



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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District Manager

June 11, 2007

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

Re: General Theological Seminary

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 is writing to you concerning the revised applications for Certificates of Appropriateness submitted in May 2007 by the General Theological Seminary for the square block in the Chelsea Historic District occupied by the Seminary and sometimes called Chelsea Square. It is located between Ninth and Tenth Avenue, 20th to 21st Streets. The applications are for Certificates of Appropriateness to demolish the building called Sherrill Hall located at the east end of the block facing Ninth Avenue and to erect on the site a new seven-story building, intended largely for private residential use, and also to erect a smaller new building to be located west of the existing West Building on 20th Street in the southwest part of the block. These applications replace more extensive applications filed previously but withdrawn.

On May 17, 2007, the architects for the Seminary presented the revised proposals at a meeting of the Landmarks Task Force of the Board attended by about 30 members of the community. The Task Force recommended modifications reflecting the changed scale and design to the earlier position of the Board adopted February 7, 2007. These modifications included conditional acceptance in concept of the proposed new seven-story building on Ninth Avenue while recommending withholding support of the design of the building until the Board had seen completed designs. Some features of the design were seen as either unacceptable or still under development, especially the treatment of the large amounts of glass shown on crucial areas of the Ninth Avenue building. The Task Force reiterated the Board's previous opposition to several aspects of the proposed new building on 20th Street.

At the regular meeting of the Board on June 6, 2007, the architects of both buildings made a brief presentation, centering on the elements of the Ninth Avenue building about which the Landmarks Task Force had expressed concerns. The designs were described as final. The full Board adopted the attached revised statement ratifying the recommendations of the Task Force that found the Ninth Avenue building acceptable in concept and in some design aspects but

nevertheless inappropriate, especially in the presence and treatment of large areas of glass in some points of the largely brick base and in the glass two-story rooftop element. The statement also confirmed the previous judgment on the 20th Street building as inappropriate in several aspects of the design and in its connection to the historic West Building. The vote was 32 in favor, 3 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 1 present but not eligible to vote.

Sincerely,



Edward Kirkland
Chair
Landmarks Task Force



J. Lee Compton
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4

Cc: General Theological Seminary
Electeds
Municipal Art Society
Landmarks Conservancy
Historic Districts Council
Council of Chelsea Block Associations

**Statement of Manhattan Community Board No. 4
on the Revised Proposals of the General Theological Seminary
June 6, 2007**

Summary

Community Board 4 supports in concept the scale of the seven-story building now proposed on Ninth Avenue and some aspects of the treatment of its five-story brick base but believes that several aspects of the design are inappropriate. Our principal concerns with the design are:

- The large amount of glass, which clashes with the proportions of glass and brick masonry in Haight's designs;
- The two assertive wide vertical glass strips on Ninth Avenue and on 20th Street;
- The excessively heavy treatment of the two-story glass top of the building.

The Board further believes that important aspects of the proposed new building on 20th Street are clearly inappropriate:

- The dominant east wall of mica schist;
- The glass connector to the West Building;
- The related impacts on this important historic building;
- The tall projecting windows at the northwest corner of the new building;
- The encroachment on open space to the north of the new building;
- The zinc roof with its multiple windows.

Background

The General Theological Seminary forms an important part of Chelsea's historic heritage and character. The full block site donated by Clement Clarke Moore to the Seminary was the center for the residential development that he planned for his estate and is now at the heart of the Chelsea Historic District. Between 1825 and 1836 two early Gothic Revival buildings of mica schist were constructed on the block, one of which survives as the West Building near 20th Street.

