



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
Discovery Play Park
Central Park West and West 100th Street
Central Park
August 7, 2007**

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 modify, replace fencing and alter pathways in this playground, constructed in 1936 and rebuilt circa 1972, in this English Romantic-style public park designed in 1856 by Olmsted and Vaux.

It's been a long road since the Central Park Conservancy began its renovation of the park's first of five Adventure Playgrounds in 1997. Back then, parents and others in the community rose up to oppose the demolition of Richard Dattner's West 67th Street Adventure Playground (1966). Over the past decade, the Conservancy, the Landmarks Commission, Art Commission and the public at large have developed a new appreciation for both Modernism and the importance of preserving the multiple layers of our city's complex past. Citing Central Park as one of New York's most compelling examples of this historical layering, LANDMARK WEST! has been involved with the five playground renovations and brought the designers to work with the Conservancy. The Conservancy has kept pace with this shift in attitude and adopted a more sensitive approach to retaining the spirit of the 20th-century Adventure Playgrounds while making adjustments to meet what they describe as current safety and accessibility standards and avoiding the "cookie-cutter," pre-fabricated construction approach to playground design that has stripped many contemporary playgrounds of any shred of individuality and excitement.

The Conservancy has put forward what our Committee considers, overall, a laudably preservation-minded proposal to renovate the Discovery Play Park at Central Park West and West 100th Street. The Conservancy has made three presentations to our Committee over the past six months to keep us informed about changes in its plans and has revised its design in direct response to many of our comments. This kind of back and forth discussion, together with helpful guidance from the Landmarks Commission, has resulted in the successful reconstruction of other Adventure Playgrounds, most notably Heckscher Playground and the Ancient Playground. With this last of five playgrounds, it is clear that the Conservancy continues to work towards "getting it right" and repeating their successes with the previous playground renovations. To that end, our Committee is in favor of the direction of the treehouses and spray feature and has several recommendations for improvements to the current proposal—particularly with respect to the cone-shaped climber, the use of sand, the bunker structure, alterations to the playground plan and the proposed metal surface finish.

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Description of the Discovery Play Park

The Discovery Play Park was the direct product of neighborhood activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To raise awareness for needed improvements to the Moses-era playground at West 100th Street, 500 people attended, in the words of the *New York Times*, a “rollicking neighborhood happening” with a tumbling group and an Ibo dance ensemble. Husband of one of the chief organizers, Kenneth Ross and colleagues James Ryan and William Jacquette were selected to improve an existing playground at this location. The late architect and critic Peter Blake commended the Discovery Play Park in his Cityscape Awards for *New York* magazine and offered a “Gilded Lollipop” to the Landmarks Commission for “certifying” the design’s “inspired madness.” He noted that the designers Ross, Ryan and Jacquette “sensibly and successfully reverted to their own childhoods to research the design.”

Designed for interactive play, the Discovery Play Park is composed of a system of geometries, anchored by the cone-shaped climber and circular spray feature, with the “spine”-like bridge providing armature. As with other Central Park Adventure Playgrounds, the main play elements, including treehouses, were situated within a field of sand, an integral part of their design and, in and of itself, a creative play feature for children.

Central Elements of the Playground Worth Preserving

Treehouses

Among our initial concerns voiced to the applicant were that the treehouse platforms—to be rebuilt with metal rails—did not capture the “woody” spirit of the original. We are pleased with the latest concept which incorporates vertical wooden members applied to the safety mesh.

The Cone

Our Committee supports the Conservancy’s efforts to preserve the tunnel and original brick/tile surface of the cone-shaped climber. In our meetings with the applicant, we discussed the treatment of the circle enclosure at the west entrance to the tunnel. This circle-shaped pit plays an important role in the geometry of the cone climber, and we would like to see it preserved as is. The removal of one section of the circle to accommodate disabled playground users and caregivers would not wholly undermine this geometry. However, we object to the removal of the cantilevered concrete bench in the circle’s interior. This bench serves a functional purpose as a convenient perch for a caregiver and, in the words of one committee member, as a “conference room for children at play”. This type of feature recalls a recent quote in *The New York Times*, citing the need for playgrounds to “encourage the kind of social, sensory, interactive and individual fantasy play that children need”. In closing, the removal of this cantilevered bench seems unnecessary. At 69 inches in diameter, the circle is sufficiently wide to accommodate users and provide entry to the pyramid’s tunnel.

Bowl-like Spray Feature

The two, main circular elements in the playground, the cone and the sunken spray feature, relate to one another like a “volcano” and “crater.” The Conservancy has successfully redesigned the spray feature, which serves as a sculptural foil to the cone, to respect the primary circular geometries of the playground while becoming accessible to different kinds of users.

Sand

Sand is a signature feature of Central Park’s Adventure Playgrounds. We have heard the applicant’s arguments in favor of using a synthetic replacement material, but will go on record that “fuzzy sand” is an untested material in Central Park and is not a suitable substitute for sand in terms of aesthetics or play value. Through a considerable amount of press recently, notably a playground designed by architect David Rockwell for Lower Manhattan, the NYC Parks Department has declared a renewed commitment to using sand in playgrounds. As the current proposal reduces the playground’s sand area to little more than a sand box, we would like to see stronger evidence of this commitment in the Discovery Play Park’s reconstruction.

Bunker Structure

Noted by designer James Ryan for its “hyperbolic paraboloid” roof, we feel that the concrete storage building, significant and intriguing as an example of Brutalist design, should be preserved in this proposal. This quirky structure harkens back to the days when playgrounds were more progressive and had play assistants, much like the planned Rockwell Group playground that the Parks Department is planning to build near the South Street Seaport. Although this building may be utilitarian, it is interesting original fabric and it would be a shame to see it go if it could be refurbished and used, rather than rebuilding something pre-fabricated and new.

Alterations to the Playground Plan

The Conservancy has proposed to alter the plan of the playground at the southwest corner. This will incorporate additional plantings in this location and obscure the view of the playground from Central Park West. The interaction between the playground and the street is an integral part of the Discovery Play Park’s design and should not be compromised as part of this proposal.

Metal Finish

With respect to the powder coating proposed for the metal finishes within the playground, we feel that a “natural” or galvanized finish would be more appropriate than the proposed reflective, almost glittery finish that has been presented.

In closing, we commend the applicant for its attentiveness to the design of the Discovery Play Park and look forward to seeing its successful execution.