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The American Institute of Architects New York Chapter, the founding Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, representing 3,880 architects, professional affiliates, and public members would like to comment in support of the proposed addition to the Whitney Museum of American Art in the New York City Upper East Side Historic District. The preservation issues in this instance are complex, and they are important for students of history and architecture to consider in the context of the 40th anniversary this year of the NYC Landmarks Law. Demolition and new construction are serious actions that in the 1960's – 1970's led to the passage of laws throughout the nation that provided neighborhoods with the tools to preserve communities, rather than destroy them. In addition, the preservation legislation provides a framework for evaluating contemporary construction.

The framework for review, in this instance, is the evaluation of a new addition to a landmark Modernist museum building that sits cheek-by-jowl in a historic district which has a variety of residential structures, including brownstones, townhouses, mansions, luxury apartment buildings and notable hotels. The proposal to demolish 2 row houses and a portion of a third, add to the existing Whitney Museum building, and construct a new building in the rear of the Madison Avenue buildings is unique in the scope of its proposed work. The measurement of the standards of appropriateness to be met include an analysis of the design of the complex, both from an assessment of the proposed work with respect to its function as a major museum, and then an assessment of the preservation issues.

The current proposal for the expansion of the Whitney Museum designed by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop is essentially based on improving the ability of the museum to exhibit art in its many forms and to offer other services to the artists and public not currently possible with the existing facility. In addition, the Whitney is attempting to enhance the public access on Madison Avenue, inviting interaction with the pedestrian streetscape. By doing so, the new entry court allows large groups of visitors comfortable entry into the museum.

As explained by museum director Adam Weinberg, the facility originally designed by the firm of Marcel Breuer was outgrown almost immediately, and indeed the original design included knock-out panels in the southern exterior wall to allow future connections to an expanded museum. It is important to understand that the Whitney became one of the few major New York City museums to exhibit art directly from artists' studios. As artists' work changed, the museum facility needed to adapt. The stated purpose of the expansion is to allow the museum to catch up to these changing needs. There are numerous other proposed improvements to loading, security, public access, and new technology in support of this effort.

The design, as presented by architect Renzo Piano, is brilliantly efficient in that regard. Significantly, the exterior bulk demonstrates admirable sensitivity to the neighborhood. Previous proposals for the Whitney expansion were reviewed for information purposes, and the excessive bulk of these earlier proposals versus the efficient space planning of the current proposal was apparent.

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The Piano design articulates circulation to the point of creating an open invitation to enter the building. The galleries are conventional at the moment, but flexible enough to allow for some innovation as the final design is articulated.

The adjacent row house properties incorporated into the design have been owned by the museum for some time in anticipation of the growth of the facility. The museum has demonstrated its commitment to be a good neighbor by preserving and incorporating historic structures and providing public space within the complex. The Whitney has presented a proposal that offers an upgrade on Madison Avenue and more importantly an expanded ability to deliver art that is fresh from the artist's studio to an eager audience.

To evaluate the appropriateness of the entire composition, as proposed, the scheme is harmonious with its context and adds to the special sense of place that the Upper East Side Historic District embodies. The scale of both the rooftop addition and the larger gallery "tower" is well within the size and height of other buildings within the district and more importantly, in the immediate area. The materials proposed: stone to match the Breuer building, glass, and an acid-washed stainless steel, are appropriate within the context of both the Marcel Breuer-designed building and the larger apartment buildings, and complement the historic row houses as a subdued backdrop. The design elements that could be further refined are the glass proposed for the "tower," where the proposed tinted glass is not typical in this neighborhood, and more defined details of the infill proposed for the new entrance. In addition, it would be important to have clear view studies of the mechanical penthouse addition to determine just how visible it is in conjunction with the existing museum building.

The preservation question is then: does this elegant and appropriate design require that proposed demolitions be achieved? On the whole, the proposed project succeeds admirably by inserting itself so seamlessly into the context of buildings and streetscape of the Upper East Side Historic District that it feels as though it has always been there, and adds to rather than detracts from the district. However, the approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness to demolish a "contributing" structure in an historic district has not been granted before. While each application is viewed on a "case by case" basis, we believe that an opportunity exists here to define the criteria that would guide future decision-making regarding appropriateness: consideration for a public institution enhancing its mission and expanding its services; selective demolition only where required to appropriately serve public access and use; restoration and adaptive re-use of the preserved historic district structures; design within the scale of and with materials complementary to the existing historic fabric; creation of an urban composition that successfully binds old and new elements into a coherent whole. We would respectfully request that the LPC require, at a minimum, both a conditions survey and an alternatives study be prepared and presented to the Commission that would illustrate the options available to the museum other than complete demolition.

The studies would, we believe, support the proposed project and the LPC review in reminding all that the success of New York's Landmarks Law has always been in its focus on the Commission's ability to balance the desire to preserve with the need to remain viable and vital. The measure of appropriateness is the degree to which any action has a negative impact on the landmark or historic district to be affected, and a reminder that especially in New York, the loss of one small building can be judged appropriate.

On February 19th, 2003, the AIA New York Chapter and Columbia University's James Marston Fitch Colloquium sponsored a symposium entitled History as Prelude: Modern Interventions in Historic Contexts. The purpose of the program was to explore the appropriateness of modern additions to historic buildings as well as to historic communities.

As described by Paul Byard, FAIA and Director of the Colloquium, "The basic business of preservation...is inescapably a matter of innovation, of designing in response to the passage of time the precise changes - molecular or architectural - that will extend the protected meaning of the valued artifact into the foreseeable future. At the same time, changes that successfully understand and extend the protected identity in fact enlarge its authenticity - the expressive truth it embodies - with their own. Authenticity and innovation, that is, are inherent hallmarks of successful design with old buildings."

The proposed addition to the Whitney Museum of Art by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop embodies the principles articulated by Professor Byard. The project reflects the organic quality of the city, whereby growth is encouraged, and selective pruning is required to make the underlying organism stronger. By integrating both the old and the new, both the historic context and the new addition become stronger. As elements of the past are preserved, they not only serve as the foreground to the proposed addition, the contrast makes them more visible and distinctive. As the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius noted:

"Observe always that everything is the result of change, and get used to thinking that there is nothing Nature loves so well as to change existing forms and make new ones of them."