

## FRIENDS *of the* UPPER EAST SIDE HISTORIC DISTRICTS



NEWS FROM FRIENDS

DECEMBER 2004

### THE CURTAIN CLOSES

Cinema I II at 1001 3rd Avenue (Abraham W. Geller & Associates with Ben Schlanger, consulting theater architect: 1962) is currently undergoing extensive alterations on its exterior and interior.



*Cinema I II in 1998 (photo: Phyllis Hoffzimer) and after the destructive alterations in October.*

The glazed blue Venetian tiles on the façade have been replaced with a blank white stucco wall and important artworks that were integrated into the interior design have been removed, including a mural by Ilya Bolotowsky that abstractly depicts the motion of film, a geometric mural by Sewell Sillman and beautifully crafted Danish chandeliers. Cinema I II, New York's pre-eminent post-World War II art film house and the first duplex theater in the country, is one of the few such theaters remaining in Manhattan. The building is slated to become retail according to a department of buildings permit.

Abraham W. Geller, who studied with the architects William Lescaze, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, was termed an "unreconstructed modernist," and was known to refuse commissions where a historical style was demanded. Twenty years later, Geller was again hired to divide the larger upstairs auditorium into two, making the theater a triplex. He received an AIA Medal of Honor in 1985. Cinema I II also received awards from the Municipal Art Society and the New York City Department of Commerce and Industrial Development.

## THE NEEDLESS DESTRUCTION OF A POST-MODERN MASTERPIECE

In early June, the new owner of a Hans Hollein designed gallery removed the building's iconic 2-story stainless steel column and made other alterations, actions seemingly taken to avoid the designation of the building. The gallery, which is an early example of post-modernism, is the only North American building designed by the Pritzker Prize winning Austrian architect. It is located just outside of the Upper East Side Historic District. The needless destruction occurred despite months of outreach from FRIENDS; the gallery's original owner, Richard Feigen the New York Tri-State chapter of DOCOMOMO/US; and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). The owner's actions were legal, and the events emblematic of the difficulty in preserving modern architecture in New York.

In 1969, Richard Feigen commissioned Austrian architect Hans Hollein to redesign an 1887 rowhouse and convert it into a two-story gallery and residence for his own use. The planar stucco exterior was punctured by single pane windows and a two-story recessed entry divided by two joined stainless-steel columnar shafts. Hollein's finely crafted interiors had a sinuous nautical quality throughout. The February, 1970 issue of *Progressive Architecture* headlined an article about the building, "Architectural Fabergé," and wrote that Hollein's design combined "an architect's sense of space with a goldsmith's sense of craft to produce an exquisite ambiance for art."

The Feigen Gallery was erroneously assumed to be relatively safe because when Feigen sold it to Hanae Mori in 1973 they had an informal agreement to preserve the building. When Hanae Mori sold it in December 2002, no one was informed. It was when Feigen saw workmen nearby the building in April that he contacted FRIENDS who researched the property and found no permits. After contacting the new owner and getting no response, FRIENDS made a Department of Buildings complaint after which the new owner quickly secured a permit for alterations in mid-April. Both FRIENDS and Feigen contacted the new owner on numerous occasions, explaining the significance of the building, offering assistance in renovating it while maintaining the significant features and pleading for sensitivity.

At the same time, FRIENDS submitted to the LPC a Request for Evaluation, the formal paperwork asking them to designate the building and requesting the Commission help save the building. On behalf of the Commission's Chair, a staff member contacted the owner's attorney and explained the building's significance and the benefits of designating it.

The outreach seemed to spur the new owner into quickly destroying the Hollein design. On June 4, under a veil of scaffolding, the 18-foot high stainless-steel column was ripped off the facade (revealing the brick structural pier). Since then, all traces of the Hollein design have been removed and replaced with a new one.



-Lisa Kersavage

## WHY THE LOSS?

In 1997, FRIENDS conducted an extensive survey of Post-World War II architecture located outside of the boundaries of the historic districts on the Upper East Side. Twenty-two unprotected landmark-quality buildings, including the Feigen Gallery and Cinemas I II, were included in an exhibit, *Modern Architecture on the Upper East Side: Landmarks of the Future* (catalogue available upon request). Robert A. M. Stern, the keynote speaker for the exhibit's opening night on September 19, 2001, said "...let us preserve what is ours not only from the far past but from our own time that history shall know we have added some things of worth to this great city."

