

Landmarks Preservation Commission
Application for Certificates of Appropriateness
The General Theological Seminary
175 Ninth Avenue

This application is for three Certificates of Appropriateness for the General Theological Seminary's Chelsea Square block within the Chelsea Historic District: (i) the demolition of an existing building, fronting on Ninth Avenue between 20th Street and 21st Street, known as Sherrill Hall, including the "Deanery" on 20th Street and Ninth Avenue, which does not contribute to the historic and architectural character of the Chelsea Historic District, (ii) a new building to be built on the same footprint, and (iii) a new building to be built along a portion of the 20th Street frontage adjacent to the West Building.

Background

Founded in 1817, with the majority of its buildings designed by Charles Haight and constructed between 1884 and 1904, the General Theological Seminary serves as the heart of the Chelsea Historic District, occupying an entire block known as Chelsea Square. With its open, park-like campus, known as the Close, the Seminary provides a peaceful and coveted relief without denying its urban surroundings. The historic buildings provide a detailed and dignified setting, housing the educational, administrative and residential uses of the Seminary. In the Chelsea Historic District Designation Report the Landmarks Preservation Commission recognized "that the needs of the General Theological Seminary in the Chelsea Historic District may change in the years ahead," noted that the designation "is not intended to freeze the properties of the Seminary in their present state for all time," and explicitly stated that the Commission "recognizes that the General Theological Seminary may want to erect new buildings on its grounds in the future." (p.27)

The General Theological Seminary and the Chelsea Square block itself now face a crisis as the physical condition of the historic buildings has made continued maintenance, let alone capital investment, financially infeasible. In addition, the changing role of the Seminary in modern education has created additional institutional demands and financial pressures. After fervent and, at one point hopeful, efforts to partner with other religious and academic institutions proved unsuccessful, the Seminary's Board ultimately determined that partnership with a private developer and the creation of new buildings to replace the deteriorating and out-of-character Sherrill Hall, built in 1960, was the only viable option¹ to ensure the physical survival of the historic buildings and the institutional survival of the Seminary in Chelsea. Utilizing the development rights available within the Seminary block, two proposed buildings would provide a new facility for the programs currently located in Sherrill Hall and a privately developed residential building component, which would provide a financial resource for the repair and continued maintenance of the Seminary's historic buildings. The General Theological Seminary looks forward to continuing its community outreach and preserving its historic precinct with two new buildings that would contribute to the existing character of the Close and provide the economic backbone needed to preserve its historic buildings.

The proposed Ninth Avenue building will contain approximately 130,000 gross square feet of residential use developed by The Brodsky Organization, 15,000 gross square feet of seminary library uses, and 4,000 square feet of retail use above grade. Below grade the building will contain an additional 8,000 gross square feet of residential use, 20,000 gross square feet of library uses, accessory parking for approximately 90 cars, which will serve both the seminary and the residents. In addition, 4,000 square feet of retail use would animate the Ninth Avenue frontage. The proposed 20th Street building would contain approximately 31,550 gross square feet, with approximately 25,700 square feet above grade, and house Seminary functions such as faculty and administrative offices. This building would have a scale reflective of its location on a narrow, historic corridor.

Demolition of Sherrill Hall

Sherrill Hall was designed by O'Connor & Kilham and constructed in 1959-61. Sherrill Hall does not reflect the character or material quality of the Close. As the historic designation report notes, the original Ninth Avenue entrance to the Close, designed by Haight, was an

¹ The recent rezoning of West Chelsea effectively precludes the transfer of the Seminary's development rights to a site across 10th Avenue.

"impressive central building ... flanked on either side by the handsome Library and Deanery. These buildings once gave a very good indication of what the visitor might expect inside the Quadrangle. Unfortunately they have been swept away" (Designation Report p. 23). Sherrill Hall provides a low and uninviting entrance, overwhelmed by the solid mass above. It is clad in a red brick, which is paler than the historic brick, and has limestone trim, creating an exterior at odds with the richness of the historic brick exteriors and brownstone detailing of the Haight buildings on the Close. Critics have described the building as "crude," "naïve and ridiculous," and "of little distinction," even comparing it to a suburban library "at odds not only with the campus as a whole but with the broader urban context." Thus, we submit that Sherrill Hall, including the Deanery, does not contribute to the historic character of the area because it is out of context with both Chelsea Square itself and with the entire Historic District.

The Proposed Buildings

After numerous forums with community members, representatives and elected officials over the past year, the Seminary revised its original proposal, submitted to the Landmarks Preservation Commission in December of 2005, to reduce the height and bulk of the proposed Ninth Avenue building and to relocate that floor area in a second building on the site of the tennis court in the Close along 20th Street. The siting and design of both buildings evolved after careful study of the historic fabric of Chelsea Square and the Historic District and preserves the pattern of development over time of the Close.

The proposed Ninth Avenue building respects the footprint of Sherrill Hall along Ninth Avenue and the Deanery on 20th Street, at the east end of the Seminary block. The proposed 20th Street building is sited at the street line between the West Building and the recently renovated and restored Desmond Tutu Education Center (which consists of Chelsea 8/9, Eigenbrodt Hall and Hoffman Hall). These locations maintain and refine the cohesiveness of open space within the Close and improve the relationship of the Seminary to the surrounding streetscape. This approach is consistent with the intentions expressed in Haight's campus master plan, which proposed a street wall building on the south edge of the west quad of the Close, mirroring the placement of Chelsea 2/3/4.

