



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
By Lisa Kersavage, Director of Advocacy and Policy
746-748 and 750 Madison Avenue, Borough of Manhattan
January 22, 2008

The Municipal Art Society is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to advocate excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art.

I am Lisa Kersavage, speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society. The Preservation Committee had a presentation on the proposed application, which we believe the Landmarks Preservation Commission has correctly calendared as a demolition of the two-story building at 746-748 Madison Avenue and the construction of a fourteen-story building.

The committee is unable to support the proposal for demolition. The last application the committee reviewed for the demolition of a “style” building on the Upper East Side was at the Whitney Museum. In our testimony we opposed the demolition of that “style” building, and that application was eventually modified to avoid such demolition. As far as we know, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, in its 43 years of watching over our city’s heritage, has not permitted the demolition of a “contributing” building in a historic district under a Certificate of Appropriateness. If the commission approves this demolition, this case will undoubtedly be cited as precedent in the future, and we wonder how the commission would be able to deny other proposals to demolish designated buildings for a more profitable use?

While the applicants may claim this is not a demolition, it clearly is. While they plan to restore and retain the very significant cast iron storefront, it will be used as an architectural remnant applied to a new building. The demolition and addition to the two-story building divorces the cast iron façade from its historic fabric and transforms the reading of the building. As a result, the restored storefront looks applied rather than preserved. Many committee members felt the three-story addition directly above the historic facade overwhelms and flattens the base of the building. Furthermore, the filling in of the sides has a surprisingly negative impact. It effectively eliminates the neo-Georgian wings, a characteristic element of the historic building, and contributes to its

heavy appearance. Overall, the changes to the base create an entirely new building with little or no relationship to its former self.

While the committee's disapproval of the project rests on the demolition, several members offered comments on the bulk and massing of the proposed building – and there was a difference of opinion regarding its appropriateness. Some felt that the idea of a 14-story building on a midblock site could be appropriate to the district. Still, others pointed out that despite the diversity of building heights on Madison Avenue, this block possesses a clear rhythm of relatively low-rise buildings. Also significant is the fact that while there are taller apartment buildings on Madison Avenue, they are all, with one exception, on the corners, not in the mid-block. As far as we know, there is not one block in the Upper East Side Historic District in which there are low buildings on the corners and a tower in the mid-block. Finally, some committee members felt that stepping back the massing of the tower was inappropriate to the character of the Upper East Side, in which most historic buildings have a relatively tall streetwall.

Finally, I would like to express the committee's concerns about the use of Section 99-08. We understand that the Betts House is the "style" building to be preserved as part of the application to waive the midblock transition portion heights limitation pursuant to Section 99-08. The fact that a continuing maintenance plan for one "style" building - the Betts House – comes at the expense of the demolition of another "style" building, 746-748 Madison Avenue, appears to run against the spirit of the law. We were shocked to see a description of a continuing maintenance plan for 744-748 Madison Avenue. By what strange leap of logic can there be a continuing maintenance plan for a building that will be demolished?

The preservation of 744-750 Madison Avenue is a worthy goal, but completely disconnected from the current proposal. If approved, this project could be a precedent-setting demolition of an existing "style" building in order to reap larger financial gains from the property. The demolition should be denied. The question then becomes how can an appropriate addition be constructed without demolishing or changing the character of the existing building? We think it could be possible to build an addition, but it certainly is a significant design challenge to do so while retaining the character of this protected building.