



CITY OF NEW YORK

**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR**

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

**JEAN-DANIEL NOLAND**  
Chair

**ROBERT J. BENFATTO, JR., ESQ.**  
District Manager

May 9, 2008

Hon. Robert G. Tierney  
Chair  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
Municipal Building, 9<sup>th</sup> floor  
One Center Street  
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Proposed West Chelsea Historic District**

Dear Commissioner Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board 4 wishes to reaffirm its strong support for the designation of the proposed West Chelsea Historic District. The Board was the original creator of the concept of a Historic District in western Chelsea and believes that preservation of the most significant buildings remaining from the industrial past of this part of Manhattan will make an important contribution to the future of the area.

The first and most obvious reason for designation is the quality of the buildings in the proposed Historic District. Although this area has until recently been unfamiliar to most New Yorkers and even to the residential community just to the east, persons who have come to know it on walking tours or through visits to the art galleries that occupy much of the area are surprised by the quality of the structures there. The buildings in the proposed district were erected in a period when industry was considered as a major part of New York life, and the owners were proud of their contribution to the city and commemorated it by erecting handsome buildings. Among the architects were prominent ones such as Cass Gilbert, whose elegant Williams Warehouse bookends the District at Tenth Avenue, and Clinton and Russell, whose fine Otis Elevator Building with its glorious cornice adorns the east side of Eleventh Avenue facing the sweeping forms of that modern monument, the Starrett Lehigh Building of Russell and Walter Cory in association with Yasuo Matsui.

These buildings join with their neighbors to offer remarkable industrial streetscapes, and the totality establishes a sense of place that is not only fine in itself but also reinforces and supports the presence of the art galleries with excellence of design and distinctive area quality. By maintaining this character the proposed District will thus contribute not only to the quality of life in the city but also indirectly to its economic activity.

Not only is the District special in preserving a reminder that Manhattan was once a major part of the great industrial city that New York was at the turn of the Twentieth Century, its distinctive theme encapsulates the special characteristic of industrial transport on Manhattan's West Side. The rail transport then almost essential to industry took three forms here: direct access by tracks in the streets from the national rail system, most famously on Tenth Avenue with its "Death

Avenue Cowboys” riding with red flags in front of New York Central trains; access more or less direct by tracks and small railyards fed from New Jersey by the three float transfer bridges on the North River edge of the District; and finally, the High Line that replaced Death Avenue with an elegant elevated freight line just to the west that has recently become a famous symbol of the new New York.

Features reflecting all three types can still be seen in the District: the great archway of the Terminal Stores on Eleventh Avenue that welcomed strings of cars from the New York Central to the large curving “tunnel” on the interior that provided sheltered loading and unloading of such special cargo as that for the cold storage it was probably first to provide in the city; the corresponding arch on Twelfth Avenue that gave access to freight cars ferried from New Jersey to the float bridges; the High Line itself next to the Williams Warehouse with the platform built to be served by the elevated tracks that were to bring the trains on which books printed in the Wolff Buildings around the corner on 26<sup>th</sup> Street were to be shipped for years.

Other distinctive remnants of the past remain--among them an entrance at the northwest corner of the Starrett Lehigh Building that was the last point from which freight cars serving the building, originally constructed over an open railyard, could enter for unloading; the square industrial chimney still visible on the north side of 25<sup>th</sup> Street, the survivor of at least three that carried off smoke from the manufacture of aluminum foil and Reynolds Wrap; and, just outside the District in the Hudson River Park, the actual float bridge, raised and restored as a valued feature of the park, that served the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad warehouse in the District at 25<sup>th</sup> Street and Eleventh Avenue, which is an early example of a large reinforced concrete building.

There is also one very different and significant aspect of the West Chelsea Historic District: it originated in a planning process and eventually came to this commission as a result of such a process. It is an example of including historic preservation as an integral part of planning from the beginning. After Community Board 4 had at last won at least at least partial acceptance and implementation of the Chelsea 197-a Plan, a plan that had as one of its major goals protecting the character of the distinctive part of traditional Chelsea within and close to the Chelsea Historic District, it turned its attention to western Chelsea, then almost a wasteland zoned for the manufacturing that had disappeared with the working waterfront. One of the first discoveries in this effort, which started a little before the new millennium, was the strikingly handsome buildings of the area; and one of its few concrete achievements was the shaping of a proposed Historic District much like the one before the Commission today.

Unfortunately this planning effort ran into obstacles and faltered, but with the proposals for saving the High Line and rezoning most of western Chelsea to make that project possible the preservation component took on new life. Our concept for a Historic District was reinforced by a studio of the Columbia School of Architecture, Planning, and Historic Preservation of the kind that was devised to bring historic preservation to influence planning and which in this case put forward concepts similar to the Board’s. But what really spurred a vigorous response was the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the rezoning, which listed building after building as eligible for designation as a city landmark and then pronounced them likely to be lost to development. The only stated mitigation was explicitly or implicitly listed as designation.

The obvious answer was to gain designation for these buildings, most of which were among the buildings we had included in the Historic District we had proposed in our planning. We submitted our proposal for a Historic District and some individual buildings in our comments on the DEIS, and were gratefully surprised to see the district appear in the FEIS as a potential source of mitigation. When study of the district appeared in the points of agreement that Speaker Christine

Quinn inserted into the Council's ratification of the ULURP, and was followed up by her and other elected officials, especially State Senator Thomas Duane, we realized that what had occurred here with a large component of lucky timing could be an explicit model for rezonings to come. Other recent major actions like that on the Brooklyn waterfront have left this Commission struggling to catch up ex post facto with planning that had not included timely recognition of the impacts on historic character,

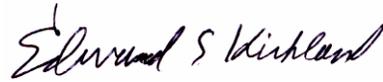
We hope that the Commissions's adoption of the West Chelsea Historic District, which has been crafted to include most of the significant historic buildings affected by the rezoning, could also become the starting point for developing a model for ensuring that historic preservation is included from the beginning in the planning process throughout New York City. Manhattan Community Board 4 thus urges designation of the West Chelsea Historic District not only for its historic and architectural importance but also for the precedent it can offer for a more inclusive approach to planning.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,



Jean-Daniel Noland  
Chair, Manhattan Community Board 4



Edward Kirkland  
Chair, Landmarks Task Force

c.c:

Borough President Scott Stringer  
Representative Jerrold Nadler  
State Senator Thomas Duane  
Assembly Member Richard Gottfried  
Council Speaker Christine Quinn  
Lisa Kersavage, Municipal Art Society  
New York Landmarks Conservancy  
Historic Districts Council  
Council of Chelsea Block Associations  
Save Chelsea