

Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
Regarding the Designation of the former Crawford Clothes Building
36 East 14th Street, Borough of Manhattan
March 29, 2005

LANDMARK WEST! is a non-profit community organization committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side.

We urge you to act today to designate the former Crawford Clothes Building (1948-51), an exuberant, attention-grabbing work by Modern architect Morris Lapidus. Others can speak more eloquently than I about this unique building's architectural significance, which the Commission's staff and virtually unanimous expert opinion have clearly demonstrated meets the standard for Landmark designation. It is also fairly obvious that alterations are in progress – right now as we speak – that have considerably undermined the building's architectural integrity.

The pre-emptive demolition of the former Crawford Clothes Building recalls similar efforts by property owners to circumvent the landmarks process. Twenty years ago, the Commission was considering designating the Normandy apartment building, an art-deco gem designed by Emery Roth. By the time the Commission held its hearing, the sidewalk of Riverside Drive was already littered with the remains of historic steel casement windows that had been removed by the building management. At the time, LW's testimony stated,

Unfortunately, when the process lurches from crisis to crisis, seeming to respond only to the threat of the wrecking ball or the inappropriate aluminum window contractor, we fuel the energy of those who attack the landmarking process. (LPC Public Hearing, November 12, 1985)

The Commission rose to the occasion and designated the Normandy on the spot. It was a brave and laudable action to take – though not as brave and laudable as it would have been had the Commission acted sooner, before the damage was done to both the building and the agency's credibility.

Today, we are no less concerned about the future of the Landmarks Commission, which too often operates in crisis mode, too often responds when it's already too late. We trust that this concerns each of you as well. The former Crawford Clothes Building has been on the Commission's radar screen for many years. It is the work of a master, Morris Lapidus, whose contributions to 20th-century architecture are now widely recognized and celebrated, although this was not always the case. "Boarding-house baroque,"

“superschlock,” and “tail-fin chic” were some of the epithets critics gave – and might still give – to Lapidus’s exuberant buildings. Not unlike another building I could name, and will: Edward Durell Stone’s 2 Columbus Circle. What more will it take for the Commission to lead the way beyond the hackneyed insults hurled against the architectural character of buildings like 2 Columbus Circle, criticisms that increasingly show themselves to be downright specious in light of what scholars and preservationists now justifiably consider “significant”?

Today’s public hearing is a first step. It demonstrates the Commission’s ability – indeed, its mandate – to inspect the facts with clear eyes, to hear arguments on both sides, and to make a determination on the merits. Again, I urge you to act on your findings and designate the former Crawford Clothes Building without further delay.