



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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Delores Rubin
Chair

JESSE R. BODINE
District Manager

April 14, 2016

Hon. Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th floor
One Centre Street New York, NY 10007

Re: 404 West 20th Street

Dear Chair Srinivasan:

On the recommendation of its Chelsea Land Use Committee, following a duly noticed public hearing at the committee's meeting on March 21, 2016, Manhattan Community Board No. 4 (CB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on April 6, 2016, voted, by a vote of 38 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining and 0 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend denial of an application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for alterations to 404 West 20th Street in the Chelsea Historic District.

The Board believes that the proposed alterations are contrary to the purpose of historic districts in general and to the Chelsea Historic District in particular. The proposed alterations to 404 West 20th Street, the oldest house in Chelsea, would demolish the entire house except for its street facade and do further violence to this house and to the most historically sensitive and architecturally distinguished block in Chelsea. CB4 strongly opposes this application.

Background

The Chelsea Historic District Designation Report, published September 15, 1970, Calendar No. 1, PL-0666, states:

No. 404, the oldest house in the Chelsea Historic District, was built in 1829-30 for Hugh Walker on land leased from Clement Clarke Moore for forty dollars per year. The lease stated that if, during the first seven years, a good and substantial house was erected, being two stories or more, constructed of brick or stone, or having a brick or stone front, the lessor would pay the full value of the house at the end of the lease. Walker's Federal style house with brick front wall, laid in Flemish bond, was unusual in Chelsea. The original clapboard of one sidewall is still visible on the east side of the house. These materials and the general proportions are all that remain of the original Federal style.

The Report goes on to cite later changes to the house made in the Greek Revival and Italianate styles which would characterize other development within the District. Its brick front and clapboard siding, however, speak of its creation in the very first days of the Chelsea neighborhood when Clement Clarke Moore subdivided his estate, Chelsea, into building lots and personally participated in its planning. The front gardens of the house and of its neighbors to the west were meant by Moore to complement the open grounds of the General Theological Seminary on the full block across West 20th Street, and he sold the Episcopal Church for one dollar with the intention that it would be the centerpiece of his land development. This focal role is reflected in the block's historic name of Chelsea Square. Not only is 404 West 20th Street distinguished among other houses in the historic district as the oldest, but the block on which it stands is the most historically sensitive and architecturally distinguished in Chelsea.

404 West 20th Street stood as a freestanding house for a decade, until construction of the Greek Revival Cushman Row of houses immediately to its west. Cushman Row is widely viewed, along with the row on the north side of Washington Square, as one of the two best preserved rows of Greek Revival houses in New York, adding to the importance of the Seminary Block. Ever since the construction of Cushman Row, 404 West 20th Street has remained open on its wood-sided east face, where its narrow side yard provided access to former wood-frame back buildings.

Proposal

The current proposal would demolish the entire house except for its brick street façade. It would claim the side yard space to add area and street frontage for a new house, closing the yard off from the street with brick infill recessed from the historic brick façade by two feet. The resulting shallow façade niche would be clad on its west surface with wood siding as a miniscule reference to the historic clapboards highlighted in the Chelsea Historic District Designation Report. Further, the ground under the existing house would be excavated down one story below the existing basement level for nearly the entire footprint of the building lot to create a cellar floor lit by rear yard skylights, adding living space not counted as floor area for zoning purposes. The new house would further enlarge upon the existing one by adding two upper stories and encroaching twenty-five feet farther south into the rear yard.

Community Board 4 Conclusions and Conditions to its Recommendation

CB4 finds the proposed alterations contrary to the very purpose of historic districts. The proposal amounts to façadism, a strategy long discredited as a developer's superficial preservation compromise. CB4 reminds the Commission of its core mission, dating from the demolition of Pennsylvania Station, to protect our shared historic legacy from destructive market forces of the kind now at a fever pitch in Chelsea and blatantly on display in the current proposal. CB4 is concerned that the proposed demolition of the oldest house in the Chelsea Historic District will set a precedent for the gutting of other rowhouses in the District including Cushman Row, reducing the District's blocks to a false front of historic facades.

We view with deep skepticism the claims of the owner's architect that the house is too deteriorated to save; it was continuously lived in by the same family for decades until its recent sale, and many CB4 members and elected officials have visited it as guests in recent years. The

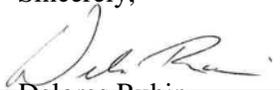
house retains period details which would be of great value to an appreciative owner and which carry great resale value. The cost of structurally stabilizing the house would be a tiny fraction of that for the current proposal's structural work, including as it does creation of an entire below-ground floor immediately adjacent to and below the basement level of the historic Cushman Row, which would require extensive shoring and protection. Similarly, the architect's claims that the existing wood side wall is a fire hazard are at odds with his plans to introduce lot-line windows in the proposed new construction; these windows will require fire protection accommodations of a sort which could just as easily be applied to the historic side wall.

We note that the new house's south elevation would be fundamentally different in character and scale from that of the existing house and Chelsea Historic District rowhouses generally. Its height and rear extension would detract from the historic character and light and air of its block's interior open space, particularly blocking low morning sunlight from a large area of it. The new house's rear façade and roof would be visible from the public way on both West 19th Street and Ninth Avenue, across New York City Housing Authority open space, including a corner playground.

CB4 does not view the current proposal as one that can be made appropriate or acceptable through modification. The Board recommends that LPC reject this proposal and request that the applicant prepare and submit an entirely different design for alterations to 404 West 20th Street, one that:

- Retains to a meaningful extent the substance – not just the façade – of the house;
- Retains the open side yard for the full height of the house and the full depth of the lot, preserving the historic extent of the house's clapboard sidewall, reclaiming existing siding as far as possible and otherwise replacing it in kind;
- Makes only appropriate changes to the rear and roof of the house with particular sensitivity to public views and maintaining the scale and modest character of the house.

Sincerely,



Delores Rubin
MCB4 Chair



John Lee Compton, Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Betty Mackintosh, Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee

cc: Hon. Gale A. Brewer
Hon. Brad Hoylman, State Senate
Hon. Richard Gottfried, State Assembly
Hon. Corey Johnson, City Council