National Arts Club Talk
Kate Wood, President, LANDMARK WEST!
April 19, 2017

Stephen F. Harmon

Good evening. I'm thrilled to be here tonight with all of you, at the National Arts Club, a rare example of a "landmark trifecta"—not only a New York City Individual Landmark, but also protected as part of the Gramercy Park Historic District, and designated as a National Historic Landmark. I can't think of anyplace I would rather be, and I'm guessing that you all, fellow lovers of landmarks, feel the same. So, thank you.

As Steve mentioned, I come here tonight wearing my LANDMARK WEST! hat. LW! is the "watchdog" organization defending the historic architecture of the Upper West Side, and even more important the quality of life that architecture sustains, now and into the future. This is the

arena in which I cut my teeth as an advocate, as a professional, and as a citizen. And it's the lens through which I view the world.

Let me say right off the bat, we at LW! are not the only ones doing historic preservation on the Upper West Side. Far from it, and that's a great thing. There are thousands of people out there taking care of our neighborhood, our city…many of you, I know. But LW! is the only Upper West Side group single-mindedly focused, full time, on architecture and its essential role in our community, our daily lives. It's a big job, and it's one that we take very seriously. Because, as you probably know from your own experience and from some of the episodes I'll talk about tonight, the preservation of the Upper West Side was hardly a sure thing.

I want to give fair warning that what you'll hear tonight is hardly a comprehensive history of every significant preservation battle. I can't possibly give credit to all of the people inside and outside of LW! who deserve the title of "neighborhood hero". Fortunately, there are a lot of them, and I hope someday someone will write their stories.

Tonight's talk is basically a sequence of events, highlighting some of the episodes that, in retrospect and in light of what's happening today, seem the most significant. You may find yourselves thinking (as I have as I did my notes for this talk), "Does nothing ever change?". That really could be our title tonight, instead of "How the West Was Won". But I'm going to choose a more forward-looking, advocacy-driven alternative title: "The Case for a New Upper West Side Preservation Movement".

I think most of us are here tonight because we believe there's something special, something magical about the Upper West Side.

Stephen F. Harmon

To the Dutch is was "Bloemendahl" (Bloomingdale) or the "vale of flowers", to Washington Irving it was "a sweet rural valley".

Stephen F. Harmon

By the 20th century, it was lauded for its "powerful iconography of twin-towered apartment buildings" and its "rich variety of interrelated buildings that produce a complex urban area."

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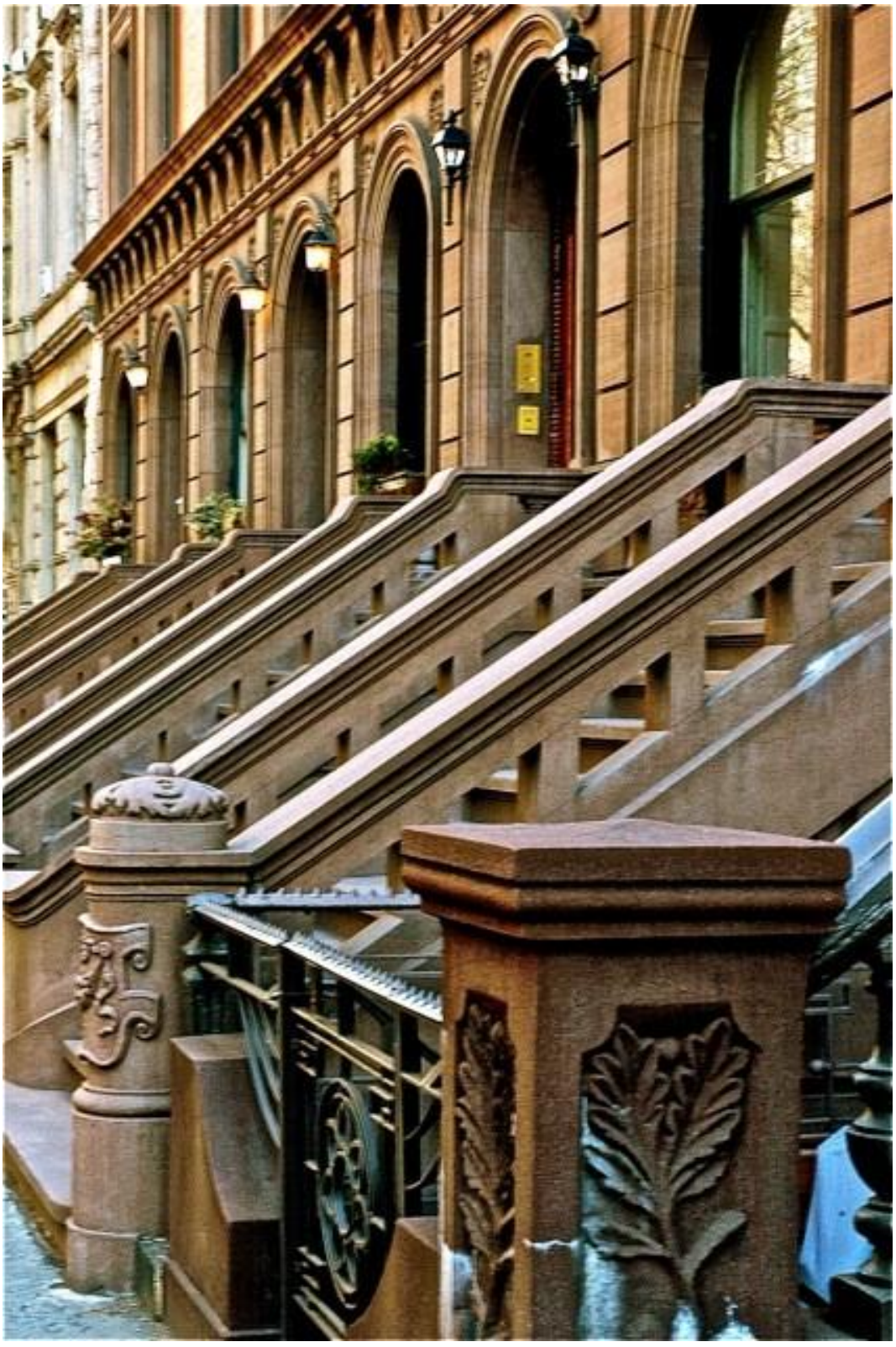


Stephen F. Harmon

And by the late 1970s, this was the future staring Upper West Siders in the face. Pretty much all we have left of All Angels Church, the building that once anchored the corner of West End Avenue and 81st Street, is this photograph and the stone pulpit that was saved and put on prominent display in the American Wing at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

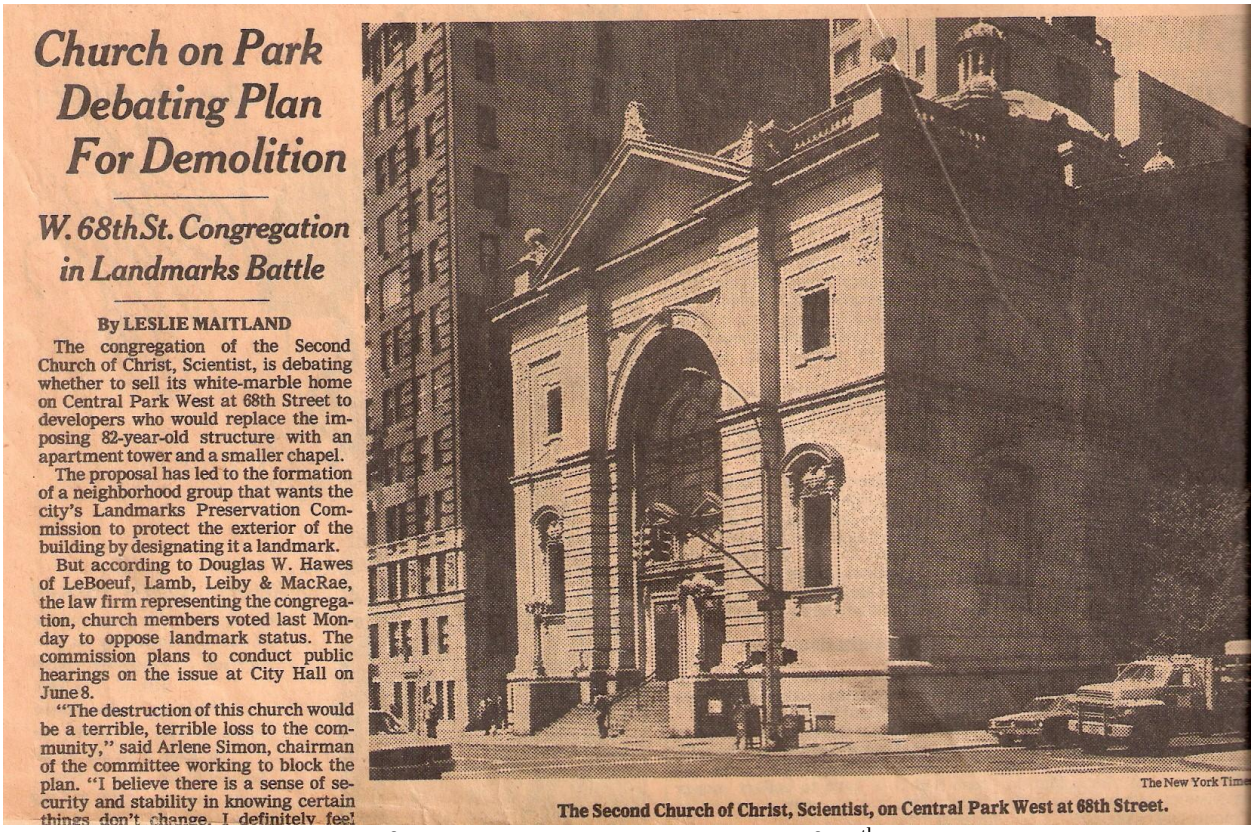
That's the first clue of the West Side preservation movement I ever saw, when I finally became a full-time New Yorker, my Anthropology & Archaeology bachelor's degree in hand, to be Administrative Assistant II in the Met's American Decorative Arts department. My preservation epiphany had come a few years earlier, at age 17, when I saw an ad for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in a copy of *Newsweek* magazine. My parents were educators and avid home do-it-yourselfers, and in that moment, all of the weekends of scraping and sanding, trips to battlefields and presidential libraries, tours of historic sites across America and Europe, it all came together. I was a preservationist.

But little did I know about the work of community advocates and what it takes to save a building that you don't own, with little economic leverage and the political winds blowing against you. It wasn't until 1998, when I arrived at LW! as a graduate intern, looking to apply what I was learning in Columbia's Historic Preservation and Urban Planning programs, that I learned what neighborhood preservation is all about.

By then, LW! was a robust, teenage advocate, having been founded by Arlene Simon in 1985, defending the Upper West Side's nearly 2,500 designated landmarks—that is, buildings that are protected either as Individual Landmarks, Interior Landmarks, Scenic Landmarks, or buildings within Historic Districts, and regulated by New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission under a law that was officially signed by Mayor Robert Wagner on this date, April 19, in 1965…

…a couple of years too late to save this, a loss that is still all too painful.

You'd think the lesson would have been learned. But, no, the "Penn Station" scenario plays out in every neighborhood, every year right up to this very day. Every community has its own "Penn Station", and every generation, it seems, has to learn this lesson for itself.



Church on Park Debating Plan For Demolition

W. 68th St. Congregation in Landmarks Battle

By LESLIE MAITLAND

The congregation of the Second Church of Christ, Scientist, is debating whether to sell its white-marble home on Central Park West at 68th Street to developers who would replace the imposing 82-year-old structure with an apartment tower and a smaller chapel.

The proposal has led to the formation of a neighborhood group that wants the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to protect the exterior of the building by designating it a landmark.

But according to Douglas W. Hawes of LeBoeuf, Lamb, Leiby & MacRae, the law firm representing the congregation, church members voted last Monday to oppose landmark status. The commission plans to conduct public hearings on the issue at City Hall on June 8.

"The destruction of this church would be a terrible, terrible loss to the community," said Arlene Simon, chairman of the committee working to block the plan. "I believe there is a sense of security and stability in knowing certain things don't change. I definitely feel

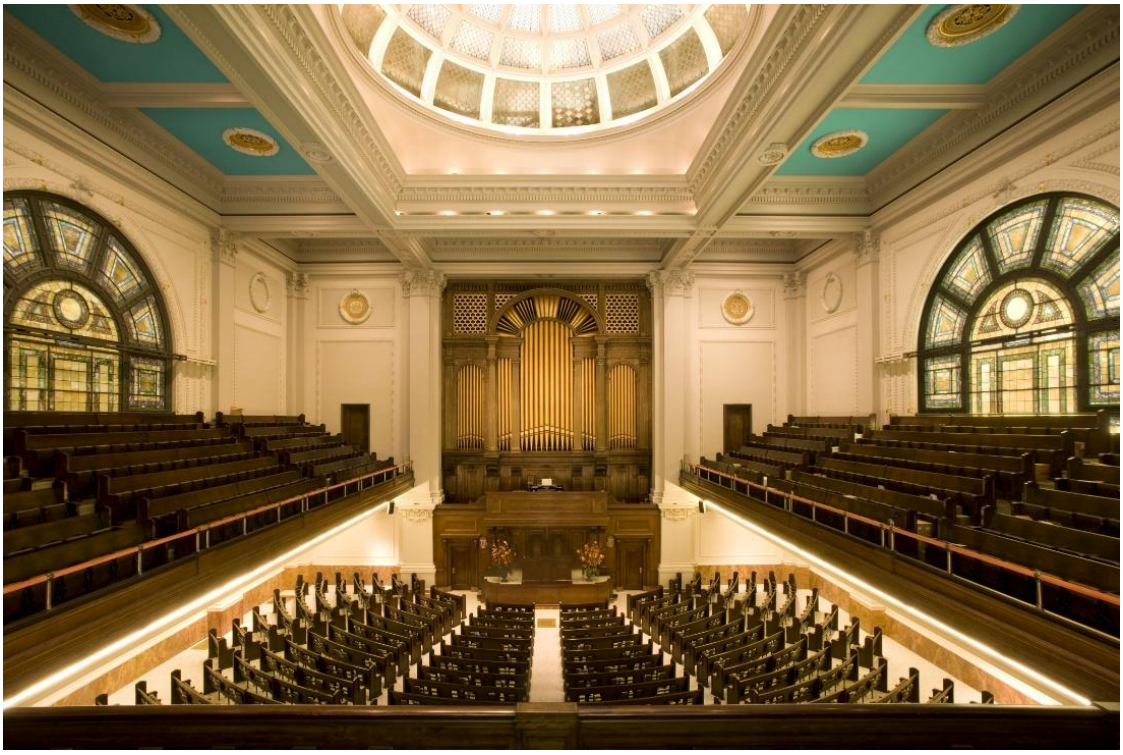
The New York Time

The Second Church of Christ, Scientist, on Central Park West at 68th Street.

In 1982, the Second Church of Christ Scientist, on the corner of 68th Street & Central Park West, was an Upper West Side "Penn Station".

And this was our "Madison Square Garden"… or rather buildings like this.

Let me share the good news that the church did not ultimately meet the same fate as Penn Station or All Angels.



Today, the Church has been beautifully restored, LW! gave it a preservation award, it has an active and engaged congregation who take care of the building, make it available for community events, organ concerts, Open House NY.

The key factor was having a local community of stakeholders willing to fight for it. For that, we can thank the Committee to Landmark the Second Church of Christ, Scientist, ordinary citizens who sounded the alarm that the church was in negotiations with developers to demolish its building and replace it with a tower. This was a wake-up call that even buildings that looked like landmarks, that in other neighborhoods would be landmarks, were not yet protected by the then-17-year-old Landmarks Law. Not coincidentally, the founder of the committee to save the church, Arlene Simon, went on to found LW! soon after, because clearly something needed to change, or else West Siders would continue to fight this same battle over and over again at different sites throughout the neighborhood, as indeed they were.

In fact, this episode did get the Landmarks Preservation Commission's attention, including its chair, Kent Barwick, the same chair who had gone to the mat to save Radio City Music Hall a few years earlier. That's another key factor, having a Landmarks Commission not only empowered but willing to insert itself. The Landmarks chair and other commissioners are appointed by the Mayor. So the legal authority and the political will to save landmarks are two very different things.

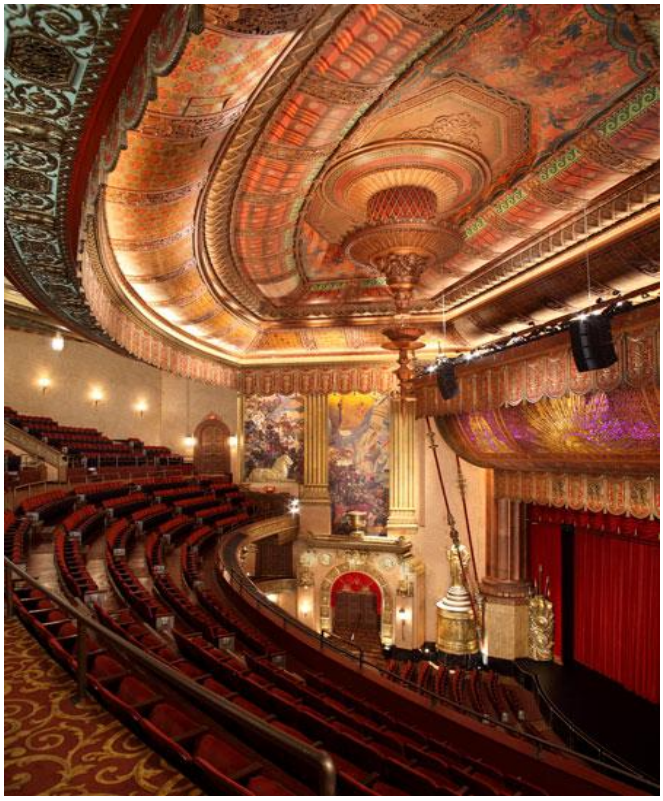
In the case of the Second Church of Christ, Scientist, the Commission held a public hearing, and told the church to stand down while it studied the potential for broader designation on the West Side.

Here's a survey of some of the landmarks designated on the UWS between 59th and 110th Streets back in the early 1980s. In the nearly 20 years since the Landmarks Law was passed, the Commission had designated 26 Individual Landmarks and 125 buildings in small historic districts, compared to 115 and 1400 on the Upper East Side.