The loss of the Feigen Gallery and Cinemas I II are partially due to the Catch-22 of a common preservation strategy — raising awareness of a building that ought to be designated can hasten its demise by alerting the owner, who may choose to avoid designation through pre-emptive destruction. Despite the strong interest in modern architecture among preservation practitioners, it lacks the "heart-tugging" appeal of more traditional historic building making it a difficult "sell." Modern architecture is especially difficult to preserve because its historic, technical and cultural significance is not widely understood or appreciated.

The only way prevent further loss of significant modern architecture is for the Commission to act quickly to designate the many worthy buildings left on the Upper East Side, including, Manhattan House at 200 East 66th Street (1950: Architects: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Mayer & Whittlese), and The Beekman Theater and Blockfront at 1242-1258 Second Avenue (1952: Architects: Fellheimer & Wagne, John J. McNamara and J. M. Berlinger).

FRIENDS will continue to be outspoken and vigilant in protecting modern buildings located in historic districts. We feel strongly that they deserve the same level of protection as other buildings in the districts. We hope the Commission will be as strident in protecting the Whitney Museum or any other modernist buildings in the districts, as they would be a turn of the century Beaux-Arts mansion.

## THE CURTAIN CLOSES, CONT.

In late October, FRIENDS was alerted by Andrew Bolotowsky, the son of the artist Ilya Bolotowsky, that his father's mural had been removed from the cinema. FRIENDS discovered a building permit had been issued for these destructive alterations despite our outreach efforts to the owners encouraging them to value the historical and artistic value of the building as well as our efforts directed at the LPC to consider the building for landmark designation.

This insensitive alteration highlights the need for designation of modern architecture on the Upper East Side and across the City. FRIENDS along with Andrew Bolotowsky and other interested cultural organizations approached the Landmarks Preservation Commission in early November to intervene in the disfiguring alterations of this important example of Modern architecture. We hope that at the very least, the artwork will be reintegrated into a retail environment. A move has yet to be made.



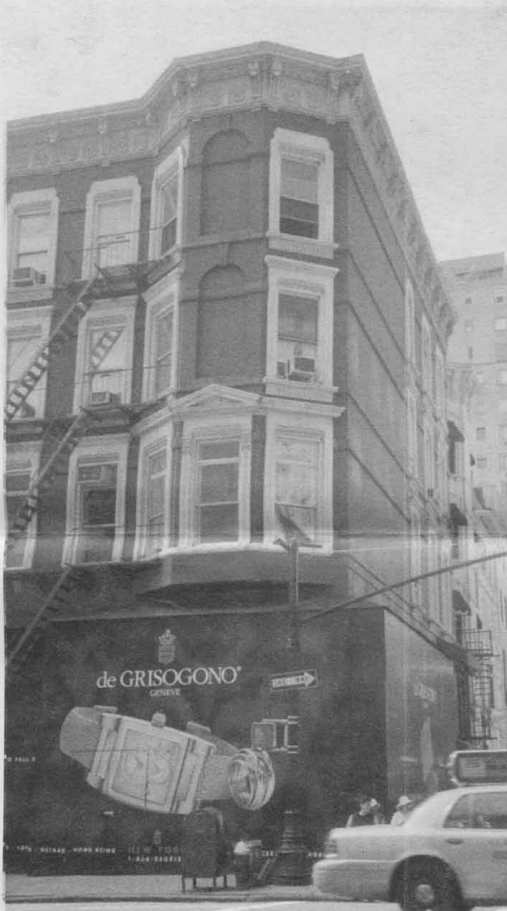
*Extra Stoller ©, 1950.*



*Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Gottsch-Schleisner Collection ©, 1952.*



## SURPRISE PACKAGES



Upper East Siders have gotten used to seeing shopfronts along Madison Avenue enclosed by plywood boxes covered with ads while new stores are under construction. Since the passage of the Madison Avenue guidelines, however, these ungainly packages have taken on mysterious implications since observers now have no way of knowing what is going on underneath the plywood wrapping paper.

