

December 9, 2014

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE N.Y.C. LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION REGARDING A CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS FOR ALTERATIONS AT 361 CENTRAL PARK WEST, THE FORMER FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST, SCIENTIST, AN INDIVIDUAL LANDMARK

Good day, Chair Srinivasan and Commissioners. I am Alex Herrera, speaking on behalf of the Landmarks Conservancy, regarding proposed alterations to 361 Central Park West, the former First Church of Christ, Scientist.

New York's historic religious architecture is an integral part of its streetscape. These are places of great beauty that link New Yorkers to the City's history. Yet the ability of religious institutions to keep and maintain their buildings in the face of declining membership is a long-standing issue. As development pressures continue to increase, institutions face difficult decisions regarding their buildings. The Conservancy's Sacred Sites Program sponsored a conference last year highlighting the challenges inherent in converting these properties to other uses.

Those challenges are clear in this proposal. The turn-of-the-century, Carrere and Hastings church exterior has a solid and austere beauty that will be compromised to meet requirements for its new use, but will survive. The elegant interior, unprotected, has been demolished. We regret this loss, but given the reality of this situation, support the proposal.

The most visible changes, the insertion of many window openings and the rooftop addition are, overall, modest and respectful of the building's massing and proportions. The low addition does not overwhelm the base. On the east and south, the perforations reasonably extend the existing configuration. We do suggest some subtle modifications so the changes draw less attention. The six new vertical windows facing Central Park West could follow the same subdivided configuration as the existing windows, and stylistically appropriate grilles could be inserted at the spandrel panel windows.

At the west façade, the new entrance and window openings will not be seen easily from many angles on the street. At the north façade, we appreciate that the architects have endeavored to remove as little historic fabric as possible, while fulfilling mandates for residential use. This elevation will have the most substantial changes in the large number of new openings, but their visibility is limited. Regarding the stained glass, we cannot weigh on the removal of the windows attributed to LaFarge, as we do not have enough information. We appreciate that the border panels will be maintained.

The project promises improvements in the restoration and repair of the facades and new clay tiles to match the original at all roofs. We hope that some elements of the interior will be salvaged and reused to remind those using the building in the future of its past. And we believe that in total, this is a sensitive adaptation that strives to maintain this landmark, while enabling a new and sustaining use.

Thank you for the opportunity to present The Landmarks Conservancy's views.