Late in the 19th Century then Dean Hoffman employed the architect Charles C. Haight to design an academic campus or "close" in the new Collegiate Gothic style, of which it is an early and largely intact example. These buildings share the brick and brownstone materials and the low horizontal scale typical of the Chelsea Historic District. The layout is that of an E with a spine containing the major buildings along 21st Street to the north and opening onto 20th Street to the south. Characterizations such as "low-lying uniformity," "reposeful," and "homogeneous" use of materials" mark the description of the close in the Chelsea Historic District Designation Report prepared for the landmarking of the District. Across 20th Street one of the finest Greek Revival rows in the city faces the open space of the Seminary. In 1959-61 the historic buildings on Ninth Avenue forming the eastern leg of the E were replaced by Sherrill Hall, a low brick flat-roofed building generally regarded as unsuccessful.

Recently the Seminary has been facing severe financial pressures, including the cost of remedying the effects of long-deferred maintenance on its historic buildings. After fruitless exploration of several possibilities it entered into a contract with the Brodsky Organization to demolish Sherrill Hall and use the Seminary's unused development rights to replace it with a large new building that would be dominantly residential and was intended to make a significant contribution to the costs of rehabilitation and preservation of the historic buildings of the close.

The December 2005 filing sought construction of a 17-story building on Ninth Avenue with the lower four floors to be used mostly for the Seminary's library and administration and the upper 13 floors for luxury apartments. A revised filing earlier this year reduced the height of the Ninth Avenue building to 15 stories plus mechanicals, reduced the footprint of the apartment tower, placed the library largely in its historic location at the corner of 21st Street and Ninth Avenue, and relocated Seminary administration into a new low building to be built on 20th Street.

Both these proposals would have required a ULURP under Section 74-711 of the Zoning Resolution to allow waiver of the height limit of 75 feet imposed by the protective zoning mapped by the 1992 rezoning that implemented the pioneering Chelsea 197-a Plan put forth by this Board. The proposals, especially the scale of the Ninth Avenue building, aroused a great deal of opposition in the community. Both versions were eventually withdrawn for lack of support.

The changes currently proposed to the Seminary block, comprising a seven-story building on Ninth Avenue, largely residential in character but also housing part of the Seminary library, and a low new administration building on 20th Street, require only Certificates of Appropriateness from the Landmarks Preservation Commission. This has allowed more detailed and precise presentation and review of aspects of the design of both these buildings.

The Certificates of Appropriateness

A "Statement by the Commission" at the end of the Designation Report for the Chelsea Historic District discusses such issues as possible new buildings on the property of the Seminary. It has been often cited by the applicants. The only references to criteria are found in two sentences in the last paragraph. "In reviewing a new building proposed for an Historic District the Commission will take into account, and the architect of the new building should take into account the surroundings, including the adjoining buildings, those across the street and along both blockfronts. A new building should relate well to its neighbors in terms of the materials which are used, the architectural proportions, the size and shape of the windows and the details in the front of the building." The Board believes these principles have guided its review of the applications.

Demolition of Sherrill Hall. The Community Board has no objection to the proposal to demolish the present 1960 building occupying the Ninth Avenue front of the Seminary and turning the corner onto 20th Street as an action taken in isolation. The building is of poor quality and undistinguished design, even though it attempted to relate to its context in a style of the time. It is also in poor condition. The Board can, however, support this portion of the application only if the building that is to replace Sherrill Hall is truly appropriate.

The proposed Ninth Avenue building. The Community Board welcomes the reduction of the proposed scale of this building to one more nearly consistent with the scale of the Chelsea Historic District. The five-story base with a setback two-story rooftop element fits within the envelope set by the protective zoning implementing the pioneering Chelsea 197-a Plan, including the 75-foot height limit, and thus requires no further public approvals beyond that of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Although the Board believes that much progress has been made toward an appropriate solution, the Board regrets that it must find the design of the Ninth Avenue building inappropriate largely because of the size and treatment of the larger glass elements of the building. We are concerned that we have seen practically no materials showing the appearance of the rear of the new buildings from the interior of the block, although the close is regularly open to the public and the back of the Ninth Avenue building will be partially visible from 20th Street.

