



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
March 4, 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 establish a Master Plan governing the future replacement of windows on this Italian Renaissance-style apartment building designed by Clinton and Russell and built in 1906-08.

“The Apthorp Apartments—The Largest In The World” is how one contemporary trade publication promoted this Upper West Side marvel when it was completed in 1908. From the courtyard to the gates and, of course, the apartments themselves, everything about the Apthorp was constructed on a grand scale, and to this day, one hundred years after completion, the apartment house remains one of the city’s biggest and most magnificent. Described in the Commission’s 1966 designation report as “an outstanding example of Italian Renaissance architecture modified to meet the needs of an early twentieth century apartment house”, the Apthorp is on a par with fabled Upper West Side landmarks including the Dakota, the Ansonia, the Dorilton, the Belnord and the American Museum of Natural History (which recently began restoring the more than 600 mahogany windows on its 77th Street façade), all of which have either restored their original wood windows or replaced them in kind.

And so, every proposal affecting the appearance and integrity of this “monumental and magnificent”¹ building, this landmark among landmarks, among the first to be designated by our city’s nascent Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1969, must be evaluated very closely, every option weighed carefully.

Our committee opposes the proposed masterplan to replace the Apthorp’s wood windows with aluminum windows, including extruded aluminum brick molds and simulated, surface mounted mullions. Furthermore, based on the materials provided to the Commission and the community, we do not feel that appropriate alternatives have been fully and conscientiously explored. Those alternatives include a) restoration of the existing original wood windows and, if restoration proves impossible, b) replacement in kind with new windows that match the original in material, configuration and operation, as required by the Landmarks Commission’s official Guidelines for windows in Individual Landmarks.

The Preservation and Environmental Benefits of Restoration

Our committee strongly believes that restoration is the best and most appropriate approach because it will a) preserve the original design and authentic historic fabric of this legendary Individual Landmark’s majestic façades and b) convey environmental benefits by retaining

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and recycling the “embodied energy” of the existing, historic windows and preventing them from ending up as landfill.

Preservation of Original Design and Historic Fabric

Several of the Upper West Side’s most prominent Individual Landmarks have sensitively restored their windows, including the aforementioned Dakota and American Museum of Natural History, proof that restoration, even on a large scale, is possible and preferable.

In a recent professional article for the Association for Preservation Technology (APT) Bulletin, architects Walter Sedovic and Jill H. Gotthelf made a convincing case for retaining historic windows (“What Replacement Windows Can’t Replace: The Real Cost of Removing Historic Windows,” APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology, Vol. 36 April 2005, pp. 25-29). They argue, “Historic windows possess aesthetic and material attributes that simply cannot be replaced by modern replacement windows.”

This statement, which is directly in line with the Commission’s Guidelines dictating restoration over replacement, advises extreme caution when considering a building whose design and texture relies as heavily on its fenestration as the Apthorp. On its total of eight exterior and interior facades, the Apthorp features over 2,000 windows representing 23 different window types

This application proposes double-paned, non-true-divide, aluminum windows that do not even come close to matching the profiles of the originals. Also, of concern is the extruded aluminum brick mold which does not replicate the profile of the original brick mold. All of the new aluminum elements will read as glaringly thicker and more prominent, in essence “dumbing down” the building’s luxuriantly complex and detailed façade.

The applicant did not provide the community with a clear answer on the number of original windows remaining in the building or how the impossibility of restoring the windows was determined. However, a sidewalk survey of the façades persuades us that a majority of the windows are indeed original. Every effort should be made to restore them in the interest of preserving the aesthetic and material authenticity of this Individual Landmark.

Environmental Benefits

Sedovic and Gotthelf emphasize other, equally important environmental arguments for restoring original windows. Manufacturers of new aluminum windows make a strong pitch for the energy efficiency of their products. But, all told, new windows consume far more energy than they conserve for a variety of reasons including the energy costs of manufacturing, transporting and installing new windows; the need to remove and dispose of existing windows; and the limited lifespan of new windows versus historic windows that, restored and maintained, can last 100 years or more.

In addition, the overall energy efficiency of a new window unit is often far less than the U- or R-value of its individual parts. And once a new window fails, it is more difficult to restore than an old window, subjecting the building to an inescapable cycle of replacement that eats up money and energy. New window replacements are usually not as energy efficient as they

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constructed only with 90 degree angles. The shimming and sealing that is attempted to correct this problem is often poorly executed, making the advertised energy efficiency almost impossible to attain in reality.

In-Kind Replacement

For examples of successful replacement with wood windows, the applicant need look no further than the Belnord, (which the AIA guide calls the Apthorp's "cousin") building at Broadway and 86th Street, and Harperly Hall, a 1911 Arts & Crafts apartment house at 1 West 64th Street, both of which have successfully replaced their original windows with new, mahogany windows. Although many residents of these buildings preferred restoration to replacement, they also appreciate the merits of the new wood windows. All things considered, they agree, the replacements have been the right move.

We reiterate the plea by the Preservation League of New York (see handout for submitted letter) when it listed original wood windows on the 2006 Most Endangered List: "While often seen as interchangeable parts, windows are actually one of the most important aspects of a building's historic material and appearance. They are also most likely to be the last item on a regular maintenance list and deteriorate over time. Each year thousands of historic wood windows are removed and sent to landfills in New York State alone."

The Apthorp's original wood windows are much too good for the landfill.

In conclusion, we provide this quote to ponder from the Sedovic and Gotthelf article on window restoration: "Windows are a critical element of sustainability, but sustainability is not just about energy. It is about making environmentally responsible choices regarding historic windows that take into account the spectrum of associated costs and effects. The choice of whether to replace or restore requires embracing a more encompassing definition of sustainability. The answer is not as simplistic as some would have us believe." Given the Mayor's PlaNYC initiative and its focus on sustainability, we suggest that helping stewards of landmarks make environmentally responsible choices about their properties is solidly within the mandate of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

¹ White, Norval and Elliot Willensky. The AIA Guide to New York City: The Classic Guide to New York's Architecture (New York: Random House, 2000) 345.