

May 6, 2009

Hon. Robert B. Tierney  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
Municipal Building  
1 Centre Street, 9th floor  
New York, New York 10007

Robert A.M. Stern Architects

Dear Commissioner Tierney:

I am writing to lend a strong voice of support for the proposed landmark designation of the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) power station, occupying virtually the full block bounded by West Fifty-eighth and Fifty-ninth Streets, Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues, in Manhattan. With an exterior designed in 1902 by Stanford White, the building not only represents an important work from the final stage of White's career but also stands as a testament to the enlightened aesthetic ambitions of the IRT's founders. The power station deserves the same landmark status that now safeguards Heins & La Farge's IRT control house (1904) on Seventy-second Street and Broadway and twelve of the forty-nine original IRT subway stations.

The power station has been owned and operated since 1959 by Con Edison, who have been largely indifferent to the building's value as a work of industrial architecture, stripping away its cornice almost thirty years ago and recently demolishing the last of the original tapered smokestacks. The preservation case for the power station has been placed before the commission for consideration twice, most recently in 1990. Since then, as the landscape of the west side has been transformed by the construction of high-rise apartment towers, its unique features have become more prominent to the public than ever before — it is visible from the elevated highway along the river and provides virtually the only visual and scalar relief from the new neighborhood that surrounds it. With the loss of the Waterside No. 2 and Kent Avenue power stations, it is the only building of its stature in the city — an incomparable monument to the age of coal and steam. As Con Edison slowly winds down activity at the plant, there is every reason to fear that the power station will meet the same fate that befell the Waterside and Kent Avenue plants.

But the loss of White's IRT power plant would be a very serious blow. It is a powerful work of industrial architecture by an architect who is frequently dismissed as one only concerned with houses for the rich — but who, together with his partners, in reality also successfully took on all sorts of projects including those of heavy industry. In London, England, one of the great Thames-side power stations is now a world-famous museum — Tate Modern — while its companion powerhouse, at Battersea, is being considered as the centerpiece of a new mixed-use development.

By virtue of its vast interior spaces, its location, and its compelling industrial beauty, the power station is poised not only to continue with its original functional mandate but should Con Edison move on, it has the potential to serve us in many other ways. It is easy to imagine it entering a new phase of life as an amenity for the entire city—a museum, a mixed-use center — who can predict? But one thing is certain, it needs to be preserved. I urge you not to let the opportunity to protect this building pass the commission by a third time.

Sincerely,



Robert A. M. Stern, FAIA

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