The brick base of the building makes a thoughtful attempt to harmonize with Haight's buildings along the 21st Street spine. The new design reflects careful study in the placement and details of the mostly inset windows, and the string courses that largely unified Haight's row and reinforced its dominant horizontality are continued in brick and in other materials. These changes diminish but do not entirely remove all impression of a flat cladding rather than the solidity of Haight's structures.

The amount of glass even in the brick base reinforces this appearance of a lack of solidity. On the one hand the relatively large windows on the 21st Street façade of the new structure are appropriate as a modern equivalent of the historic library windows in the same location while also reflecting Haight's refectory windows to the west, the grouped windows on the main façade are sensitive to the context, and the stacks of large windows on Ninth Avenue at least provide a welcome articulation reflecting the scale of historic buildings in the Historic District; on the other hand the cumulative effect of so much glass reduces the visual weight and solidity of the structure and is in conspicuous contrast to the proportions of glass and masonry in Haight's buildings.

Although the architect's significant attempts to provide texture and solidity by careful recession and projection of largely glass elements do reduce the impact of the large amounts of glass in a way recalling the methods that Haight used to provide articulation and solidity by similarly varying masonry elements, the large amount of glass and the prominent metal elements supporting it are overly dominant at some points and destroy any balance between glass and masonry.

The two wide unbroken glass strips extending upwards from the new Ninth Avenue residential entrance and from a location on 20th Street are of particular concern. These strips are even reflected in the two-story building top. While they are intended to define the major portions of the structure, in their present form they are large, disturbing intrusions with prominent metal elements and are seriously inconsistent with the character of the historic buildings of the close and in the Chelsea Historic District. They are particularly clashing on quiet, low-scale 20th Street,

where the strip rises close to Cushman Row, perhaps the finest Greek Revival townhouse group in the city. The strips should be restudied to reduce their size and impact.

The two-story rooftop structure crowning the building and set back only the minimum required distances from the building line will be highly visible from many points up and down Ninth Avenue, some way down 21st Street, and from many points on 20th Street, not to mention the publicly accessible close. While a largely glass treatment of this totally residential portion of the building might be acceptable in principle, the proposed assertive treatment, the masses of glass that are broken only by shallow dividers that seem inadequate to provide sufficient texture and solidity, and such overbearing features as the overhang of the upper floor make a statement inconsistent with the historic surroundings and the carefully calibrated and in many aspects successful design of the base of the building below.

In contrast the new retail stores at the base of the Ninth Avenue building have been largely developed in a way consistent with the historic streetscapes of this retail avenue in the Chelsea Historic District. Whatever the size and type of enterprises located here—and smaller stores would certainly reinforce the character of the area—the appropriate incorporation of this base into the streetscape through the visual division and general configuration of the storefronts, including such traditional elements as bulkheads and signbands, articulate the base of the building and contribute to a desirable solid texture. Breaking up the sheet glass of the store windows with transom bars would further reinforce this effect.

Finally, the entrance on Ninth Avenue is to be converted from one leading to the close to one leading to the new residential units. This change from the previous proposals, together with the new entrance to the close to be created at the new 20th Street building, would bring a fundamental change from Haight's eastward orientation of the Seminary, facing Ninth Avenue and the Chelsea Historic District, to a new southwestern orientation. Public access will be either through the new entrance well to the west on 20th Street or through the new Tutu Center on Tenth Avenue. Although in the early days of the Seminary access was largely from 20th or 21st Street, it was never located in this relatively remote corner of the close. Such a basic change should be considered in evaluating the new buildings proposed.

The proposed 20th Street building. The Community Board accepts the concept of a low structure on an existing tennis court in the southwest of the close near the West Building, but continues to believe that such aspects of the present design as the heavy mica-schist wall on the east side, the glass connection with the West Building, the projecting windowed element at the northwest corner, and the roof with its multiple windows are basically inappropriate and inconsistent with the understandings upon which the building was originally discussed with the community. After the presentation of the Seminary's earlier proposals the concept of a building on this site was raised in meetings with community representatives as a perhaps acceptable way of reducing the bulk originally proposed by the Seminary for the Ninth Avenue building. The location was seen as compatible with Haight's original plan for a small building on 20th Street in this part of the close and as not interfering with the major opening of the close to the south centering on the Seminary chapel.

