

Greetings, Neighbor...

Isn't Jules Feiffer's cover arresting (pun intended)? Keep it in the back of your mind as you read "Central Park: For Sale" (p. 2) and as you note – increasingly these days – the sale of corporate indulgences exploiting public property (e.g. the "Movado Clock" in Dante Park, facing Lincoln Center; the proposal to have corporate donor signs defacing directional maps in Central Park). On the positive side of things, would you believe that a high-ranking New York City official – in one of the City's historically maligned agencies, the Department of Buildings, made a dramatic, focused, high-energy difference in improving the City's quality of life? Check out our preservation profile of Gaston Silva – alas, recently resigned (p. 8). And for a heart-warming taste of the future, keep up with our long-in-gestation but now actually functioning education program in the Upper West Side's elementary schools. "School Bells Ring: A Landmark Lesson" tells the story of LW's partnership with the Manhattan School for Children and the successful piloting of *My Preservation Journal* at P.S. 166 (p. 9). We also have great stories on the fabulous art deco building at 55 CPW (p. 10) and the historic Mercer tiles that adorn 165 W. 72 St., more of which have been "archaeologically excavated" in the course of our 72nd Street Retail Assistance Project (pp. 3-4). Before you get to feeling too upbeat, we report in our Update the extremely disappointing refusal of the Landmarks Preservation Commission to calendar a hearing on the Goulet Garage and the "Missing Finger" (W. 64 & 65 Sts. – Updates, p. 11).

Preservationally Yours,

Arlene Simon, President

New York Architecture Now: Are We Getting What We Deserve?

was the topic of a panel discussion at the Municipal Art Society on October 6, 1998. Moderated by Carole Rifkind, panelists included Amanda Burden, Joseph Giovannini, Hugh Hardy, Rebecca Robertson, as well as historian Thomas Mellins (co-author of *New York 1930* and *New York 1960*), who spoke on the impact of recent changes to public spaces and the LW! 72nd Street project. His take on the subject:

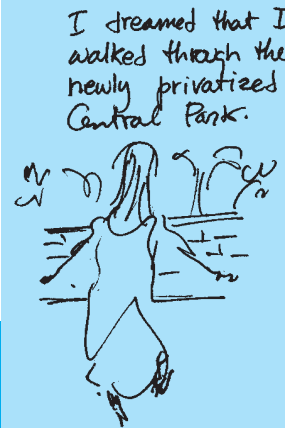
In contrast to the great public squares of Europe, which are defined by cathedrals and palaces, here public space is primarily in parks and the streets themselves. In the nineteenth century, the streets were used as marketplaces, not just conduits for traffic. But after WW II, we turned them over to the traffic engineers. In the 1970s, there was the beginning of a reaction to this; now there's a real rethinking of the idea of the street as public space. ...LW! is transforming 72nd Street between Broadway and Columbus Avenue. It's not just a matter of repaving the sidewalk and replanting the trees closer together, but of acknowledging that it is now commercial space and it takes away from public space when a canopy goes all the way out to the street. ...There's an effort to not make everything too neat and tidy, so you feel you're in New York, not a theme park. Here you have a privately-funded group talking to every shopkeeper on the street. They thank LW! for widening the street when all that was done was to repave it.

December Oculus, published by the AIA New York Chapter

Central Park: For Sale

by Arlene Simon

Unthinkable as it seems, you can actually buy property in Central Park. The Central Park Conservancy would be pleased to sell you a choice piece of land, on Fifth Ave., with your name emblazoned on a shiny new bronze plaque (see Jules Feiffer's cover). A recent example is the debacle over Central Park's Louis and Bessie Adler Playground, located on the east side of the park near 72 St. Designed in 1969 by the well-known architect Richard Dattner, this award-winning historic adventure playground is now threatened by private ambition in a public park. After receiving an offer of \$1.2 million from the Heilbrunn family, the Conservancy, without thinking twice, proposed to demolish the beloved Adler playground and to build a new one displaying the Heilbrunn name. Not only is this an insult to the original donor's family, but also to the families who enjoy the unique attributes of the existing playground.



If this scenario sounds familiar – it is. We fought a nearly identical battle three years ago to save the Central Park Adventure Playground at W. 67 St., also designed by Dattner in 1967. LANDMARK WEST! and Friends of the Adventure Playgrounds led the campaign to preserve and restore this pioneering design for children's play. After countless meetings with CB7 and concerned neighbors, we eventually prevailed upon the Conservancy to work with Dattner to preserve his original design intent while incorporating new safety guidelines.