Belnord Apartments (225 W. 86th St, 1908, H. Hobart Weekes)

New York Cancer Hospital (455 Central Park West, 1884-90, Charles Coolidge Haight)

Ansonia Hotel (2109 Broadway, 1904, Paul E.M. Duboy

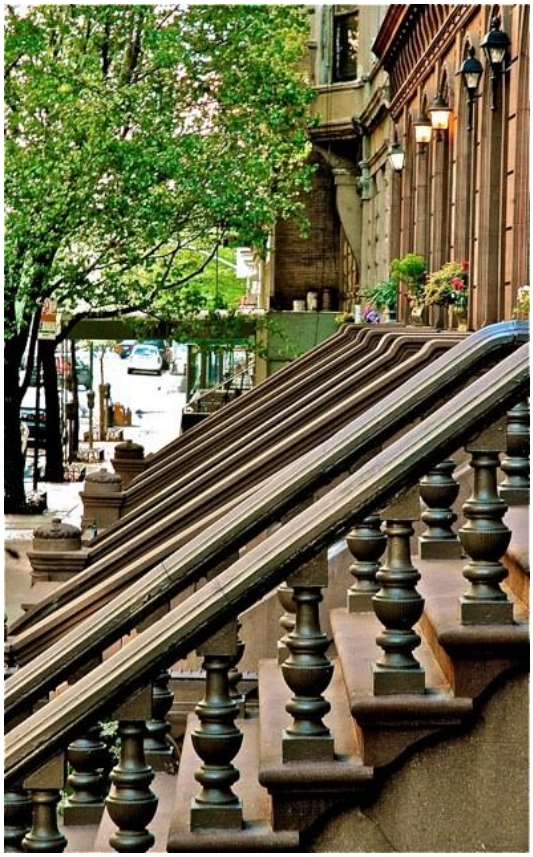


Beacon Theatre (2124 Broadway, 1929, Walter W. Ahlschlager)

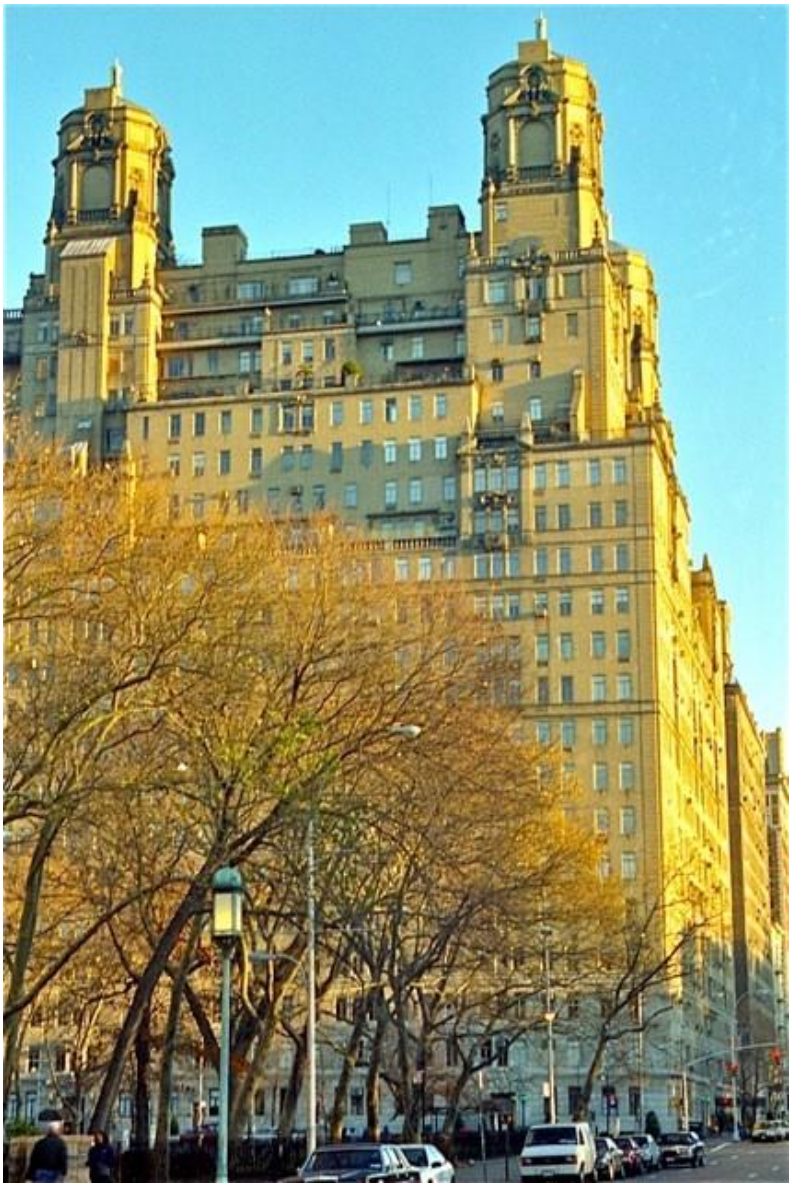
Dakota Apartments (1 W. 72nd St., 1884, Hnery J. Hardenbergh

When LW! was founded in 1985, here's a survey of what had not YET been protected LW's first "Wish List" of landmark designation priorities included…

Manhattan Avenue at W. 106th St.



Most brownstone blocks



Beresford Apartments (211 Central Park West, 1929, Emery Roth)

Iconic Central Park West towers were barely 50 years old (the same age as the original Penn Station when it was destroyed).

So, despite some headway, we were still living in the Wild West… Property values were skyrocketing…1961 zoning allowed, in fact encouraged development like…

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 31, 1981

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Has the City Sold Its Birthright For Air Rights?

Continued from Page 1

picture of more and more skyscrapers. And many of these buildings were made bigger than they ever had to be thanks to convoluted city zoning regulations that, instead of restricting development, actually end up yielding ever-larger structures.

A good case in point is the 41-story tower proposed to go atop a section of the West Side Y.M.C.A. on 63d Street off Central Park West. Like so many of the current crop of buildings, this skyscraper would be plopped atop a distinguished older building, which would become its base. This proposed tower is 20 percent bigger than it would otherwise have been, thanks to a provision in a new city zoning regulation allowing developers of luxury buildings the option of including some moderate-income units in exchange for the right to build a bigger building. Nothing is more needed than moderate-income housing, of course, but is it a fair tradeoff for the city to get it only at the price of bigger buildings?

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It is worth interjecting here that the Y.M.C.A. design, by the architectural firm of Beyer Blinder Bell, is not bad, and if it were not twice as big as it should be, it could even be called good. But that is something like saying that a hippopotamus would be just dandy if it were the size of a mouse. The real problem is that the intelligent aspects of this design, the campanile-like shaft with a pyramidal top and the many details that relate to the fine original Y.M.C.A. building by Dwight James Baum, mean only so much in the face of the impact a building like this has on the city as a whole. Whatever the architectural quality, this is still another tower, proposed at a time when we are already reeling from the catastrophic effects of more and more towers on the cityscape.

Indeed, the Y.M.C.A. tower would be cheek by jowl beside one very tall apartment tower, the 43-story One Lincoln Plaza, and across the street from the nearly-as-tall 30 Lincoln Plaza. Maybe, since the Y.M.C.A. tower is a better piece of architecture, the city should consider a deal: Order One Lincoln Plaza dismantled as the price for letting the new tower go ahead. At least that way we would end up with the same number of high-rises here, and even a net gain in architectural quality.

New York seems less interested in guiding and directing private development than in cheering it on.

Alas, this is not the kind of joke that our city administration would be likely even to find amusing. For all efforts have been directed toward more buildings, not fewer of them, and toward larger buildings, not smaller ones. The new zoning provision that would permit the Y.M.C.A. to make its tower 20 percent bigger than would otherwise have been allowed is consistent, at least in spirit, with many other zoning provisions of the last 20 years that offer bonuses of 20 percent in size in exchange for other public amenities — plazas, arcades, theaters, interior public atriums, and so forth.

These were all conceived with good intentions, but the results have generally been disastrous, and not only because the designs of so many plazas and arcades have been atrocious. It is also because it has meant larger buildings at a time when sane planning would suggest that we need to be thinking in terms of smaller ones. It seems never to have occurred to anyone that the most urgently needed public amenity might not be more plazas, but smaller buildings.

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Nowhere has the city's willingness to play handmaiden to overdevelopment been more clear than at Columbus Circle, where the city, in cooperation with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, sold the site of the obsolete New York Coliseum for private development. Here was a situation in which the city could have played any card it wished, for the Coliseum and its land were public, and any private developer would have had to accede to whatever limits the city chose to set.

But the temptation to cash in was too hard to resist for an administration that takes pride in thinking in the same kind of terms as real-estate developers. Instead of setting proper restrictions for this crucial site, on a prime intersection at the southwest corner of Central Park, the city in effect sold it to the highest bidder. The winner, Boston Properties with Salomon Inc., will pay roughly $450 million. It is a lot of money. But those dollars will shine briefly in the budget and then be gone — while the immense hulk of Moshe Safdie's double tower, far too large for this site by any sensible standard, will loom over Central Park forever.

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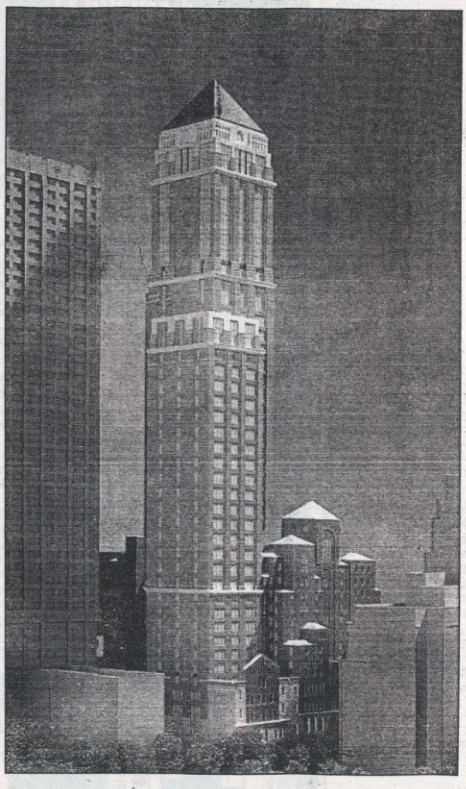
The Columbus Circle story is the worst, but it is not the only case of the city selling its birthright for a mess of pottage. On 56th Street another tower, far too tall though thankfully slender, rises above the City Center, larger than it should have been due to a complex city deal for performing-arts subsidies. And the southern tip of Manhattan may be changed forever by a tower to be built over the Staten Island Ferry terminal, another deal that the city has made with a real-estate developer.

The city is no longer our protector, but a full-fledged participant in the orgy of Manhattan real-estate development. This is the sad truth — that the municipal Government, which at its best should be a moral force for good development, has shown so little interest in anything except accommodation. It is not the job of private developers to set limits; it is their job to make money. It is the function of the city to represent the public interest and forge into the building process the values that matter, which often means drawing the line. And that is just what the city has chosen not to do.