Both proposed buildings reflect the architecture of the Close in a modern yet respectful way, drawing on the scale and proportion of the existing buildings, the modulation of the existing fenestration, and the textural quality of the existing materials.

Proposed Ninth Avenue Building

The overall massing of the Ninth Avenue building is comprised of a five-story brick base that extends the streetwall of the existing Seminary buildings, and an articulated vertical tower set back from the base 32 feet from the north, 10 feet from the east and 50 feet from the south. The tower's massing mirrors the width of the Close. Its setback from the north preserves views of the Chapel along 21st Street.

The base, a masonry street wall constructed of brick and brownstone intended to match the existing materials, continues the historic street wall on 21st Street at a height derived from that of the existing buildings and extends its horizontal coursing and accents. The composition of smaller residential scale and larger monumental windows along the existing 21st Street elevation inspires the scale and rhythm of the new building. The placement of the new library on the southwest corner of Ninth Avenue completes the triumvirate of significant community spaces on the Close (Library, Refectory and Chapel). This reinforces 21st Street as the backbone of the Close, and facilitates an axial entrance on Ninth Avenue that frames the view to the Chapel Tower. On Ninth Avenue and 20th Street, the scale and rhythm of fenestration reflect the residential character of the new building in the context of the Seminary buildings, and of the row houses along 20th Street. Larger glass openings on 20th Street reflect the location of new residential entrances.

Setback from the base, the tower portion of the building rises an additional 10 stories facing the ninth avenue and 8 stories facing the Close. The building's height matches the height of the Chapel Tower facing the Close. The tower is articulated by brick masonry buttresses that relate to the dimensions and articulation of the historic Chapel tower. The setbacks, glass detailing and visual interplay of the brick and glass break down the mass of the building particularly on the north and south ends where the setbacks are substantial. The proposed design also includes two new below-grade levels, which will house library stacks, residential support functions and parking. These program spaces and most of the mechanical space have been located below grade in order to minimize the height of the building.

Proposed 20th Street Building

The proposed 20th Street building would be five stories tall and enhance the composition of this frontage of the Seminary by creating street wall definition at the west quad to correspond

to Haight's original master plan. The building would create a new, primary entrance for the Seminary through a glass atrium connecting the new building and the oldest building on the Close, the West Building. The relocation of the entrance to the Seminary to 20th Street recalls the original site plan of Chelsea Square in the mid-nineteenth century, when the East Building and the West Building were the only buildings, with gates onto the site from 20th Street. This new, distinguished atrium space would provide a welcoming and accessible entrance to Chelsea Square at sidewalk level and allow for the mediation of the substantial grade difference to occur within the Close (and with elevators in the building).

The West Building is the only remaining schist building on the campus and a modern use of schist on the eastern wall of the new building would frame the glassed entry space with a common materiality that signifies the Seminary's long history and thoughtful evolution. Red brick and brownstone would ground the building's street and Close frontages in these materials that dominate Haight's master plan. The uppermost level of the building would be clad in zinc, inspired in tone by the adjacent slate roofs, to provide a breakdown in scale that relates to heights of the adjacent Seminary buildings. As with the base of the Ninth Avenue Building, the scale and rhythm of fenestration is inspired by the composition of windows in the adjacent Haight buildings on Tenth Avenue, while reflecting the new building's various interior functions.

A connection to the Desmond Tutu Education Center (formerly Eigenbrodt Hall) would also be provided at grade-level, integrating Seminary functions and activities with the new program spaces at the Tutu Center, and providing a connection to the new face of the Seminary on Tenth Avenue.

Conclusion

The proposed designs of these two buildings do not make full use of the as-of-right zoning floor area attributable to the site, which would have yielded much larger buildings than proposed. The proposed buildings gracefully address the architecture of the Close and the character of the surrounding neighborhood, while providing an economically viable solution to the Seminary's long-term needs. The proposed development plan would help to generate the funds needed to stabilize the historic campus buildings and prevent further deterioration of this historic resource. We therefore request Certificates of Appropriateness for the demolition of Sherrill Hall and for the two proposed buildings.

**Landmarks Preservation Commission
Application for Report Pursuant to ZR 74-711
The General Theological Seminary
175 Ninth Avenue**

The Seminary requests that the Commission issue to the City Planning Commission a Report in support of a 74-711 Special Permit Application, recognizing that a program has been established for continuing maintenance of the Seminary's historic buildings on Chelsea Square that will result in their preservation and their continuing contribution to the Chelsea Historic District. The Seminary will commit to using the funds generated by the proposed project to stabilize and improve the historic buildings, and will also enter into a Restrictive Declaration, committing to a legally enforceable, long-term maintenance plan.

This application is for a Report to be issued pursuant to ZR 74-711 for the following:

1. The proposed Ninth Avenue building at approximately 155 feet (164 feet with mechanical) will exceed the height limit of 75 feet under ZR 35-24.
2. The proposed Ninth Avenue building will exceed the permitted lot coverage for corner lots under ZR 23-145.
3. The Accessory Parking Facility, providing approximately 90 accessory spaces for Seminary and residential use, exceeds the maximum size and number of spaces permitted under ZR 13-143.
4. Street tree planting will occur on the frontages of the proposed Ninth Avenue building but will not occur on the frontages of the other buildings as required under ZR 28-12.