Presently, LW!, working in conjunction with East Side neighbors and city-wide civic organizations has embarked on a similar strategy to protect the Adler Playground. Due

to overwhelming public support, CB8 (Upper East Side) recently voted to endorse our plan to retrofit the original design. Dattner has again generously offered his design services free of charge, and Robert Liberman, the grandson of the original donors, has offered to help pay for playground improvements. Pending Art Commission review this fall, the Conservancy will be working with Dattner to realize this goal.

Even though preservation professionals have become increasingly aware of the value of a broader range of landscape features, such as playgrounds, the Landmark Preservation Commission chose not to hold a public hearing for the Adler Playground.

Although private donations to the public park present the opportunity to restore landscape amenities, the Conservancy's misuse of these funds poses a threat to the park's historic landscape integrity. This has been shown by the examples of the adventure playgrounds, the Conservancy's ill-conceived 1996 plan to display corporate donor names on signs already too large and inappropriate for the park, and frequent park closings for private parties and television commercials. LW! is committed to preserving the distinctive features of our historic urban landscape, including the diversity of children's play environments in Central Park.

JULES FEIFFER

W. 72nd St. afficianados know that one of the most interesting buildings on the block (165 W. 72) is decorated with beautiful and unusual Mercer tiles. Sept. '99, security gate & Kinoko sign removed to fully reveal the tiles. **Bravo! Here's a short history of the man behind them.**

The Tileman's Castles

by Allen Freeman

More than a hundred years ago, a 41-year-old Pennsylvania gentleman-scholar by the name of Henry Chapman Mercer needed a pair of tongs for his old-fashioned fireplace. As Mercer scoured the hoard of a fellow Bucks Countian, who was in the habit of buying penny lots of obsolete, valueless utensils and other junk, it dawned on him that these objects illustrated the history of his state. "I was seized with a new enthusiasm and hurried over the country, rummaging the bake-ovens, wagon-houses, cellars, haylofts, smoke-houses, garrets, and chimney-corners on this side of the Delaware Valley," he later wrote.

Mercer created one of the first collections of Colonial and early Federal artifacts of its kind, and his vision – that one can chart humanity's course by studying its tools – foreshadowed today's material cultural studies. But Mercer's interests and accomplishments were much more far-ranging than this collection. Like Frank Lloyd Wright, Mercer was an architect who experimented and assimilated ideas from many sources. Like Thomas Edison, Mercer constructed his structures out of the relatively new medium of reinforced concrete. And like both great contemporaries, he was passionately driven. He became hellbent to rank as a first-class manufacturer of Arts and Crafts handcrafted tiles, and he succeeded. Sixty-six years after Mercer's death, his visible legacy remains in his three major buildings – his house called Fonthill, his pottery and tile works, and the Mercer Museum – and their unique contents.

Mercer was born in Doylestown in 1856 to well-educated parents of modest means. He was able to pursue his "subjects" in large part through the good will of his Aunt Elizabeth, a sort of Victorian Auntie Mame. She treated her precocious 14-year-old nephew, Henry, to a five-month European Grand Tour, the first of Mercer's many travels abroad. After extensive scholarly excursions following graduation from Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Mercer returned to the University of Pennsylvania as a museum manager in 1891. Three years later he was advanced to the position of curator of American and prehistoric archaeology and led archaeological digs in the U.S. and the Yucatan Peninsula. In early in 1897 he quit, returned to Doylestown, and remained self-employed for the rest of his life.

Mercer's first step was to continue his quest for tools and to try to secure the interest of the Bucks County Historical Society. But the historical society's indifference to this and other of his projects led him to resign



from it in 1899 and to start a second collection of preindustrial tools while concentrating on another newfound interest, tilemaking. In 1908 he began the construction of his house, Fonthill. Largely using an inheritance from his aunt, Mercer took four years to complete Fonthill's 44 rooms on seven staggered levels. Instead of painting or wallpapering the rooms, he textured the concrete and arranged his own and antique tiles on the walls, columns, floors, stairs, and risers. Fonthill was a bachelor's showplace reflecting Mercer's interests and fantasies and serving as a kind of tile museum/showroom.