It is not a mere matter of sentiment to speak of sunshine, and of shadow, and of scale. A city in which virtually every parcel is built up to maximum density, in which the skyscrapers crowd each other the way the brownstones used to, is not a city in which it is either comfortable to live or easy to work — and this has economic consequences, too. City life is harsh enough at its best; we put up with it because for all its difficulties it is also stimulating, even exhilarating. But it is a delicate balance, easily toppled. For the Upper West Side, about to be treated to the grotesque intrusion of the Columbus Circle behemoth, the Y.M.C.A. tower, handsome as it is, may be the final straw. When will the city believe that thinking about things like this is its duty? □



Model of a 41-story tower proposed to rise above the West Side Y.M.C.A. on 63d Street—It could be a good design if it were not twice as big as it should be.

Pressures were such that even the designated landmarks we had were at risk

In 1984, a 23-story building was planned on top of New-York Historical Society on Central Park West.

And in 1982, a 42-story building was planned on top of Congregation Shearith Israel on West 70th Street and Central Park West.

At the time, *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger wrote that nonprofit institutions like the Historical Society "are embarking on the very construction projects that are likely to most alter the face of the city's familiar buildings, streets and neighborhoods." The Historical Society's proposal "must be the most dramatic attempt to turn air space into profit-making real estate since the plan years ago by the Penn Central Railroad to put a skyscraper atop Grand Central Terminal."

Remember New York had recently lost the Helen Hayes and other Broadway theaters. Low-rise buildings like theaters, churches, synagogues, museums were "the city's new battleground", as Goldberger called them, buildings that "provide symbols of continuity and stability in an all-too-

rapidly changing place…" that can be viewed in two different ways "as underused pieces of land or as precious remnant with a symbolic importance for us all. The way we choose will determine what kind of a city we have."

On June 12, 1984, the Landmarks Preservation Commission rejected the **New-York Historical Society's** proposed tower on the same day as it denied an application by St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue to construct a skyscraper over its community house. Goldberger celebrated the decisions as "a decisive verdict against the growing trend toward turning landmark buildings into profit-making real estate."

By now, Gene Norman was the Commission's chair. And it was the convergence of his leadership, awakened community activism holding his feet to the fire, and a series of very visible threats that gave the West Side preservation movement its momentum.

By the mid-80s, there was broad consensus among Upper West Siders about the need for zoning reform (lower, less dense buildings) and architectural preservation. Journalist and Upper West Sider Roberta Brandes Gratz summed up the kind of mettle that would be needed to achieve these goals: "We're known for being obstinate. We're known for being neurotic. And we're known for being fighters. And this is no time to lose that reputation."

Speaking of fighters, some of you know the woman in this picture. Definitely my most significant professional mentor, though not an actual professional herself. Arlene Simon was almost the same age as I am now when this picture was taken for *New York* magazine. The article cited her "one of a relatively new breed of self-appointed, self-starting, self-made—and increasingly powerful—West Side women who are usually identified in the papers as neighborhood activists. They have become forces to be reckoned with by just about anyone who wants to get something done in their part of town." The article quotes Simon: "Taking care of this neighborhood is what I have chosen to do with my life."

Cityside/Mary-Lou Weisman

'EMPRESS OF WEST 67th STREET'

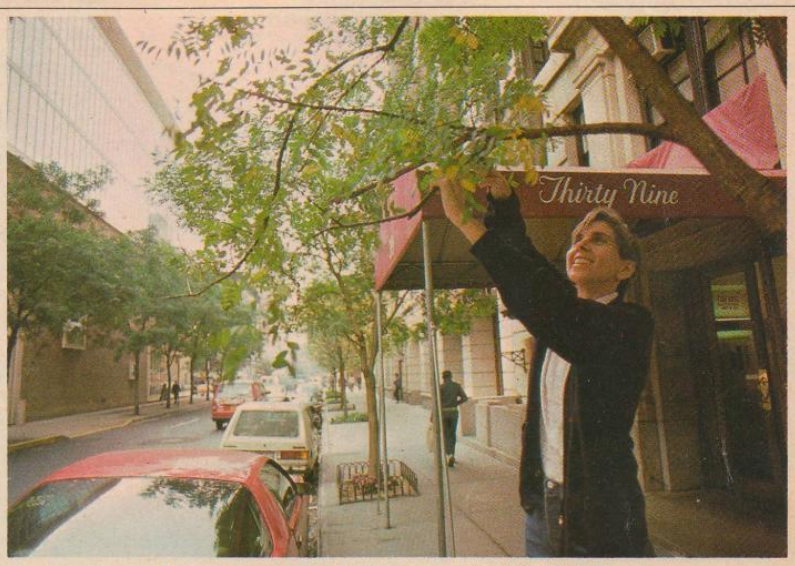
Tough Town, Tough Lady

AT 7 A.M., WHILE MANY OF HER CONTEMporaries are crawling into their panty hose or lacing up their Nikes, Arlene Simon is on her way to the flower market to buy exotic blooms for the lobby of her West 67th Street co-op.

At 8:15, when a few of us are still hitting the snooze buttons on our alarm clocks, the 47-year-old Simon is on the phone to the Parks Department, asking if the trees for the sidewalk on 67th Street have arrived.

By nine, when female executives all over New York are unsnapping their attaché cases, Simon is trotting to a rendezvous in a nearby vacant lot where builder-developer Benny Caiola is putting up a building.

Until you get up close enough to see the tiny lines around her eyes and the occasional gray strand in her close-cropped brown hair, Arlene Simon (who



Force to reckon with: *Simon patrolling West 67th Street.*

Not everything was a "fight" in the aggressive sense. Here's a shining example of community leaders working hard to avoid a fight. Save Our Universalist Landmark (S.O.U.L.) committee, including Arlene, Judith & Bill Moyers, and other citizens, founded to preserve the Fourth Universalist Society building on 76th Street and Central Park West. The *New York Times* reported, "In what preservationists hope will be a model for saving threatened landmarks, the financially troubled Universalist Church on Central Park West has formed an alliance with the surrounding community to raise $400,000 for urgently needed repairs." The Church agreed to reject all offers from real-estate developers to add an apartment tower to its property. So, a community project instead of a community battle. Think about this example next time you hear anyone disparage NIMBYs—concern and the willingness to take responsibility for what happens in your back yard was and ever will be one of the most important motivators for civic engagement.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1985

Community Joins in Aid To a Landmark Church

By WILLIAM G. BLAIR

In what preservationists hope will be a model for saving threatened landmarks, the financially troubled Universalist Church on Central Park West has formed an alliance with the surrounding community to raise $400,000 for urgently needed repairs.

If the community can raise the money, the small, 88-year-old Gothic church at 76th Street has agreed not to exercise its development, or air, rights for at least 12 years, according to David A. Dunlop, its business manager.

The church is one of 49 buildings that the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission included in 1973 in the Central Park West-76th Street Historic District.

In an effort to preserve it, a nonprofit corporation called Soul — Save Our Universalist Landmark — has been formed, with its board drawn almost equally from the church's congregation and the community.

Developers Seek Investments

The church and the community are trying to cope with a problem that other nonprofit landmark institutions face — inadequate revenues and decaying buildings — a situation that has attracted real-estate developers seeking investment opportunities.

"The real-estate people have approached just about every tax-free institution on Central Park West," said Arthur Sarnoff, a community member of Soul's board who has lived 51 of his 54 years in the landmark Kenilworth cooperative apartment building, which adjoins the church.

Although the church has been among those approached, "we do not intend to use our development rights as a fund-raiser to allow some developer to replace the existing building," Mr. Dunlop said. "My raison d'être, and that of everybody connected with the church, is to save the building."

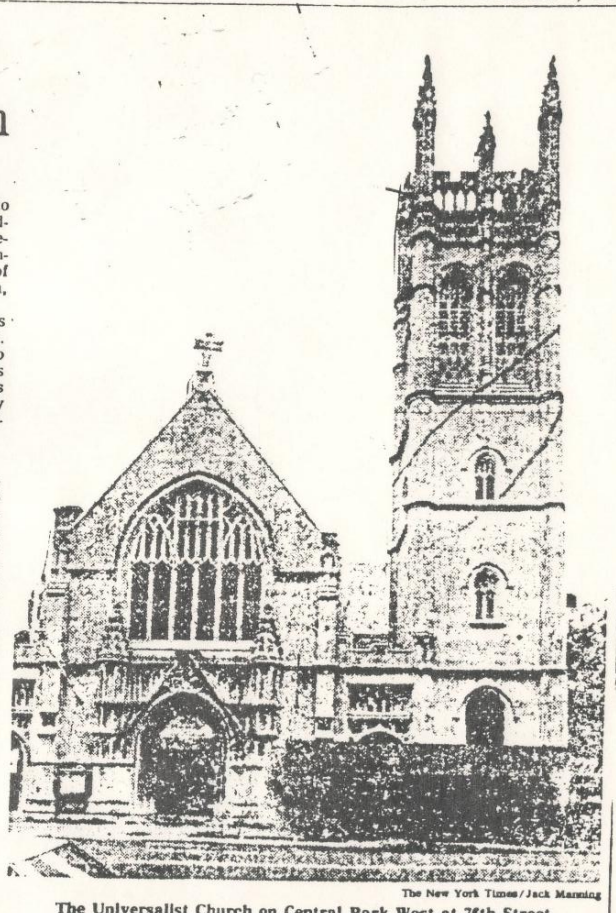
Referring to the controversial plans of such landmark institutions as St. Barthomelew's Episcopal Church to replace all or part of their structures with towers, Mr. Sarnoff said: "This is totally unique, in that it is a community project instead of a community battle."

'Could Be a Breakthrough'

The unusual church-community experiment in landmark governance has attracted the support of such preservationist organizations as the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Municipal Art Society of New York and Landmark West, whose president, Arlene Simon, said, "This could be a breakthrough."

