



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD No. 4

330 West 42nd Street, 26th floor New York, NY 10036
tel: 212-736-4536 fax: 212-947-9512
www.ManhattanCB4.org

WALTER MANKOFF
Chair

ANTHONY M. BORELLI
District Manager

April 7, 2005

Hon. Robert Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
9 Center Street, north
New York, NY 10007

Re: 327, 329, and 331 West 22nd Street - Chelsea Historic District

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the applications for rear extensions to these three adjacent rowhouses. Although the three applications are not all in the same stage of completion, all three are for rear yard extensions, and the decisions for each of the three buildings on the justifications for removing existing extensions and for determining the extent of new extensions depend on similar considerations and should be made together. The Board further notes that the limited restoration planned for the principal façades on 22nd Street is not part of these applications. The Board also requests that if significant changes are made in any applications for these buildings they should be referred to the Board for review of these changes.

At the back of numbers 327 and 329 there currently exist dilapidated extensions that are relics of old tea porches or tea rooms. As the Commission knows, in many rowhouse districts it became quite early the practice to extend the parlor floors out into the rear yards several feet to provide a kind of porch on which the ladies of the house could take tea or entertain in good weather. Since bad weather is all too common in New York, almost all the surviving examples were eventually enclosed under the name of "tea rooms." These were light wooden structures that have typically undergone many changes and vicissitudes over the years, but the survivors have typically become integral parts of the houses to which they were attached.

This is what has happened in these cases, and the changes and vicissitudes of many years weigh heavily on them, as the pictures shown the Landmarks Task Force of the Board clearly reveal. They are in poor condition, and in their current state display little historic character: they look like shanties. Although intact tea rooms are relatively rare, the reality that these examples are invisible from the public way and have lost most historic character argues against requiring their retention.

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The applicants propose to erect full-height extensions in place of the tea rooms, and also in back of number 331, which currently has no extension. On number 327 the extension would reach the 30-foot building line required by zoning. This deep extension would narrow even further the hole in the “doughnut” or enclosed open space within a rowhouse block at its narrowest point. Although seriously encroached upon over the years, especially on the north side, which faces onto 23rd Street, a main crosstown street not included in the Historic District, the doughnut remains sufficiently intact, largely in the south half, for it to be a significant element in the block. It reinforces the block’s historic rowhouse character and provides a significant historic open garden atmosphere that is a valuable amenity to the residents. To allow the deep extension requested at 327 would effectively cut the open space into two pieces and destroy its character by blocking views from the backs of the buildings on either side into the other half of the enclosed space.

The Board believes that allowing modern extensions on all three buildings out to the line established by the existing tea-room derived extensions at 327 and 329, which approximately follows the rear line of existing buildings just to the east and west, would not add significantly to the existing encroachments on the “doughnut” hole and would be appropriate. These extensions would be of the type that leaves the top story of the rear wall with its small cornice intact, thus recalling the historic rear wall and preserving a historic feature. Allowing anything more than this depth would seriously detract from the interior space and the historic character of this portion of the Chelsea Historic District.

Sincerely,



Walter Mankoff
Chair
Manhattan Community Board No. 4



Edward S. Kirkland
Chair
Landmarks Taskforce

cc: Local elected officials
Applicant