importance of the courtyard was not thought of as secondary but rather complimentary to the exterior character of the Apthorp. How the proposed cooling towers will affect the interior courtyard is as important as how they affect the building as it is viewed from Broadway or any other public thoroughfare.

Even when set back from the building's original parapet, two to three feet of the proposed acoustical screen would still rise above the Apthorp's parapet and be visible from the West End Avenue entrance of the Apthorp. This is inappropriate. Any additional intrusion – especially something that will become permanent – is visually polluting and a great detraction from the building's design. Screening – with trellis or various densities of mesh – often reduces cooling unit efficiency and serves to further call attention to the objects rather than disguise them.

Our Committee cannot support this proposal. It is the burden of the applicant to identify equipment that does not compromise the integrity of the building – not the burden of the public to concede a landmark's degradation. If no alternative is available, then the solution seems to present itself: cooling towers are not appropriate for the Apthorp apartment building.

² *Real Estate Record and Guide* 1908, 19.