They will join Soul today at a news conference at the church to announce the fund-raising campaign officially. The money is needed to repair the church's leaking roof, crumbling stone entrance steps, deteriorating European stained-glass windows and collapsing Gothic tower that is a copy of the tower at Oxford University's Magdalen College. The building, erected in 1897, was designed by William Stuart Potter.

Mr. Dunlop said the church, with annual income of about $225,000 from a small endowment and other limited resources, had been operating at a loss for some time and was projecting a loss of $50,000 for this year.

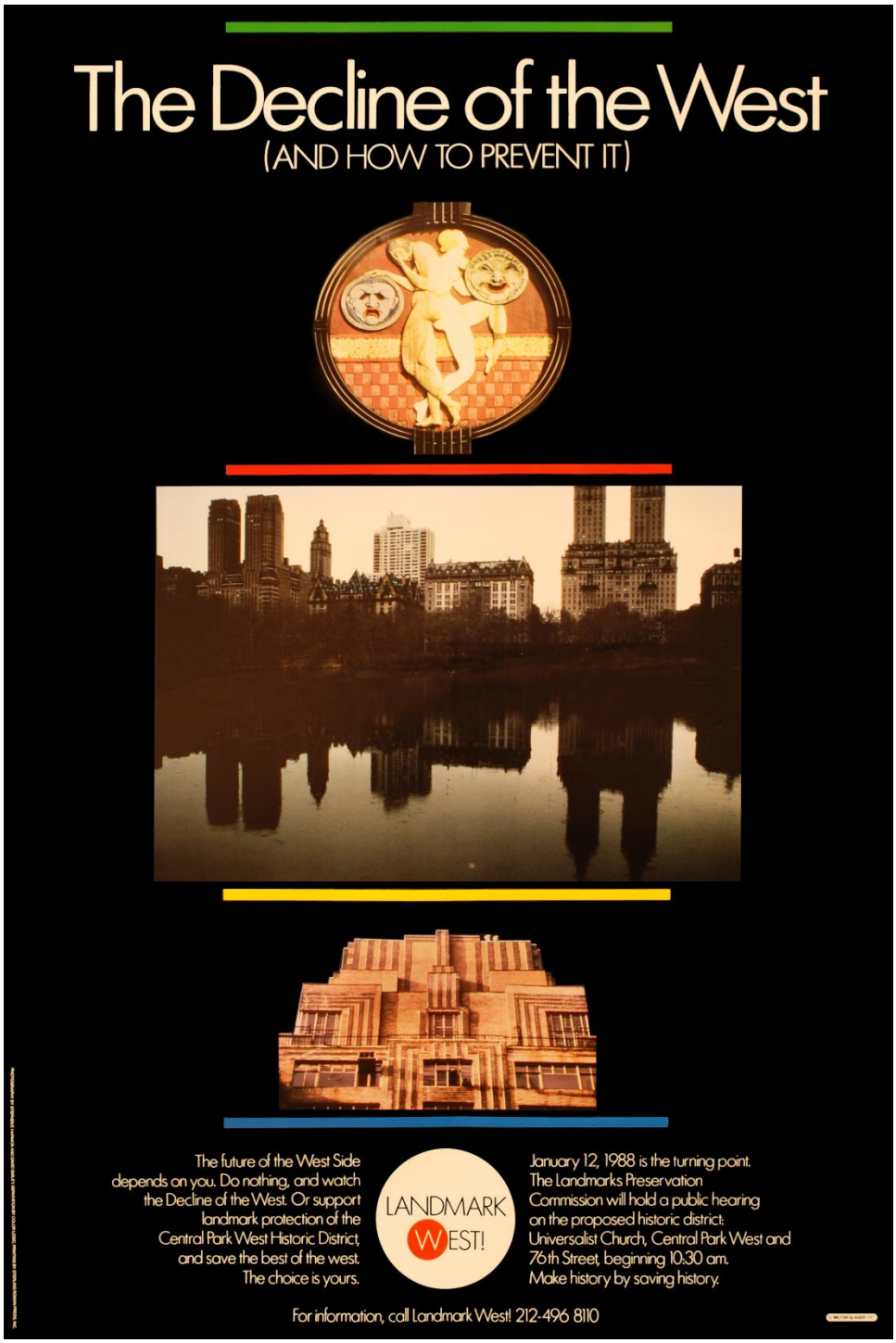


The New York Times/Jack Manning

The Universalist Church on Central Park West at 76th Street.

In a December 29, 1985, *New York Times* article, Paul Goldberger called S.O.U.L. "…surely the most pleasing glimmer of hope on the architectural front in the past year…There could not be a more positive sign for the future of New York than the decision by those in charge of this church…to save and restore its building for the benefit of its community…willing to stake a claim for the belief that we do not make a better city by seeing every landmark merely as a piece of developable real estate."

More good news…On November 17, 1986, in the *New York Times*, Landmarks Preservation Commission Chair **Gene A. Norman** announced "the start of a systematic approach to examine the historic fabric of the Upper West Side." But the Commission was slow grasp the fabric of the neighborhood as a whole. I recently learned that it was actually the research staff of the Commission that pushed for a new approach, looking at the Upper West Side that developed in waves over a relatively short period of time, and where those layers and relationships between different building types were what defined the character of the neighborhood.



On January 12, 1988, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing regarding the proposed Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District at the Fourth Universalist Society. The public hearing began at 10:30 AM continued for nearly 15 hours before finally adjourning at 1:17 AM on January 13. Culminating years of advocacy by LW!, rounding up support from celebrities including Jackie Onassis, doing the research, paying for building-by-building photography, 1990 2,020 buildings designated in one fell swoop, even after all that work, still like catching lightning in a bottle

Let me point out that the RS-WE Historic District also designated around this time, in 1989, a relatively small area with a few hundred buildings, and was not revisited by the Landmarks Commission for another 25 years.

I'm going to switch gears here for a few minutes before coming back to my new title for tonight, "The Case for a New Upper West Side Preservation Movement." I've talked a lot about landmark designation, but of course once a landmark is designated, to survive it has to be regulated. And that's where a lot of the preservation action takes place. One thing I've come to realize is this: When you lose a building, you know it, it's gone. But you never can really say that a building is "saved". It's an ongoing process that takes huge effort and vigilance.

First, the story of a success (so far…) West 72nd Street is a great example of the architectural complexity of the Upper West Side. *New York Times* columnist Christopher Gray wrote, "Nothing on the Upper West Side slipped as dramatically as 72nd Street from a prestigious parkway of private houses in the 1880's to little shopfronts and commercial buildings in the 1920's….

[I]n recent years the block between Columbus and Amsterdam has taken on a honkey-tonk air..." This is what West 72nd Street looked like in the mid-1990s.


RAVISHING!
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LW! started a program to help 72nd Street business owners clear up their violations and declutter the building facades, meanwhile working with then-Council Member Ronnie Eldridge to secure funding for capital improvements including new sidewalks, lampposts and trees to enhance the street's retail appeal.

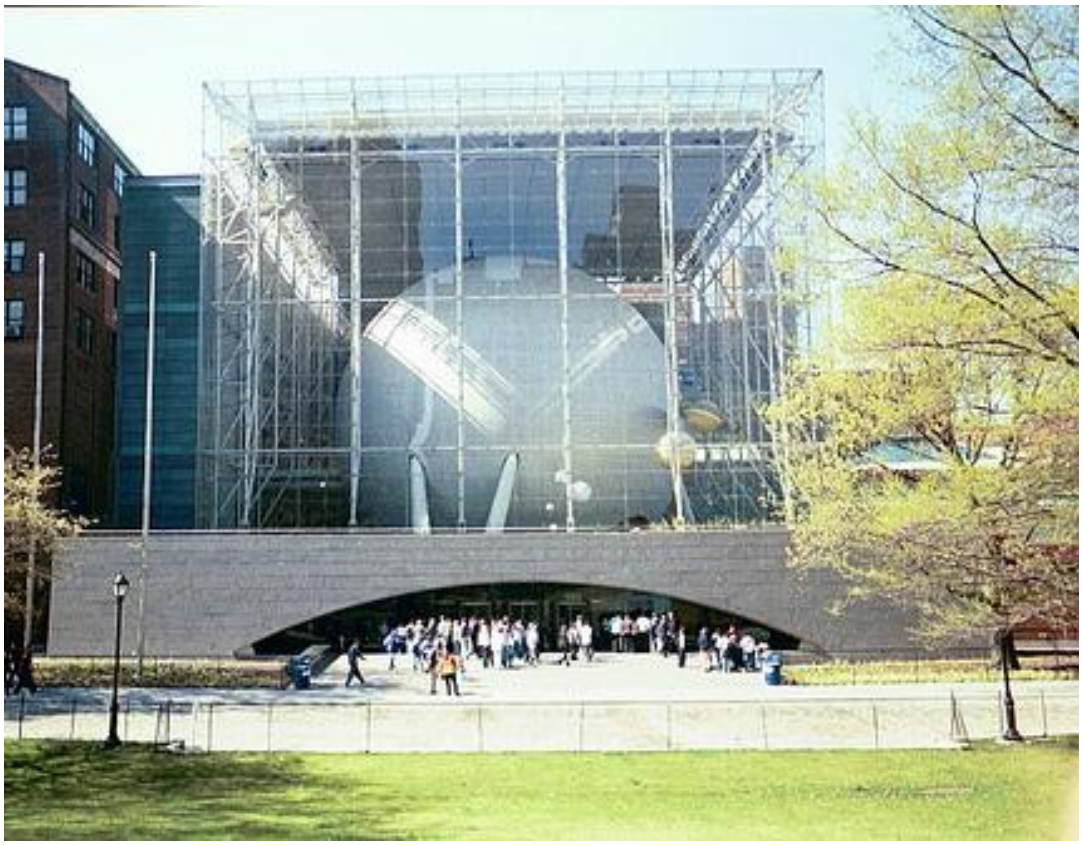
It was a carrot-and-stick approach that worked. Hard to believe it's the same building. In 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation selected West 72nd Street as a semi-finalist for its Great American Main St. Awards.