Mercer and his workers built the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works in the two years that Fonthill was being finished. It was named not for the Moravian sect, which makes neither pottery nor tiles, but for a stove plate that Mercer associated with the Moravian Church and was the inspiration for Mercer's first tile. According to Cleota Reed's *Henry Chapman Mercer and the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works*, Mercer himself designed every tile he ever produced, creating original designs and adaptations of old tiles or printed images. Among his many commissions, Mercer tiled the floors of the Pennsylvania capitol in Harrisburg and decorated the stucco facades of the Marlborough-Blenheim Hotel in Atlantic City.

He was well established as a tilemaker long before he built the Moravian Tile Works, beginning in 1899 with conventional pressed decorative designs and soon advancing to large quantities of plain tiles for floors or walls. By 1902 he was assembling mosaic tiles from pieces of clay, and from there he advanced to brocade tiles, which were even more sculptural and intricate. And he designed dozens of series of tiles that engagingly portrayed such narratives as the discovery and exploration of America, Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle, and the Old Testament's Samson and Delilah.

By 1914 when Mercer turned his attention to the construction of his third landmark building, a museum to house his collections, he had amassed more than 15,000 items. He designed a structure to wrap around the collection. Objects were arranged by type so that viewers could compare one kitchen stove with a dozen others, one apple parer with 40 others. In contrast to today's museum displays, which frequently start with a concept and arrange objects to tell a story, Mercer's was an unforced way to understand and appreciate objects for themselves. Mercer died in 1930.

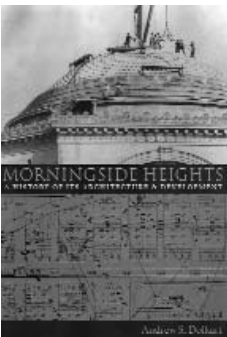
Today the historical society that Mercer helped found administers the Fonthill house museum, the Mercer Museum, and the Spruance Library, which contains many of Mercer's materials. The Moravian Pottery and Tile Works is operated by the county as a working history museum where reproductions of Mercer tiles are made. Each is a National Historic Landmark.

Adapted from material in Allan Freeman's article in the November/December 1996 issue of Preservation magazine. ©National Trust for Historic Preservation

Books in Brief

Morningside Heights: A History of Its Architecture and Development by Andrew Scott Dolkart. Columbia University Press, 1998, 505 pages, \$50. The winner of the American Association of Publishers Scholarly Book Award for best book in Architecture and Urban Design, Dolkart’s book is highly recommended by Christopher Gray. From his “Streetscapes” column in the *New York Times*, Gray writes, “Books about local history are often amateurishly elementary or impenetrably arcane.

Morningside Heights: A History of its Architecture and Development combines recondite research with bare-knuckle history, interweaving the nuts and bolts of neighborhood building with a messy human drama of rivalry, greed, marketing, bigotry and idealism.”



See our book offer p. 6

A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century by Witold Rybczynski. Scribner, 1999, 416 pages, \$28. This biography explains how Frederick Law Olmsted changed the face of America with a vision of the American landscape as a reflection of the national character and by making America’s urban spaces livable. Suzanna Lessard of the *New York Times Book Review* writes, “[an] excellent biography... a straightforward work, thorough and respectful, yet easeful in a way that is reminiscent of Olmsted himself.” Thanks to Scribner and

Martin Barabas for the generous donation of this book for our book offer.

Upcoming Events: Walking Tours

West 72nd Street Join architectural historian Andrew S. Dolkart for a tour of West 72nd Street from Central Park to Riverside Park, a fascinating boulevard of rowhouses, great apartment buildings, and shops. This tour will discuss development and change on West 72nd Street, the impact of the elevated railroad and subway, and the restoration work on the block between Amsterdam and Columbus avenues recently undertaken under the direction of LW!

Wednesday, September 15, 6-8 pm.

Morningside Heights Join Andrew S. Dolkart for a walk through Morningside Heights, one of New York’s most extraordinary neighborhoods with its concentration of architecturally-distinguished institutions. Dolkart, author of the award-winning *Morningside Heights: A History of Its Architecture and Development* (see Books in Brief), will discuss the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, St. Luke’s Hospital, and the Columbia University campus, as well as the buildings that form New York’s earliest middle-class apartment house community.

Saturday, October 23, 11 am - 1 pm.

The cost of each tour is \$10. For reservations and meeting locations call LW!, 496-8110. Space is limited. Don’t forget your binoculars!

Cover illustration created by Jules Feiffer.
Back cover photographs: top photo, Kristen Pracher; bottom photo, Rosetta Kwong.

LANDMARK WEST!

Support LANDMARK WEST! – we need your help. Please return this form with your tax-deductible contribution.

