

February 21, 2012

Chair Robert Tierney and Commissioners
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Testimony regarding Certificate of Appropriateness for proposed modifications to the Fifth Avenue entrance plaza in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

My name is Kyle Johnson; I represent the New York/Tri-State Chapter of DOCOMOMO US, whose mission involves the preservation of significant works of Modern architecture.

Kevin Roche's redesign of the plaza at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, unveiled in 1970 in conjunction with the Museum's centennial, inaugurated the architect's reconfiguration of the Museum's physical plant and the resultant rejuvenation of its public image, which have made the Metropolitan the iconic and incredibly popular institution it is today. As the recent exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York illustrated, Kevin Roche's 40+ years of work at the Met constitutes the longest-running and probably most prominent of his numerous distinguished projects in New York City (which also include the Ford Foundation headquarters, UN Plaza hotel and office buildings, Central Park Zoo renovation, several office towers and other cultural and educational facilities).

While certain programmatic changes, such as eliminating vehicular access, may justify some modifications to the plaza, we believe that any changes should remain consistent with the underlying principles of Roche's design, which has created a clear and memorable image of the Museum in the public consciousness. Unfortunately, the currently proposed redesign contravenes those principles in several respects.

The genius of Roche's three-sided entrance stairway, which fortunately is to be retained, is that it accommodates pedestrians approaching from the north and south along Fifth Avenue. The proposed new fountains, due to their large size and proximity to the stairway, impede direct pedestrian flow to the steps from the north and south. We recommend that any new fountains be reduced in size, revised in shape, and perhaps relocated so as not to obstruct movement toward the stairs.

Furthermore, the bosques of trees in front of the 81st and 83rd Street entrances obstruct the now iconic view of the museum entrance and stairs from up and down the sidewalk. Ironically, these trees also obscure the two ground floor entrances, which the Museum wishes to accentuate, for those approaching from the north or south. The gap between the trees emphasizes these entrances only if one approaches them directly from the east.

Kevin Roche's declared design intention was to create an open urban plaza that defers to and displays the monumental Beaux-Arts façade of the museum. He wanted to distinguish the urban face of the museum on Fifth Avenue from the park surrounds of the other three sides. In keeping with that principle, we believe that any objects added to the open portion of the plaza (between the two end pavilions) should be low in profile—e.g. benches, fountains or movable furniture—so as not to obscure the building façade or the ground level entrances, or obstruct access to these entrances, particularly from the north and south. The proposed kiosks and bosques of trees violate this principle.

While the unhealthy trees in front of the end pavilions need to be replaced, and the planting beds improved, new trees should maintain some visibility of the façade beyond. The proposed “aerial hedges” are overly opaque, perhaps with the intention of concealing the fabric parasols behind them. We find these parasols inappropriate and unnecessary, crowding the narrowest section of the plaza. A canopy of trees should provide sufficient shade for benches or movable furniture beneath them.

The proposed foundation planting at the intersection of plaza and building façade weakens the concept of an urban plaza deferential to the architecture of the landmark building. Although similar planting was depicted in a presentation rendering by McKim, Mead & White, that plan was not implemented; the approved and executed Roche plaza design deliberately eschews such planting.

Notwithstanding these concerns, we commend the new exterior lighting design and find the proposed treatment of the area just south of the museum building unobjectionable.

DOCOMOMO US New York/Tri-State is hopeful that the Commission will recommend that any modifications to the present plaza, to the extent that they are necessary, conform to the underlying principles of Kevin Roche's design—preserving an open urban plaza with unimpeded access to the entrance stairway and unobstructed visibility of the stairs, adjacent facades and ground level entrances.

Respectfully,

Board of Directors
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