While three sides of the proposed structure largely reflect the model informally pointed to, a modest building by Haight known as “Chelsea 2,3,4” located in a roughly corresponding position on 20th Street to the east and consistent with the materials and style of the rest of his complex, the east side is in startling contrast. Renderings show a large square wall of mica schist facing the West Building and broken only by large rectangular openings. It is linked by a glass “atrium” to the facing rough-laid mica schist wall of the 1836 West Building. A new approach to the close from 20th Street rises on steps to an entrance set into this connector. The entrance requires excavation and exposure of the West Building’s foundations and also involves enlarging a basement window to create a new entrance door into the building at the level of the connector.

This surprising departure from the expected model appears to be motivated largely by the desire to create a new entrance to the close via a new administration/student activity center housing activities relocated from Sherrill Hall. The connector will enable the uses in the new center to extend into the western end of the historic West Building. It also bypasses any possible legal problems of excessive proximity of the new building to the old.

The concept is ingenious but clearly inappropriate given the impact of the connector on the important freestanding historic structure and the visual dominance of the thick new regularly-laid schist wall, which even projects outside the connector and is very different from the modulated brick and brownstone of the rest of the new building as well as the surface of the West Building with its irregular, mortar-laid joints.. The changes to the West Building compromise the integrity of this important and distinctive early Gothic Revival building, which is the sole surviving witness to the first period of this pioneering seminary. The glass tube of the connector, visible from both the close and the street, is an intrusive modern element that forms a partial visual block to the important southward openness of the close at this point. Haight thought this openness and the consistency of his designs so important that he had planned to demolish the West Building. The present proposal must be restudied and the glass connector and the related impacts to the West Building removed.

Other aspects of the new building raise issues. At the northwest corner is a full-height projecting element with a high proportion of glass and clearly inconsistent with its brick and brownstone surroundings. The large, tall windows allow the conference room behind them to enjoy a fine view of the historic buildings around them at the price of creating an element that diminishes the character of the close nearby and even the view from the buildings it looks out on.

This projecting element, continued to the east by a one-story extension supporting a trellis, also breaks into the limited green open space north of the line historically established by the rear of the nearby West Building. Especially in view of the new structures to be erected on the close, it is essential to maximize wherever feasible the green space called out in the Designation Report in order to maintain the historic character of the close. These aspects of the building need further review both to reduce the inappropriateness of the design and to maintain the integrity of the open space.

The zinc roof with its multiple windows is awkward and inconsistent with Haight's treatment of roofs in the complex. His roofs are gabled and the relatively few windows at roof level are all set in dormers. All in all the new building lacks unity of concept and materials, and requires considerable revision to be appropriate to the Seminary and the Chelsea Historic District.

Conclusion

We thank the Landmarks Preservation Commission for what we believe will be a careful review of this complex application with major implications not only for the Chelsea Historic District but also for the larger Chelsea community.

The Board recognizes that the structures proposed in the current application will make at best only a small contribution to the financial needs of the Seminary and the fulfillment of the Preservation Plan for the historic buildings. The Board is deeply concerned about the survival of the General Theological Seminary, which has been at the center of the community since its beginnings and has helped maintain its identity across years of change. The Seminary block is rightly called Chelsea Square. We continue to believe that the search should continue for feasible measures that will enable the Seminary to maintain its presence in Chelsea and to preserve the historic buildings that are essential to the character of its close and of the Chelsea community that surrounds it.

Sincerely,



Edward Kirkland
Chair
Landmarks Task Force



J. Lee Compton
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4

cc: Applicant
Electeds