Another preservation success began as a showdown between LW! and the Central Park Conservancy. Now, the Conservancy has done truly noble and wondrous work for Central Park, New York's gem. No one wants to be their enemy. But in the case of the 1960s Adventure Playgrounds, someone needed to stand up for the historical complexity of the park. For a long time, the Conservancy held a very purist vision of the park as Olmsted & Vaux had designed it in the 19th century. Of course, the success of Central Park is that it has evolved with the city, it has many layers from picturesque lakes to playgrounds and ballfields. In the 1990s, the Conservancy didn't see the Adventure Playgrounds as contributing to the character of the Park. So the concrete pyramids, wooden treehouses, and water features were being replaced with generic, metal-and-plastic catalogue-order equipment that came with child-safety seals of approval.

LW! organized a series of meetings between parents, neighbors, preservationists, playground safety experts, and Richard Dattner, the architect of the Adventure Playground at 67th Street, near Tavern on the Green. The group reached a consensus that set the tone for less extreme playground makeovers and moved the Conservancy towards a more nuanced preservation approach.

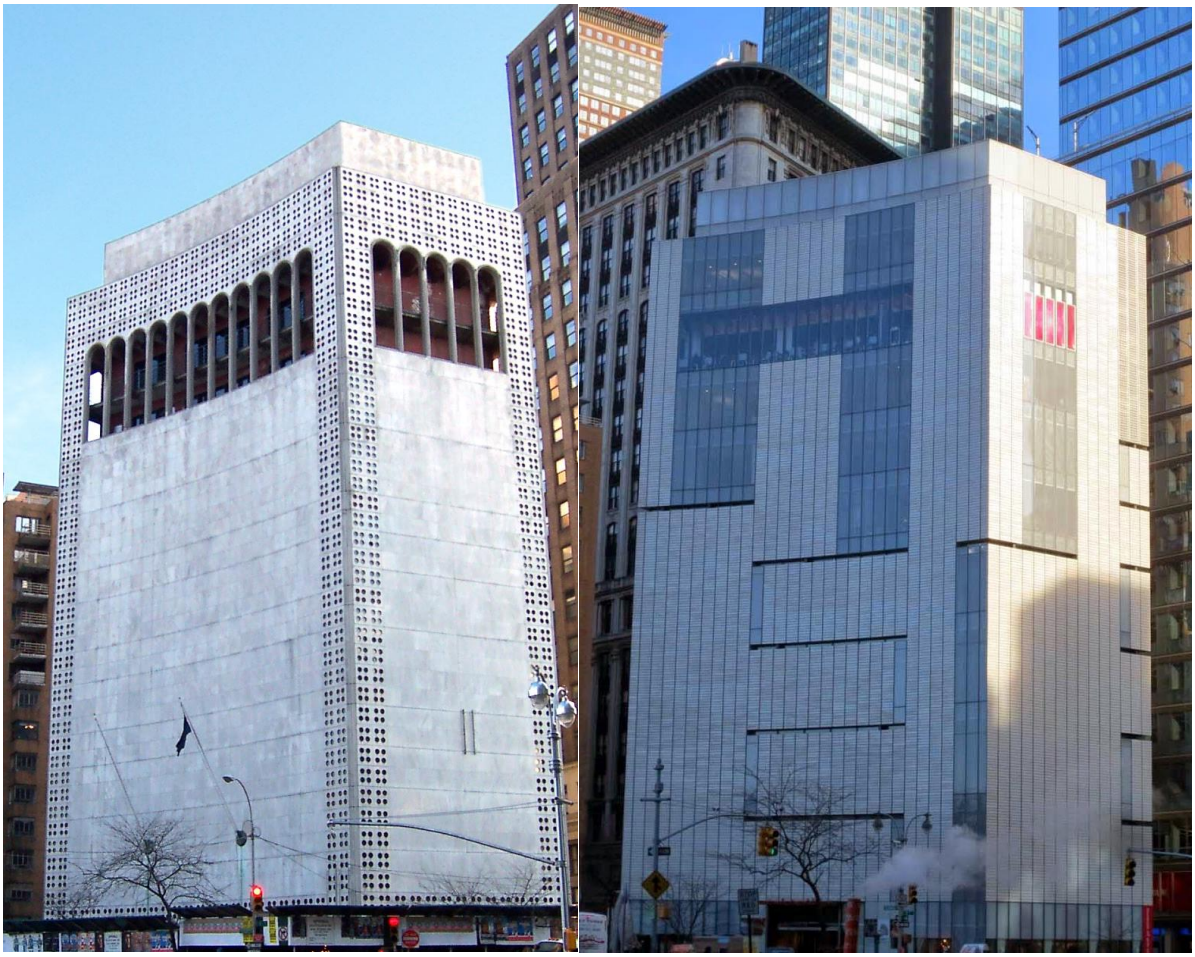
Unfortunately, today, the Landmarks Commission has punted its responsibility to review changes to Scenic Landmarks like Central Park on behalf of the public. And for all of its good qualities, the Central Park Conservancy is still a private entity that has essentially been given almost total jurisdiction over one of New York's most historically democratic spaces.

Another tough case that put LW! and others in the community on the opposite side of a widely admired public institution, the American Museum of Natural History, who claimed the upper hand of scientific education against architectural preservation. And the Landmarks Commission sided with them, approving the demolition of the 1930s Hayden Planetarium in the late 1990s.



It wasn't that we disliked the new design. It wasn't a popularity contest. We simply believed that the Museum hadn't demonstrated the need to tear down the landmark structure, which was historically, architecturally and culturally significant as part of the Museum and in its own right. That's an action that needs to be held to the highest level of scrutiny, otherwise what's the point of landmark designation?

We litigated the Planetarium decision, unsuccessfully. Fast forward to today…the Museum continues to treat the Landmark and Theodore Rooselvet Park as a development site. The Rose Center destroyed a landmark, but did not expand onto the footprint of the park. LW! and others have called on Museum to adopt a master plan to guide future development and respect the park as a critical public asset.

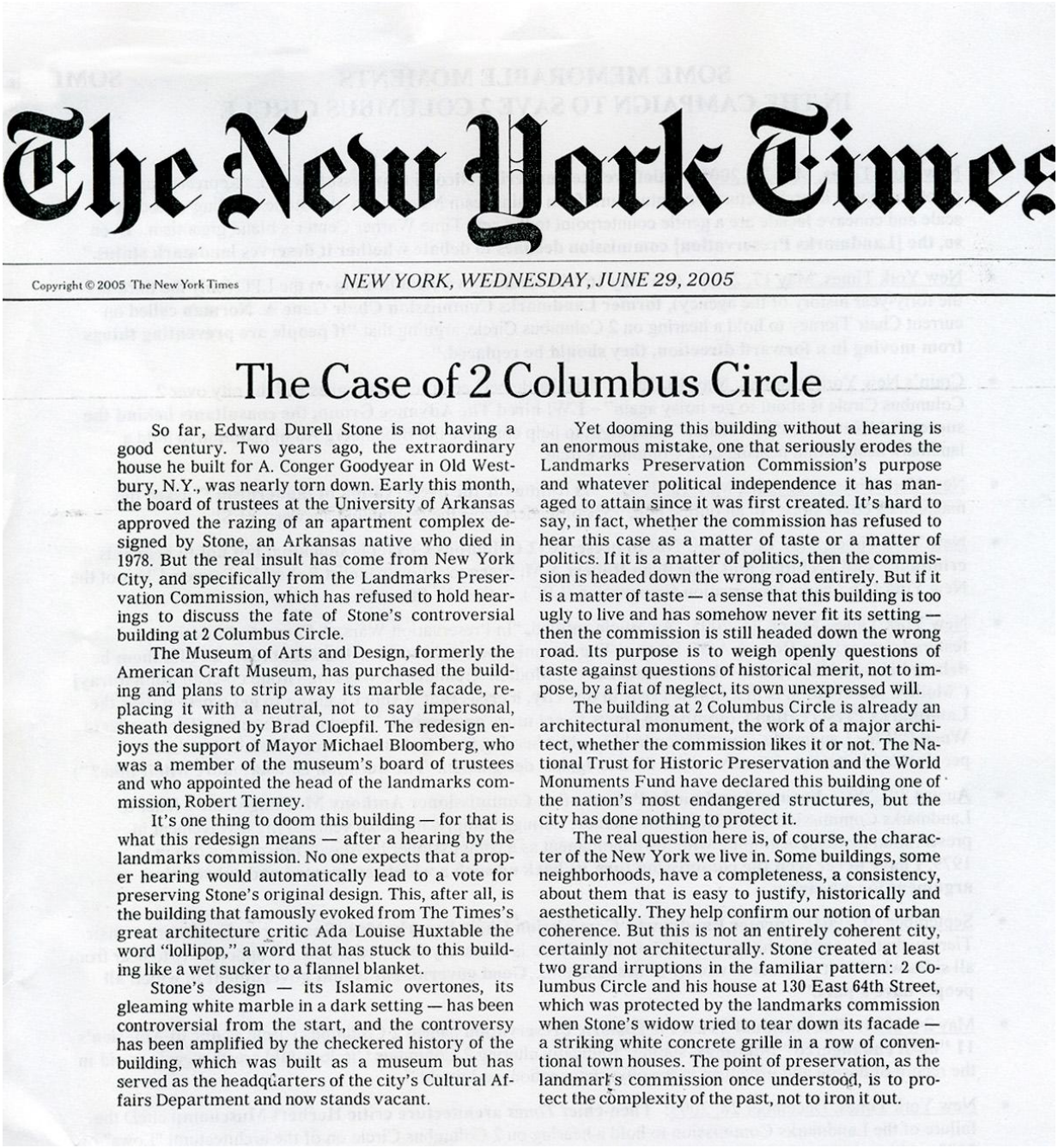


I see the building on the right every day when I emerge from the subway station at Columbus Circle. And on the left is the building I used to see. It's a daily reminder of why it's necessary to keep fighting, how the West has yet to be won.

