

# Architecture Plus !

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**Gene A. Norman, Architect**

September 30, 2004

The Honorable Robert B. Tierney  
Chairman  
The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission  
1 Center Street, Ninth Floor  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chairman Tierney:

I respectfully write to urge the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) to conduct a Public Designation Hearing regarding the former Hunting Hartford Museum Building located at 2 Columbus Circle, Manhattan.

Except for three prior instances, I have declined from making public statements before the Commission or writing to its Chair, since the end of my tenure as Chairman of the LPC fifteen years ago. On each occasion I was prompted by a desire to prevent the Commission, in my opinion, from bringing harm to itself or to the Landmark Law. The first time was to request that more designation attention and protection be given to the Harlem community; desperately needed because of the heightened development pressures that were beginning in the early 1990's. The second instance was to prevent the approval of what seemed to me as inappropriate alterations to Rockefeller Center. Alterations that would have lessened the significance of this very important landmark. The third occasion was on September twenty-first of this year, when I gave testimony in support of the proposed designation of St. Aloysius Roman Catholic Church and Church of All Saints (Roman Catholic), Parish House and School, all properties located in Harlem. Although I am in favor of these outstanding ecclesiastical structures becoming Designated Landmarks I ended my testimony by calling for a Designation Hearing on The Church of St. Thomas, The Apostle and questioning the LPC practice of almost never holding a Designation Hearing when an owner opposes Designation, as is the case with The Church of St. Thomas, The Apostle.

My letter today speaks to the need of conducting a Designation Hearing on 2 Columbus Circle, a building which has been denied a hearing, I fear, for the same reasons that The Church of St. Thomas, The Apostle has - owner opposition.

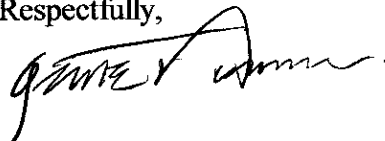
As you know, the Landmarks Law does not contain any provisions for exempting a property from designation due to an owner's objection. It has been, however, my observation that since the designation of the Dvorak House, off Stuyvesant Square, by the LPC in the early 1990's and the overturning of this designation by the City Council's failure to affirm the designation, in part due to objections raised by the owner, very few properties have been taken to a Designation Hearing when an owner objects to designation. I find this practice to be very troubling and in the case of 2 Columbus Circle believe that it will result in the demolition of the building without benefit of a review by the LPC.

A Designation Hearing should not be thought of as a step that will be followed by an actual designation by the LPC. It is not. A Designation Hearing is a means of collecting information, it allows interested or knowledgeable members of the public an opportunity to speak for *or* against designation, it allows an owner to voice their concerns and most of all, it permits the full Commission membership, assisted by the LPC staff with preliminary research, to weigh the merits of the building after hearing all sides, and then reach a decision.

From my own experience I know this to be true. Some twenty years ago the Commission conducted a Designation Hearing on a property known as the Convent of the Little Sisters, located on Lexington Avenue in the East 80's. The Sisters' Order had sold the building, and hoped for demolition so that they could continue their work elsewhere. The community wished for designation, based upon the fame of the architect. A Hearing was held and after four hours of testimony the full LPC discussed the matter and voted unanimously not to designate.

Much attention has been focused on the fate of 2 Columbus Circle. I note that in the past months this interest has been increasing to reflect the growing concern over the Commission's lack of positive action on this building. Hundreds of letters from a wide spectrum of interested individual New Yorkers and organizations have been sent requesting a Designation Hearing. Most of these letters are from Architects and others familiar with design and architectural history, all citing the building as a fine example of the notable modern architect - Edward Durell Stone. The Commission owes a response to the concerns raised by this campaign to have the merits of this building reviewed by more than the Designation Committee. Don't let the "***Owners Opposition***" issue become a standard in determining when to hold a Designation Hearing. No hearing will result in demolition for this building, a hearing *may* still result in demolition, but the Commission will have done a great service to the entire landmark designation process by its examination and by acting on the merits you see or do not see.

Respectfully,



Gene A. Norman

C. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg