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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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**Testimony of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer to the Landmark Preservation Commission
361 Central Park West - LPC-20-05782**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in regard to the former First Church of Christ building, located at 361 Central Park West. The Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) proposes to convert this landmarked building into a new facility for their use. From the moment I heard about CMOM's plans to move into this building, I have been supportive of this project. I remain supportive of their proposal, which I understand has undergone changes to address community concerns.

This building is considered to be in the finest tradition of Beaux Arts classicism and is one of a handful of churches designed by Carrere and Hastings. When there was a previous proposal by a different applicant to convert this building into condominiums, I advocated for community facility uses. This building was designed as a place of public assembly, and it was and is meant to be enjoyed by many, not just a few. I am glad to see that this proposal will open the building to the public and provide wonderful programming to keep them coming back.

However, there are elements of the applicant's proposal that I believe should be altered in order to preserve as much of the building's existing profile as possible. As many of the neighbors who are here today will express to this Commission, the modification of the roof poses concerns. In particular, the bulkheads at the western portion of the building, as proposed, seem imposing. I support the museum's desire to include programming at the roof of the building, which will allow the public access to the fabulous steeple. Furthermore, I thank the applicant for responding to concerns from residents by shifting some of the roof mechanicals to the north in order to make them less visible from West 96th Street and preserving more of the roof's original profile. But while I understand that a wholesale re-design of the mechanicals on the roof is not possible, I nonetheless exhort the applicant to minimize volume and impact of the additions. This recommendation includes treating the additions with materials that will complement, rather than clash with the building's existing façade.

With regard to the windows, I believe that the Museum's need for ample natural light—something which they do not currently enjoy—is essential for this much larger space to be functional. The repurposing of valued churches of historic significance is a difficult challenge requiring painful choices. The great LaFarge window will at least be saved, but lost to New York. The other stained glass windows are exceptionally large and beautiful, and like other historic objects, they are of a quality that cannot be matched today. The proposal to preserve window borders around the new clear glass opens in all but one window and is at least a gesture

toward preservation and historical meaning. The fate of the central portions of the remaining windows, with their removable glass and figure work should concern the Commission. I believe a significant effort should be made to find a way to preserve them in another setting. It would be tragic indeed if we cannot do better than was done to the interior, where Carere and Hastings engineering marvel of the unsupported balcony, and the pews of Carpathians oak, with their matched “angel’s head” burls, were put into dumpsters. As noted, these are painful outcomes of adaptive re-use, but the current applicant, unlike the prior one that did so much harm, has—I believe—sought to make an earnest effort. I understand that CMOM will preserve one window on the northern side of the building and incorporate it as an educational tool in their new facility. I believe this is an important step to preserve as much of the building’s original character as possible while providing for new uses.

In closing, I believe that this proposal respects the exterior significance of the building and its contribution to the character of the neighborhood. The Children’s Museum will add a significant improvement to the area’s cultural richness and quality of life. These too are values we must uphold. I look forward to seeing this Commission work with the applicant to ensure that everything reasonable is done to protect the building’s character. To that end, I support approval of the application, and trust that the project and museum will be a success.

I truly appreciate your careful review of this application. Thank you for your time to this matter.