The campaign to save 2 Columbus Circle was perhaps the biggest, most epic preservation battle in the city's history. It involved advocates and organizations at every level, from the very local to the international. It resonated in every neighborhood where people were working, against huge, largely political, obstacles to protect buildings. Around 2005, when the battle reached its peak, every community had its "2 Columbus Circle"—a threatened place that highlighted the Landmarks Commission's apparent unwillingness to do its job.

In the case of 2 Columbus Circle, that "job" was to hold a public hearing and let the evidence dictate whether the building merited landmark protection. To me, it was a personal and professional turning point, when I realized preservation is politics. To others, it demonstrated the sustained bias against buildings of the recent past (CPW towers, Chrysler Building). And to others, it represented the Commission's institutional drift, started under the Guiliani administration, away from its original mandate.

It was my first direct exposure to political coercion, the work of lobbyists and cronies in government to foil the function of the law. It was also my first lesson in the limits of the courts – LW's lawsuits were dismissed, one judge deferring to LPC by writing "Taste is not justicible." Yet also wrote "Without questioning the legality of the Commission's exercise of discretion, the litigation and larger public debate raise serious questions about the wisdom of the Commission's internal, essentially private and effectively unreviewable decision that 2 Columbus Circle is not a worthy subject of a public hearing. Especially in retrospect, one may questions, as petitioners do, whether that exercise of discretion may have affected the Commission's reputation as a guardian and arbiter of New York City's architectural heritage and undermined public confidence in the process." The *New York Times* essentially took the same position, in editorials and op-eds.



The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29, 2005

The Case of 2 Columbus Circle

So far, Edward Durell Stone is not having a good century. Two years ago, the extraordinary house he built for A. Conger Goodyear in Old Westbury, N.Y., was nearly torn down. Early this month, the board of trustees at the University of Arkansas approved the razing of an apartment complex designed by Stone, an Arkansas native who died in 1978. But the real insult has come from New York City, and specifically from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which has refused to hold hearings to discuss the fate of Stone's controversial building at 2 Columbus Circle.

The Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the American Craft Museum, has purchased the building and plans to strip away its marble facade, replacing it with a neutral, not to say impersonal, sheath designed by Brad Cloepfil. The redesign enjoys the support of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who was a member of the museum's board of trustees and who appointed the head of the landmarks commission, Robert Tierney.

It's one thing to doom this building — for that is what this redesign means — after a hearing by the landmarks commission. No one expects that a proper hearing would automatically lead to a vote for preserving Stone's original design. This, after all, is the building that famously evoked from The Times's great architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable the word "lollipop," a word that has stuck to this building like a wet sucker to a flannel blanket.

Stone's design — its Islamic overtones, its gleaming white marble in a dark setting — has been controversial from the start, and the controversy has been amplified by the checkered history of the building, which was built as a museum but has served as the headquarters of the city's Cultural Affairs Department and now stands vacant.

Yet dooming this building without a hearing is an enormous mistake, one that seriously erodes the Landmarks Preservation Commission's purpose and whatever political independence it has managed to attain since it was first created. It's hard to say, in fact, whether the commission has refused to hear this case as a matter of taste or a matter of politics. If it is a matter of politics, then the commission is headed down the wrong road entirely. But if it is a matter of taste — a sense that this building is too ugly to live and has somehow never fit its setting — then the commission is still headed down the wrong road. Its purpose is to weigh openly questions of taste against questions of historical merit, not to impose, by a fiat of neglect, its own unexpressed will.

The building at 2 Columbus Circle is already an architectural monument, the work of a major architect, whether the commission likes it or not. The National Trust for Historic Preservation and the World Monuments Fund have declared this building one of the nation's most endangered structures, but the city has done nothing to protect it.

The real question here is, of course, the character of the New York we live in. Some buildings, some neighborhoods, have a completeness, a consistency, about them that is easy to justify, historically and aesthetically. They help confirm our notion of urban coherence. But this is not an entirely coherent city, certainly not architecturally. Stone created at least two grand irruptions in the familiar pattern: 2 Columbus Circle and his house at 130 East 64th Street, which was protected by the landmarks commission when Stone's widow tried to tear down its facade — a striking white concrete grille in a row of conventional town houses. The point of preservation, as the landmarks commission once understood, is to protect the complexity of the past, not to iron it out.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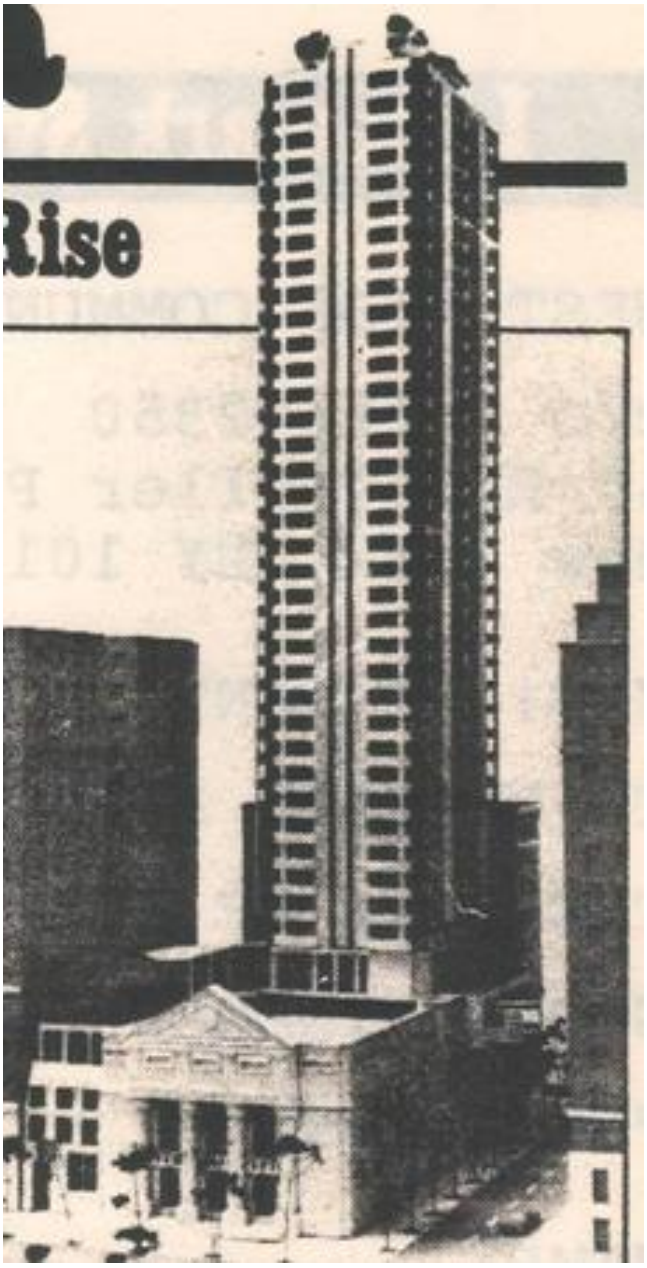
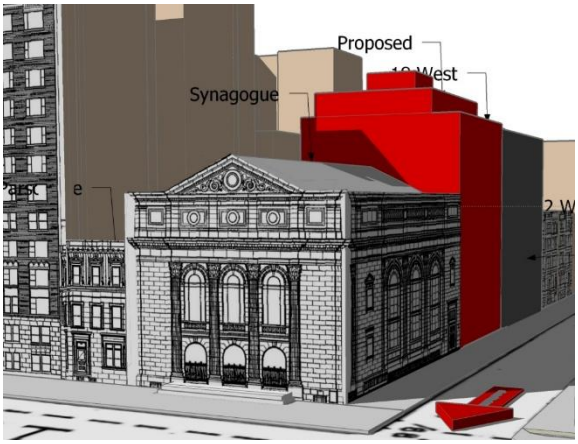
And to those who think the Landmarks Commission's position on 2 Columbus Circle was based purely on the merits, two examples: Dakota Stables on Amsterdam Avenue, described by Christopher Gray as an "architectural gem" and demolished anyway before it could get a public hearing.

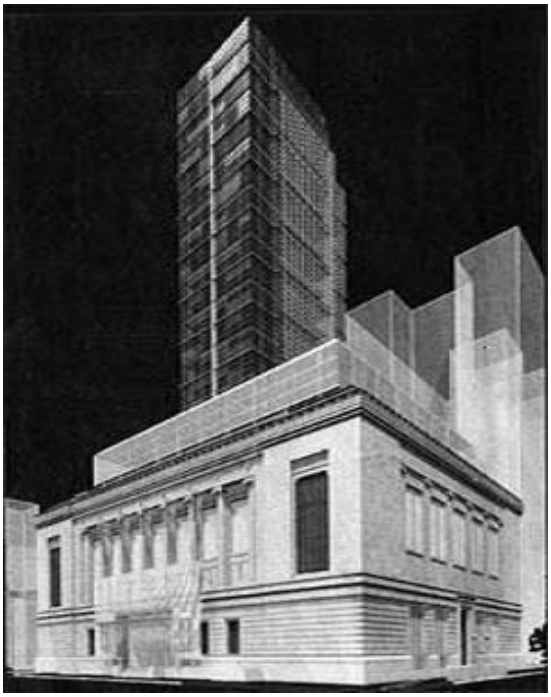
And the former IRT Powerhouse, a McKim Mead & White extravaganza that can't help but evoke the original Penn Station, heard four times for landmark designation, but blocked by its owner ConEd.

I'd like to conclude with a snapshot status report on a few different issues that, I think, highlight the threats we face today.



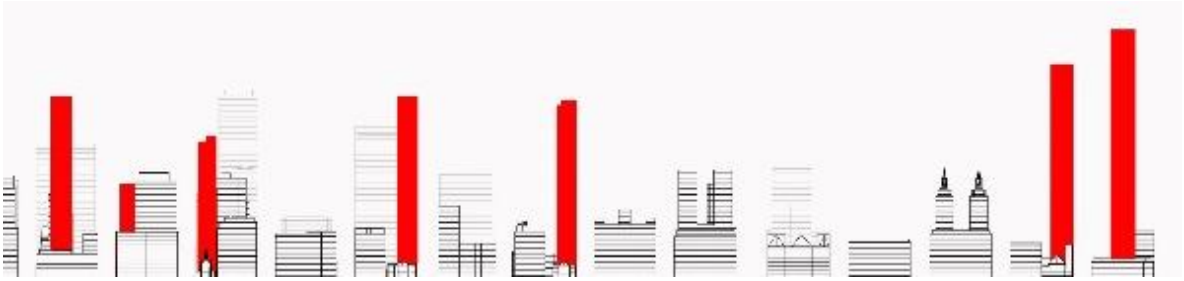


A couple of weeks ago, the Board of Standards & Appeals issued an approval that will allow Congregation Shearith Israel to proceed with the construction of a 9-story community house/condominium building. Now, you'll say that's a far cry from 42 stories, and you're right, but it's nonetheless a decision that sets a precedent for other non-conforming development along Central Park West and beyond. It's a gate-opener. And there are many developers besides Shearith Israel with a vested interest in unlocking the ability to develop Central Park West.



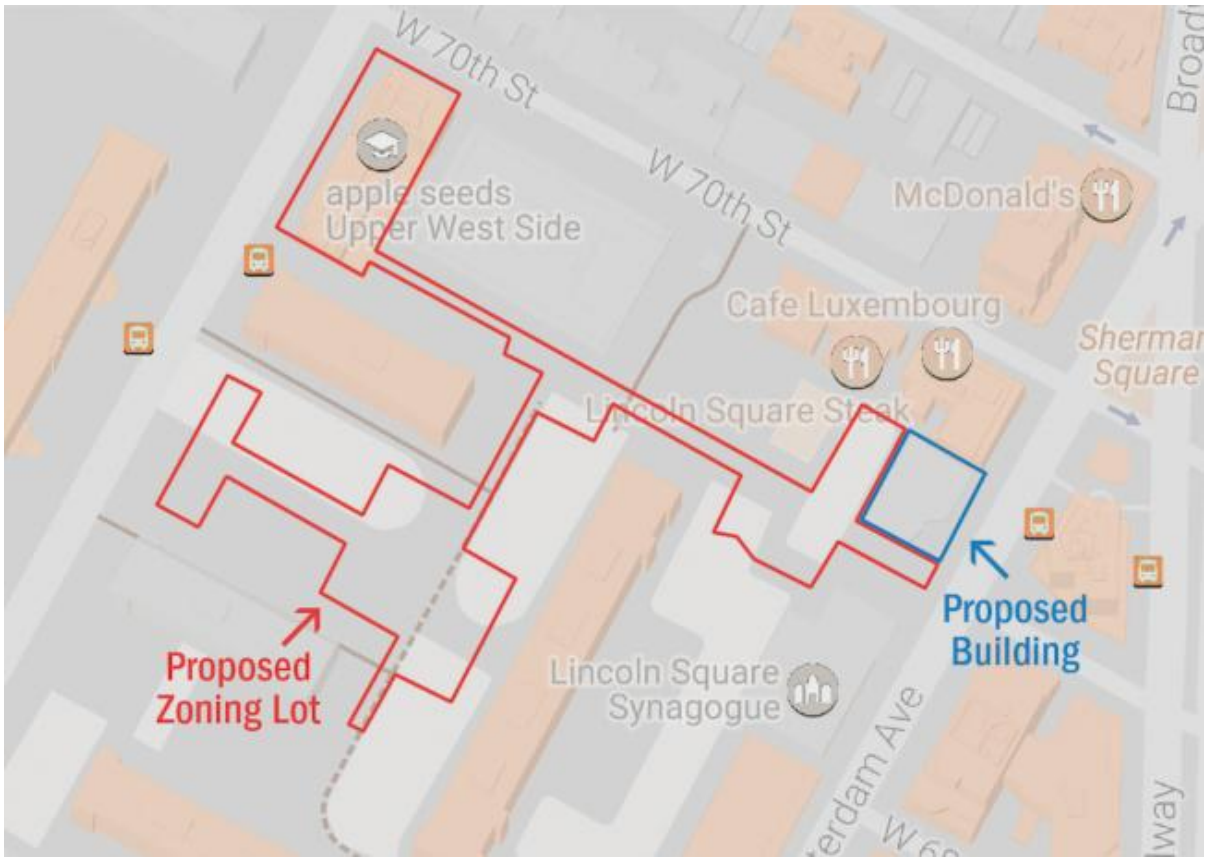
Ten years ago, the New York-Historical Society announced plans for another 23-story tower, this time made of glass. After vocal opposition, the Historical Society withdrew its plans, but the precedent is now set, and they will try again.

In response to these projects, LW! commissioned a study of the Central Park West skyline that looked at what could happen if the same kinds of variances and special permits were used to maximize development all along the park. What would the cumulative impact be? It isn't pretty…



…and now we realize it could be much worse, given modern building technology, economics, manipulation of the zoning rules, new forms of development.

Here's what we believe can and will be built on West 66th Street, right outside the historic district. Not only would it cast a shadow on Central Park all the way up to 72nd Street. It would raise the datum of "what is tall".



This site at 200 Amsterdam Avenue and 69th Street is about to become the tallest building in Manhattan north of midtown. This crazy zoning lot just shows how creative developers are in grasping any opportunity to build far beyond what the public thinks can or should be built.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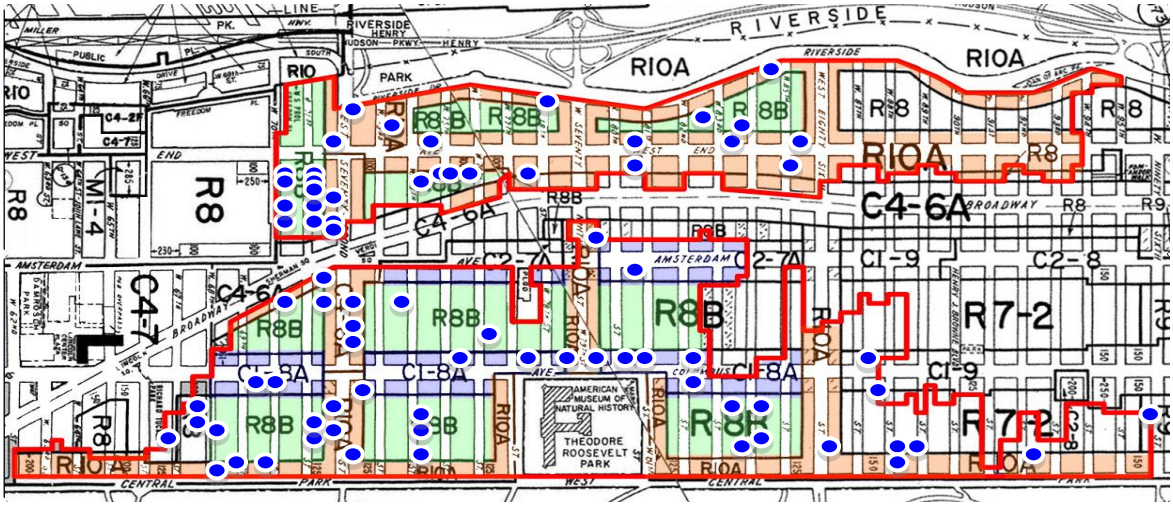
The Landmarks Commission, under the direction of the Mayor, is under huge pressure to stand clear of these development opportunities. The RS-WE district was finally expanded a couple of years ago, but with huge carve-outs along Broadway. We called it “the de Blasio diet”.



This is a scary image showing what may become a “hit list” of sites within historic districts not deemed “contributing”. Through changes to its rules and the way it designates, the Landmarks Commission is actively facilitating the redevelopment of these sites.

Here’s an example of how the Commission’s policies can lead to the destruction of a whole brownstone district, building by building, by allowing original facades to be replaced with bad stucco.

So, where does that leave us? It is estimated that about 70% of the UWS is under the protection of the Landmarks Law, up from fewer than 200 landmarks in the early 1980s to over 3,500 today. What do we have to complain about?

What calls out to me is the fact that, 40 years later, we still face many of the same dangers—the "Penn Station" type losses, colossal inappropriate new development, and perhaps most dangerous, the "death by a thousand cuts".

Stephen F. Harmon

There is more reason than ever for a new UWS preservation movement, a movement that we must rededicate ourselves to with all that we've got.

- Have to constantly remind ourselves of what is at stake, the special irreplaceable qualities of the UWS, what makes it *the West Side*, and never lose sight of why it's important, why it's valuable, both in the financial sense and more importantly the *human* sense
- We have to fight the characterization of preservation as anti-development, preservation is a vibrant form of development, we shouldn't lower our standards, we have to raise our expectations
- We need to recognize that our "model" landmarks law is being gutted administratively to benefit developers, we must fight to correct that, fight for access to information, fight for an equal say in the process of determining the future of our neighborhood
- We need new laws, new tools to protect sunlight, to preserve vistas, to close the loopholes that allow unpredictable and inappropriate development, to reinforce the idea that every square foot cannot be built out without undermining the health of the city
- We need new allies – for example, good government groups who fight "pay to play" and "business as usual" cronyism
- We have to demand more from our political leadership

Stephen F. Harmon

It's an election year, and I'm charged up about this fight. I hope you are, too.

I mentioned 3,500 landmarks on the Upper West Side. But an even more important vital statistic is the fact that we are "minting" about 2,000 young preservationists every year through our kids programs. This is for them.