Not long ago, every application for a new shopfront on Madison Avenue could be reviewed by groups like the Community Board and FRIENDS' Preservation Committee, as well as at the Landmarks Commission's public hearings. Now most shopfront alterations are covered by written guidelines and are no longer subject to public review. While the concept of guidelines is reasonable, FRIENDS argues that the design standards adopted are not always appropriate.

In addition, neighborhood eyes on the street now cannot know when the plywood box comes off, if the new shopfront revealed has been constructed according to the permit granted. A case in point is the recently uncovered store at 870 Madison Avenue, which was long a site of a violation. The new façade happily reveals an original drip molding that had been covered up, but the surrounding masonry is scarred and needs repair, and the sign band above the window is alarmingly white. Is this what was permitted?

FRIENDS and other neighborhood groups will be urging the Landmarks Commission to make permits available online so we can know what has been required of architects and owners. With over 21,000 landmarks in all the historic districts, the city needs to use neighborhood eyes on the street if we want to eliminate unpleasant surprises.

-Franny Eberhardt

## OUTSIDE THE ENVELOPE—THE WHITNEY MUSEUM EXPANSION

In June 2004, the Whitney Museum of American Art announced they hired the Renzo Piano Building Workshop to design an expansion to the museum designed by Marcel Breuer in 1966. The museum stated that the expansion will remain "within the envelope" of their properties, which include the Breuer building, four rowhouses on Madison Avenue and two on East 74th Street. In early November, the board of the museum approved plans for a silvery nine-story tower that would rise higher than the Breuer building, while also demolishing two row houses along Madison Avenue for a new glass entryway. The addition, set back from Madison Avenue with a ten foot gap between the new and old building, rises behind the remaining brownstones on Madison. New and old are connected via a new entry vestibule, lobby and series of glass walkways.

Since 1985, FRIENDS has repeatedly reached out to the Whitney Museum, alerting them to our concerns about their expansion and that the Breuer building, one of the most important modern landmarks in the country, not be diminished by any additions. FRIENDS was one of many groups voicing opposition to previous expansion plans, particularly because of the proposed demolition of the rowhouses, which contribute to the character of the Upper East Side Historic District. FRIENDS' President at the time, Halina Rosenthal, compared the rowhouses to a "corps de ballet," and said "we will oppose this dismantling of the Upper East Side Historic District, as we would the dismantling of the tout ensemble of Swan Lake." The Whitney will present a more refined plan to the Landmarks Preservation Commission in January.

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

FRIENDS' benefit honoring **Nicholas Platt** in September was a great success and we thank you for your generous support. We couldn't do it without you! In this update we discuss the sad loss of two wonderful Modern buildings on the Upper East Side, and the proposed addition to the Whitney Museum. If you haven't already, we hope you will join FRIENDS in the fight to save what we have left of our neighborhood's modern heritage. FRIENDS' board will be visiting the Whitney to review their plans, we will be sure to report back on our opinions and concerns.

As President of Friends, I have had the wonderful assistance of great Executive Directors. After more than five years, **Lisa Kersavage** will be leaving her post at FRIENDS. Lisa has been awarded the prestigious Kress/RFR Fellowship for Historic Preservation at the Municipal Arts Society (MAS). Our loss is MAS's gain; we shall miss her and wish her godspeed. A very warm welcome to our new Executive Director, **Serianne Worden**. Serianne follows in the footsteps of previous directors, with a degree in preservation from Columbia University. She has been active with preservation advocacy here in New York City as well as in England, Italy and Argentina. Most recently, Serianne participated in special projects for DOCOMOMO, the Design Trust for Public Space and the New Jersey Institute of Technology. In addition, she has written about preservation and architecture for several specialized publications and the general media. Indeed we are lucky to have her and she will ably lead FRIENDS forward! It is the Executive Director who wears our FRIENDS personal personae and we are proud of the outstanding individuals who have represented us. We are highly regarded in the preservation world and I wish to thank all of you for your friendship and dedicated years to FRIENDS.

Have a wonderful holiday season and we hope to see all of you at our upcoming Annual Meeting in February.