★ A special offer: Contribute \$150 or more, and receive a gift of either *Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century*, by Witold Rybczynski; *Morningside Heights: A History of Its Architecture and Development*, by Andrew Scott Dolkart (signed copy); or another book from our collection.

1 \$30 1 \$50 1 \$100 1 \$150 ★ 1 \$250 1 \$500 1 \$1000

1 Frederick Law Olmsted 1 Morningside Heights 1 Collection

1 Whatever you give will help \$ _____

1 Thanks, you can keep the book...but here’s my gift of \$150

1 I would like to make a gift in honor of _____

1 I will do volunteer work for LANDMARK WEST! – send me a form

1 My employer offers a Matching Grants Program – the form is enclosed

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1 I would like to be notified of walking tours (e-mail if possible)

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Thank you for your support!

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About LANDMARK WEST!

LANDMARK WEST! is a non-profit award-winning community group working to preserve the best of the Upper West Side’s architectural heritage from 59 to 110 Street between Central Park West and Riverside Drive. Since 1985 it has worked to achieve landmark status for individual buildings and historic districts. Today, LANDMARK WEST! is the proud curator of the area’s 2,605 designated landmarks (up from only 337 in 1985), and continues to promote awareness of these architectural treasures and the urgent need to protect them against insensitive change and demolition.

LANDMARK WEST!

THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE
45 WEST 67 STREET NEW YORK NY 10023 (212) 496-8110



See p. 1 "Are We Getting What We Deserve?"

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Preservation Profile: Gaston Silva

by Thomas Mellins



As Commissioner of the New York City Department of Buildings (DOB) from 1996 until May 7, 1999, Gaston Silva provided that key municipal agency with bold leadership and oversaw a decisive shift in focus from an essentially reactive stance to a proactive one. Silva, an architect who worked as a project manager and an associate at James Stewart Polshek & Partners from 1981 to 1991, and a preservationist who served as a member of the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) from 1987 until 1991, brought a valuable knowledge and appreciation of both aesthetic and historic preservation issues to his role as Commissioner.

Silva established new in-house "teams" to examine and analyze specific key issues. Broadening and sharpening the DOB's purview, such groups focused on the physical condition of public schools throughout the city; the condition of building facades, particularly as applies to ornamentation; and perhaps most surprisingly and interestingly, 'quality of life' issues in Queens. A department-sponsored symposium on building signage went a long way toward clarifying issues revolving around this essential but often ill-considered or abused visual element of urban life. Computerization of department record-keeping systems radically increased efficiency; additionally, computerization allowed for better coordination with the LPC, ensuring that the enforcement of DOB regulations did not cause the landmarking process to be bypassed.

Under Mr. Silva's leadership, the DOB also emphasized code enforcement. In 1998, a new staff position, Assistant Commissioner in Charge of Enforcement, was established. While the intended purpose of the position was not expressly to serve a preservationist agenda, rigorous enforcement is nonetheless a boon to the preservation community.

Nowhere were the results of the department's new stance and energy level more striking than on the block of West 72nd Street between Columbus and Amsterdam avenues where LANDMARK WEST's campaign has been brought to fruition in part by the efforts of the department. Compliance to department codes has been a key factor in the block's resuscitation; also important, however, was the emergence of the department as a reliable ally in the ongoing struggle to improve the quality of our built environment. As an architect and committed urbanist, Silva is positive about some of the city's current architectural activity, citing the new Hayden Planetarium, designed by James Stewart Polshek & Partners and presently under construction, as an exciting and stylistically bold addition to a designated landmark building. The landmarking process, he feels, not only preserves important buildings from the past, but makes for better new architecture as well.

Thomas Mellins is an architectural historian and the co-author of *New York 1930*, *New York 1960*, and the forthcoming *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age*.

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School Bells Ring: A Landmark Lesson

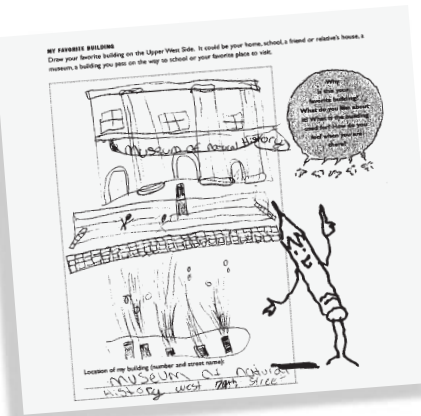
by Carlo Lamagna and Julie Maurer

LANDMARK WEST! has gone back to school. As part of our mission to strengthen the bond between the Upper West Side community and its architecture, LW! has two programs working with education consultants and teachers to introduce architecture and preservation into the classroom at two Upper West Side public schools. By integrating design and historical studies into their curricula, P.S. 166 and the Manhattan School for Children (MSC) are instilling in students concepts of architecture, its importance in their everyday lives, the story of their neighborhood's development, and the need to preserve the past for their own future enjoyment.

