



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD No. 4

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J. LEE COMPTON
Chair

Hon. Robert Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Center Street, Ninth floor

Re: 343 West 20th Street, Chelsea Historic District

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the application for very considerable alterations to the Greek Revival row house at 343 West 20th Street in the Chelsea Historic District. This house is special in that it is also visible from the public way on West 21st Street across the school playground, legally public open space, located on the west side of PS 11. The Board believes the changes and additions to this rear façade are inappropriate and excessive.

Prior to our comments on this application currently in front of the Commission, the Board must comment on a related matter integral to this action and concerning both the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the Department of Buildings. Prior to the issuance of building permit by DOB the owner must obtain a Certificate of No Harassment from HPD.

Although this issue is not within the jurisdiction of the Commission, the Board is concerned about the welfare of the sole remaining tenant, Ms. Bettina Valenti, The Board has received earlier reports of tenant harassment at this location. Mr. Turner, the architect and developer, responded at committee that he had received a Certificate of No Harassment, but the Board has not been able to verify this representation with HPD. Mr. Turner further stated that Ms. Valenti is a tenant in place who will be relocated during construction and will return to the building upon its completion. However, Ms. Valenti has stated in a telephone conversation with the chair of the Board's Landmarks Task Force her concern that the windows of her apartment will be reduced by these proposed changes. The Board opposes any action that is in conflict with her legal tenant rights.

The Board thanks the applicant, David Turner, for his presentation to the Landmarks Task Force of the Board on July 11, and for transmitting reduced copies and some photographs to the Board the next day, but regrets the absence of such drawings as floor plans and details of the work, since they have made evaluation of some aspects of the application difficult. On the basis of available materials, we support in general the proposed restoration of the altered and deteriorated historic façade on 20th Street. The drawings indicate appropriate work on the existing historic features here, and the applicant has consistently executed appropriate restoration work on street façades of other buildings in the Chelsea Historic District.

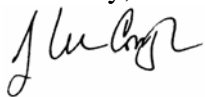
Major additions on the roof and the rear of the building are proposed. The developer has erected a mockup of the rooftop additions; and this does not appear to be visible from any point on the 20th

Street side, even at the point of maximum visibility near St. Peter's Church. On this street the façade is located between two very similar but not identical ones that have also been altered, but in varying ways. The façade of this building has previously been extended upward and the cornice removed. The applicant proposes to place a large cornice near the top of this extension, although such a cornice, found in such grandfathered alterations as those at number 345 to the west, is somewhat inconsistent with the otherwise complete restoration of a Greek Revival façade. Other alternatives might be explored, such as placing a lighter and historically more appropriate cornice over attic windows in this grandfathered blank upper section of wall. These windows might be used to light a reduced version of the additions proposed on the other side of this wall.

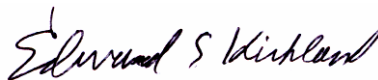
The size and nature of these additions are in fact such as to remove all historic character on the normally visible rear of the building. While the recent warm wet seasons have encouraged the existing trees in the playground to a leafy exuberance that only allows glimpses of the rear of many of the houses, this three-story-and-basement façade is revealed in the leafless season as perhaps the most intact of the row that backs on the playground. The proposed additions would extend the present low building back to the 30-foot rear-yard line to form a six-story block with a modern balconied façade that would totally hide the original rear wall. Major openings would be created in this wall, which would of course be completely hidden inside the building. The proposed new back of the building would be clearly visible in the leafless season and partially so at other times and have no historic character whatever. It would greatly diminish the historic quality of the wider view over and from the playground, which offers the public a clear example of the historic development of rear façades in a row-house block.

The Board had concerns from some aspects of the drawings that a historic tea porch might also exist in some form on the rear façade of the building, but observation and the photographs supplied make this seem unlikely. Nevertheless, the Board cannot support the extent of the proposed additions, and urges the Commission to require major modifications in the application as presented to us. The historic character of the back of the building and the historic development of the row as seen from the rear must not be lost.

Sincerely,



J. Lee Compton
Chair
Manhattan Community Board No. 4



Edward S. Kirkland
Chair
Landmarks Taskforce

cc: Applicant
Robert Bender, Principal, P.S. 11