



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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JEAN-DANIEL NOLAND
Chair

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District Manager

March 6, 2008

Ms. Kathy Howe
Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Peebles Island
P.O. Box 189
Waterford, NY 12188-0189

Dear Ms. Howe:

In connection with the meeting of the State Review Board for evaluation of the proposed Garment Center Historic District for listing on the National and State Registers of Historic Places Manhattan Community Board 4 wishes to express support of the listing, in particular of the portion of the proposed historic district within our boundaries; that is, west of Eighth Avenue.

The Board believes that Register listing of this historic district will work towards the preservation of the major historic resource that the Garment Center represents. In conjunction with both the tax advantages this listing will make available for appropriate work on buildings in the district and the façade easement program of the Trust for Architectural Easements, sponsor of the proposal, it will offer some protection against pressures for demolition or inappropriate alteration of existing historic structures to accommodate new uses, including the newly-legal residential uses in the part of the district within Community District 4. This area is the focus of potential new zoning changes to allow conversion of buildings in the area to a wider variety of uses and even to allow major new construction in connection with creation of a new transportation hub to the south.

We believe these goals are important for several reasons.

The district, and that part included in Community District 4, is of major architectural significance, as is pointed out in the request for determination of eligibility submitted for the listing. The loft buildings constructed for the Garment Center over the relatively short major period of significance give a distinctive character to the streetscapes with the uniform high streetwalls and “wedding-cake” tops decreed by the zoning. They are uniformly of steel-frame construction clad in masonry, with many windows, often quite large, in order to give light to the workers inside. The architecture is derived from various period styles, but is generally adapted to an Art Deco esthetic. The general effect is striking, and many individual buildings and details are distinguished. The building designed by the accomplished architects George and Edward Blum at 315 West 36th Street in Community District 4, already listed individually on the National Register of Historic Places, is rightly called out for its excellence in the description of the proposed district.

There are also a number of survivors of the period preceding the period called out as of major significance, when the area was a dominantly low-scale working-class residential one. Here and there in the proposed district, and in particular in the part within Community District 4, there are still tenements dating from that period. Some of these, although often deteriorated, preserve significant architectural character. In striking contrast is the mansion-like house at 557 Eighth Avenue at 38th Street designed by Emery Roth in 1903 in an elaborate Beaux-Arts style. An interesting representative of this earlier period is the group extending from 330 to 344 West 36th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, a rare surviving example of the “institutional church” devised by Protestant churches around the turn of the 20th century to minister to, provide services and education to, and thus uplift and perhaps convert the residents of working-class areas.

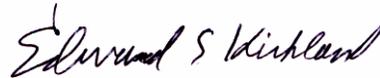
Finally, beyond planning, beyond architecture, even beyond business, the Garment Center represents something unique to New York and essential to its cultural history. The famous noontime “schmooze” that made walking impossible on many streets in the lunch hour, especially Seventh Avenue, the traffic, most distinctively the hand trucks on and off the sidewalks carrying in every direction garments in every stage of incompleteness, the huge cafeterias, the bursting life of the area—all were unique and their disappearance has made New York the poorer.

Most of the workers and many of the proprietors were Jewish, which is doubtless one reason for the often-reported efforts of the Fifth Avenue stores to push well away from them the garment factories that produced their merchandise. From the life of this district, from the working conditions that produced disasters of which the earlier Triangle Shirtwaist fire was only the worst example, arose unions, political parties, and thinkers that transformed New York and America. From this same life also arose a popular culture, also largely Jewish in origin and character, that was reflected most clearly in the comedians whose references to the life and work of people working in the Garment District (and similar locations) gave a special tint to American life and added words to its language. That world is all but gone, but the buildings that held so much of its life form its monument. They should be preserved.

Sincerely,



Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair, Manhattan Community Board 4



Edward Kirkland
Chair, Landmarks Task Force

Cc. Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer
U. S. Representative Jerrold Nadler
State Senator Thomas Duane
Assembly Member Richard Gottfried
Council Speaker Christine Quinn
Lisa Kersavage, Municipal Art Society
Nadezhda Williams, Historic Districts Council