The first program, originally conceived by LW! in 1996, took place this spring at P.S. 166 on W. 89 St. (proposed by LW! to the LPC for landmark designation), where two fourth grade classes learned about preservation with the help of LW! and *My Preservation Journal*. Conceptualized by LW! board member Carlo Lamagna and written by LW! design educator Julie Maurer, *My Preservation Journal* re-introduces students to their neighborhood through interactive activities, stunning archival photographs, design by Knickerbocker, and fanciful line drawings by R.O. Blechman of Ink Tank. Students get their own journals to write and draw in, and to tote around as they interview neighbors, use old photographs of their neighborhood to become "History Detectives," and learn to identify architectural styles and details. These and many more fun exercises challenge teachers and students to become active and creative participants in preserving the Upper West Side. The pilot program, funded by grants from the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA), the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Furthermore program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, was so well-received that *My Preservation Journal*, now in its final stage of edits, will be back in the classroom in 1999-2000.

For LW!'s second education project of the 1998-1999 school year, LW! and MSC, an alternative public elementary school (grades K-7) located in the Robert E. Simon Building on W. 109th St. (also proposed by LW! to the LPC for landmark designation), received a grant from NYSCA to develop a curriculum to introduce children to design and preservation. A project team — led by coordinators Maurer and Carolyn Halpin-Healy (MSC parent) and consisting of LW! design professionals (Polly Carpenter, Sue Radmer, and Eric Wakin), MSC teachers from each grade level, an art specialist, and a parent coordinator — continues to develop the curriculum with an eye on

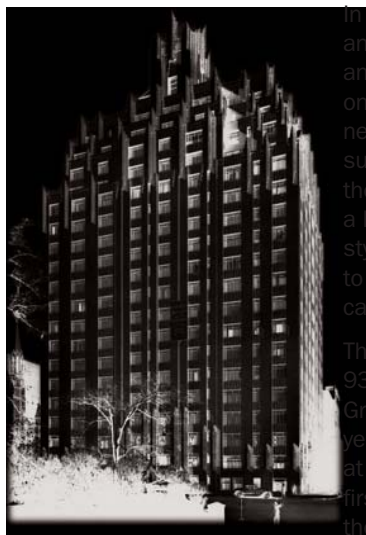
strengthening students' aesthetic judgment, analytical and creative thinking skills, mathematical ability, and general cultural awareness. Following teacher workshops conducted by Maurer, the MSC teachers formulated lessons appropriate for each grade level and with a unique focus on architecture, weaving a thread that connects children's studies as they move from one year to the next.



An Art Deco Landmark: The Changing Colors

by Christopher Gray

Central Park West, more than any other Manhattan street, was influenced by the Art Deco movement, which in a brief outburst of construction in 1929 and 1930 changed the character of what had until then been a street of fairly standard architectural style. One of the most distinctive buildings, 55 CPW, is midway through a restoration of its unusual brick facade.



In the late 1920's construction surged up and down the street, in part because of the anticipated IND subway line, which opened on Central Park West in 1932. Some of the new buildings were stylistically fairly standard, such as the Beresford at 81st Street. But in the two-year period before construction waned, a handful of builders adopted the new Art Deco style, and the results were prominent enough to make Central Park West a sort of display case for the movement.

The first of the buildings was 336 CPW, at 93rd Street, designed in 1928 by Schwartz & Gross for the developer Edgar Levy. The next year, Schwartz & Gross filed plans for 55 CPW, at the southwest corner of 66th Street, the first full-blown Art Deco building on the thoroughfare. On the exterior Schwartz & Gross

also departed from tradition, designing a facade that changed in shade from bottom to top, from deep purple to yellow-white on the water-tank enclosure. Color was a tool increasingly used in the 1920s, both with polychrome terra cotta and also in overall effects, like Raymond Hood's black and gold 1924 American Radiator Building at 40 W. 40 St.

