

**THE NEW YORK
LANDMARKS
CONSERVANCY**

May 19, 2015

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION REGARDING PROPOSED ALTERATIONS AT THE FOUR SEASONS RESTAURANT, AN INTERIOR LANDMARK LOCATED IN THE SEAGRAM BUILDING, 375 PARK AVENUE.

Good day, Chairman Srinivasan and Commissioners. I am Alex Herrera, speaking on behalf of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Conservancy has a special interest in this project. We hold a preservation easement on the exterior of the Seagram Building and own the two Lippold sculptures that hang from the ceiling of the Grill Room. The Conservancy also owned the Picasso curtain that used to hang in the restaurant. That artwork was removed at the request of the building owner and has been donated to the New York Historical Society where it will make its debut on May 29th.

Philip Johnson's design for the Four Seasons has been widely acclaimed since the day it opened in 1959. It is often described as the finest International Style interior in the United States. As such it is precious and every potential alteration requires careful analysis. We met with the architect, Annabelle Selldorf, and reviewed the proposal in detail. We are happy that most of the proposed permanent alterations that had been proposed in the earlier plan have now been deleted. But the remaining two items are crucially important. If approved, either one could alter the special historic character of the interior landmark. We urge the Commission not to view either of these alterations as minor because they are not.

The Conservancy opposes the alteration of the stationary French walnut panels in the pool room. This wall, composed of two tiers of walnut panels, is perfectly intact and original. The lower tier was designed with operable panels so that the private dining room could be joined spatially with the Pool Room when desired. The upper panels were intended to be stationary so as to help define the separate volumes of the two rooms even when the lower panels are open. The upper paneling is seamless and solid. To us, it seems neither necessary nor desirable to take apart the original panels and hang them on hinges. The paneling is beautiful and should be kept as is. Johnson's original design intent should be honored.

We also oppose the removal of the glass partition in the Grill Room. That feature was designed by Philip Johnson and installed in 1983. It is described in the Commission's designation report and is a significant feature that separates the great room into bar area and dining area. There is no reason to remove it and replace it with non-descript modern planters. Johnson originally tried planters but they did not work so the restaurant asked him to come up with an alternative, which is the glass partition. Why return to something that did not work in the space? The smoked crackled glass screen is distinctive. Low rectangular planters are not. Why replace the distinctive with the ordinary in one of the great rooms of America?

In closing, so much of the interior of the Four Seasons is perfectly intact. The walls, floors and ceilings could use a light cleaning, the carpeting needs replacing and the metal features should be cleaned and refurbished, but that's all. The more that is tampered with, the more the original character of the space is diminished. We urge the Commission to approve the sensible restorative aspects of the proposal but to disapprove the permanent alterations to significant features.

Thank you.