



# HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL

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February 20, 1998

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Honorable Jennifer J. Raab  
Chair  
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission  
100 Old Slip  
New York, NY 10005

Dear Commissioner Raab:

I am writing on behalf of the Historic Districts Council (HDC) to ask the Landmarks Preservation Commission to turn its attention to four buildings of architectural and historical significance along the southern boundary of Central Park. As a remarkably intact assemblage with a distinct character and sense of place, this area is appropriate for consideration as an historic district. At this time, however, we ask the Commission to consider the following buildings for **individual landmark designation**:

- 50 Central Park South, St. Moritz Hotel
- 180 Central Park South, New York Athletic Club
- 240 Central Park South
- Two Columbus Circle

This request is driven in part by the sense of urgency imposed by threats to several of the buildings. Each of these is worthy of landmark status: they are the products of eminent architects long associated with design in New York City, and they occupy prominent corner sites within the district which give them a distinguished presence on the street. These buildings are the gems of the Central Park South neighborhood, individually distinctive while architecturally defining the area as a whole.

Both because of their individual significance and because of their historically coherent context along the southern edge of Central Park, these buildings currently enjoy a high degree of recognition and regard by the public at large. Already "popular landmarks," the buildings merit official recognition by the Commission and protection under the New York City Landmarks Law. While HDC continues its efforts to help the area's residents build and strengthen a constituency for a Central Park South Historic District, we hope the Commission will proceed more immediately with these four individual landmark designations.

Following are brief descriptions of the buildings proposed for individual landmark designation, as well as the arguments in favor of a Central Park South Historic District. We would like to discuss these two efforts with you and your staff at your earliest convenience.

*Proposed Individual Landmark Designations – For Immediate Consideration*

**50 Central Park South, St. Moritz Hotel** (1930, Emery Roth): As did several elegant hotels built on Central Park South in the late 1920s, the St. Moritz took its architectural cue from the sheer streetwall and romantic roofline of the Plaza Hotel. The St. Moritz facade is composed of a series of asymmetrically arranged setbacks above the 21-story streetwall, culminating in a tile-roofed tower inspired by the architecture of Renaissance Florence. The roofline and the masonry facade are critical features in not only the building's architectural character, but also in its deferential role as a backdrop to Central Park. **Threat: plans for "recladding" the facade by new ownership.**

**180 Central Park South, New York Athletic Club** (1928, York & Sawyer): The Athletic Club building is a stately expression of the neo-Renaissance style with classical detailing, contributing to the Central Park South skyline in a rugged but also quite elegant way. The complexity of the building's plan is alluded to in the massing and the handsome open-air dining loggia along the Seventh Avenue facade. The Club's prominent corner location gives the building a strong architectural presence. Critic Lewis Mumford proclaimed the building as "Valhalla on the Park," and noted that "in some mysterious way it has that special character which is the mark of studied design."

**240 Central Park South** (1941, Mayer & Whittlesey): This is one of the city's earliest buildings in the modern style, and an influential design for post-war residential buildings. A masterful integration of two large modern apartment buildings into the existing urban fabric, this complex preserves the streetwall framing the Park, while also relating to the lower scale on W. 58th Street. While modern in design, its roofscape contributes to the dramatic skyline which characterizes Central Park South, and the undulating store windows define its presence on Columbus Circle. Mumford praised the building's "architectural imagination," and Paul Goldberger included it in his list of top ten apartment buildings of New York City. **Threat: imminent window replacement, pending facade alterations, and general neglect.**

**Two Columbus Circle** (1958, Edward Durrell Stone): Two Columbus Circle is a defining element of the urban character of the Circle, as one of the city's distinguished public spaces. Originally home to the Gallery of Modern Art, this is one of only two buildings remaining to acknowledge the circular configuration of the site (240 Central Park South is the other). Designed at the height of Stone's career (whose earlier work included the Museum of Modern Art), the Gallery of Modern Art represents his life-long commitment to an architectural expression that a warm and subjective form of modernism. The Municipal Art Society's Committee for Post-War Architecture calls the building an integral part of New York's heritage of modern architecture. **Threat: wholesale demolition or unsympathetic alteration as part of Columbus Circle redevelopment.**

### ***Proposed Central Park South Historic District -- Future Consideration***

The proposed Central Park South Historic District would encompass the entirety of Central Park South and portions of West 58th Street. Featuring towering hotels, luxurious residences, prominent clubhouses, and a department store, the area is comprised of diverse architectural styles within a constant streetwall that is accentuated by the fanciful roofs of the hotel towers. The dramatic effect of this masonry-and-glass wall remains very much today as it was depicted in *The WPA Guide to New York City* of 1939: "Central Park South, in character, is an extension of the [Grand Army] plaza. Its skyscraper hotels, seen from the park, have a magnificent quality as a group."

Defined by its luxury hotels since the 1920s, the area is associated in the public imagination with stylish, cosmopolitan, and modern New York. It is that cultural association which today helps to sustain Central Park South's presence as a tourist hub. As critic Robert A. M. Stern has noted in *New York 1930*, the group of hotel towers, "especially seen from Central Park, immediately became one of the most optimistic visual images of city life, an elegiac composition that balanced New York's two kinds of man-managed nature, Olmsted's sylvan landscape and the pinnacled mountain range of mid-Manhattan. Not only was this image burned into the public psyche by photographs, etchings, and drawings...but it was also widely disseminated by postcard views and Hollywood films, which presented the city as a romantic dreamlike place."

In part because it is largely built-to-bulk, the area has retained a remarkably high degree of architectural integrity, having survived two building booms in the last 40 years. As the Commission is aware, unless protected by landmark designation these buildings remain vulnerable to unsympathetic alteration or even demolition, and may not withstand the increased development activity in and around midtown.

The enclosed report, "Central Park South: The Evolution of a Historic District," traces the development of the area -- from the origins of its fanciful skyline (a theme established with the early buildings around Grand Army Plaza) through its evolution as a center for luxurious apartment residences and hotels. The enclosed map outlines the proposed boundaries for the Historic District, anchored on the north, east, and west by three of the city's historic public spaces -- Central Park, Grand Army Plaza, and Columbus Circle; and bordered on the south by portions of West 58th Street, which completes the transition from Central Park to the intensely urban character of midtown Manhattan.

There is already considerable evidence of community and civic support for this proposal. In February 1997, Community Board 5 passed a resolution requesting historic district designation for Central Park South, which was endorsed by the Preservation Committee of the Municipal Art Society, the Women's City Club, City Council Members Tom Duane and Kenneth Fisher, as well as the editorial board of the *New York Observer* ("Let's Not Mess Up Central Park South," March

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3, 1997). HDC's Central Park South Task Force is made up of preservation advocates (including members of Community Board 5) and HDC Board members, as well as area residents. The Task Force hopes to discuss this matter with you and your staff in the near future, and the Historic Districts Council is prepared to assist the Landmarks Preservation Commission however necessary to advance these proposals.

Thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your agency's continued good work on behalf of our city's architectural and cultural heritage. I will contact your office next week to see if we might arrange a time to meet to discuss designations in the Central Park South neighborhood.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,



Eric Allison  
President

Enclosures