"New modernistic design of exterior with beautiful shaded color scheme," the rental brochure for 55 CPW read, and in 1930 Real Estate magazine wrote that, "on a bright sunny day the effect will not be unlike that of the Jung Frau, that most beloved snowcapped Alpine peak." Early tenants included Rudy Vallee and Raymond Loewy, the industrial designer.

After 55 CPW came five more Art Deco buildings: the Century, from 62nd to 63rd Streets; the Majestic, from 71st to 72nd; 241 CPW, at 84th Street (also by Schwartz & Gross for Earle & Calhoun); the Eldorado, from 90th to 91st; and the Ardsley, at 92nd, all completed by 1931. The other major avenues had no such concentration, and these formed a signature line for Central Park West.

Deterioration at the roof level of 55 CPW led the co-op to undertake work (with Israel Berger & Associates) that evolved into a facade-by-facade restoration. They have had to repair a few bricks — a complicated matter, given the variation in shading. But extensive testing indicates that, unlike the brick, Schwartz & Gross used a uniform color for the mortar from bottom to top. The 66th Street side was restored last year, Central Park West facade this year, and the rear elevations in following years, at an average of \$100,000 per side.

Adapted from material in Christopher Gray's New York Times July 11, 1999 article.

Updates: The Good, the Bad and the Tasty

Centennial Historians

In January, LANDMARK WEST! president Arlene Simon and board members Andrew Scott Dolkart and Sarah Bradford Landau were among those honored as Centennial Historians of the City of New York by New York City 100, "in recognition of [their] professional achievement in history and special interest studying the past of this great metropolis during its centennial year." The Centennial Historians were selected by a committee appointed by Kenneth T. Jackson, representing the five boroughs of the City as well as the larger community of scholars around the country. New York City 100 plans for the group to serve as the base for the creation of a larger network, the Alliance for New York City History, which, it is hoped, will serve as a unified voice for members of the historical community doing work on aspects of the city's history.

"Missing Finger" Denial

On August 3, LANDMARK WEST! received very disappointing news from Landmarks Preservation Commission Chairman Jennifer Raab that our request for a public hearing on the proposed extension of the UWS/CPW Historic

District had been denied. Since 1997, we have sought – with broad support – to include the "Missing Finger" (West 64 & 65 Streets, Broadway to CPW) and its anchor, the Goelet Garage at 1926 Broadway (the Saloon/ World Gym building). (See our Spring 1997 newsletter article "Automobile Row: Garage to Go?") No substantive reason was given for the denial. None exists. In our report to the LPC, LW! identified these blocks as "a paradigm of the diverse styles and building types" on the Upper West Side. The Goelet Garage is significant not only as New York's earliest surviving automobile garage but also, in the words of Tony Hiss, as "the principal form giver for the modern incarnation of [Lincoln] Square." The day we lose these assets will be sad indeed.

This is not the first exhibition of myopia by the LPC and, unfortunately, it won't be the last. But, LW! is in this battle for the long term, and when we set our mind to something, we are persistent in our drive to get it done.

A Home for the Holidays

"Using gingerbread, rather than granite, anyone can be a Donald Trump or even a Stanford White this season."

–New York Times.

In December 1998, LANDMARK WEST! threw its baker's hat into the ring and participated in the first-ever gingerbread competition and benefit bake-off sponsored by the World Monuments Fund and the Municipal Art Society. A distinguished panel of judges – Le Cirque 2000's pastry chef Jacques Torres; architecture critic Paul Goldberger; architect Hugh Hardy; and preservationists extraordinaire Margot Gayle and Anthony C. Wood – awarded prizes to participants from fourteen teams from architecture firms and non-profit preservation organizations. LW! was awarded an honorable mention for our rendition of the West End Collegiate Church at 77th St. and WEA (an individual landmark), constructed with the special help of Madge and Barry Rosenberg of the West Side bakery, Soutine (104 W. 70 St.).



LANDMARK WEST!

THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

I dreamed that I walked through the newly privatized Central Park.



I enter with a swipe of my CentroCard.



I stroll toward the Sony Bathhouse on a Walkway brought to us through the courtesy of American Express.



I take a row on Lake Bell Atlantic.



Followed by a run around the G.E. Reservoir.



I cross the Great Trump lawn on my way to the Time Warner Zoo.



I rest on a Donor Bench from Bergdorfs, shaded by a Calvin Klein Spruce.



I spot a budding azalea. I am shocked to see it is without corporate sponsorship.



I report the azalea.



Park Op-Art: Jules Feiffer

NEWSLETTER FALL 1999