

November 7, 2002

Jerome Becker  
Chair  
Housing Finance Agency  
641 Lexington Avenue  
New York, NY

Dear Mr. Becker:

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 has serious concerns about the proposed building with the address of 555 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, the current design of which appears to require the demolition of two distinguished historic buildings on the site. It understands that the developer has sought authorization of 80-20 funding for this site and that the State Historic Preservation Office has issued a preliminary determination of eligibility for the Historic Register for two buildings that together occupy much of the site: the United States Express Company Building, largely from a design by Ernest Flag, and the Dominick & Haff Building, designed by Henry Hardenbergh. The Board supports the determination of eligibility.

Although the Board has consistently supported affordable housing, we must oppose this application for 80-20 funding if the important historic resources represented by these buildings should be lost as a result. The buildings are striking and represent relatively rare aspects of the work of these two distinguished architects. Both have been listed in surveys of significant buildings that should be preserved in the area. The prospect of demolition has aroused considerable concern among preservationists, members of the community, and elected officials.

The Board recognizes that the existing zoning makes it difficult to preserve these buildings and erect a structure with the bulk allowed by the present zoning. There is, however, a possible solution. If the buildings were to become designated New York City landmarks, a new building on the site could take advantage of special provisions of the Zoning Resolution that would allow modifications of the building envelope to make it possible to preserve much of the exterior of the historic structures, including the handsome primary façades and possibly part of the glass-roofed interior of the Flag building as well. One way of doing this would be to move much of the bulk of the new building to the 24<sup>th</sup> Street side of the site, thus keeping the main façades and establishing

an interior court that could ideally contain a portion of the glass-roofed space of the Flagg building. Such a transfer would of course have to be carefully designed so as not to have a negative impact on the current context of the site.

The Board supports landmark designation of these important buildings and would give sympathetic consideration to a transfer of the existing bulk if it preserved the historic buildings and the resulting design was acceptable. Preservation of significant existing buildings and encouragement of affordable housing are long-standing goals of the Board.

Sincerely,



Simone Sindin

Chair

Manhattan Community Board No. 4

Edward S. Kirkland

Chair

Chelsea Preservation & Planning Committee

Cc: Mayor Michael Bloomberg  
Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields  
Local Elected Officials  
Kathy Howe, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation  
Sherida Paulsen, Chair, Landmarks Preservation Commission  
Amanda Burden, Director, Department of City Planning  
Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director, Historic Districts Council  
Frank Sanchis, Municipal Art Society  
Roger Lang, New York Landmarks Conservancy  
Steven Charno, Counsel, Related Properties  
Herbert Streng