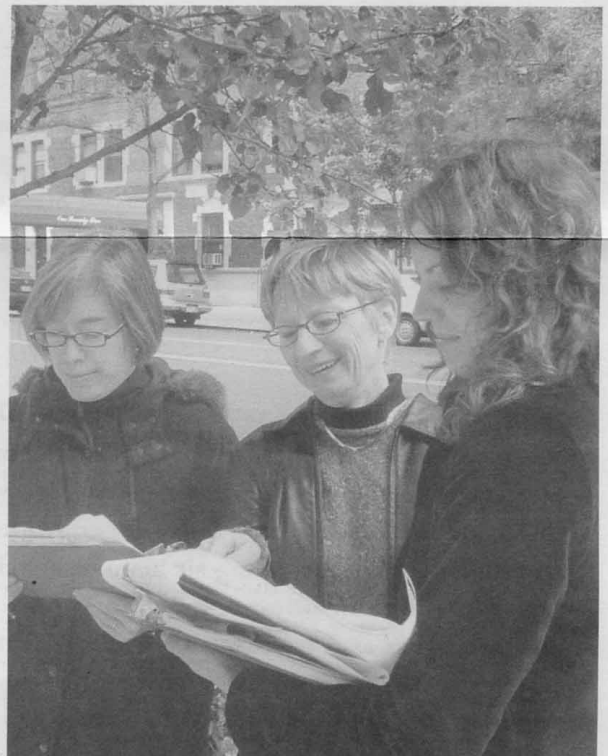
Warmest wishes,

*Anne Hilland*

## LEXINGTON AVENUE EXPANSION UPDATE

On October 22, Franny Eberhart, Rita Chu and Seri Worden met with Kathleen Howe of the New York State Historic Preservation Office and Claudia Cooney, our consultant for the Upper East Side Historic District extension project. We had a successful and productive meeting in the office discussing our strategy and schedule. We then headed outside, map in hand, to walk the neighborhood and listen to Cathy's expert opinion on what was contributing and non-contributing to the proposed expansion.

We had a successful discussion and walk and we are making great progress with the project. Our goal is to complete the nomination and submit it by the end of Summer 2005. In October and November of 2005, we will send out a series of letters to all property owners in the proposed district and also hold a public meeting in conjunction with SHPO (State Historic Preservation Office). In December, the proposal officially goes before the State Review Board and on to Commissioner Castro and the Park Service. Providing all goes well, the Upper East Side Historic District expansion will officially be listed on the National Register of Historic Places in early 2006.



*Claudia Cooney, Kathleen Howe and Seri Worden (right to left).*

## KRESS INTERN

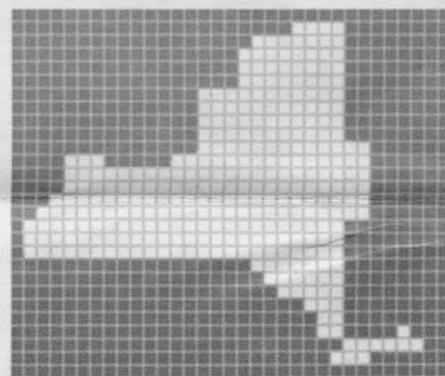


With generous funding from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, FRIENDS hired Andrea Kaiser, a graduate of the Historic Preservation Program at Columbia University, to complete the work in our project to expand the designated Upper East Side Historic District. She finished the survey and research of 450 buildings and designed an easy-to-use database containing detailed information and contemporary and historic photographs of all of the buildings. Our immediate plan is to put this database on our web site so everyone can have access to this useful information.

## ANNUAL MEETING

Join FRIENDS at our Annual Meeting and Awards Ceremony from 6:00 - 8:00 p.m. on Wednesday, January 19, 2005, at the New York School of Interior Design (170 East 70th Street). The public is welcomed to attend but reservations are required. Please call (212) 535-2526.

FRIENDS OF THE UPPER EAST SIDE HISTORIC DISTRICTS, founded in 1982, is an independent, not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to preserving the architectural legacy, livability, and sense of place of the Upper East Side. In addition to safeguarding the future of the Upper East Side's six historic districts and 125 individual landmarks, and as an advocate for sound preservation policies for the city, Friends has also been a leader in successful efforts to improve dramatically the zoning laws governing the area's avenues and residential side streets. For further information please telephone (212) 535-2526 or visit [www.friends-ues.org](http://www.friends-ues.org).  
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