



August 16, 2004

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

Mary Beth Betts  
Director of Research, New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission  
One Centre Street, 9th floor  
New York, NY 10007

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Dear Chair Tierney and Ms. Betts:

The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation has just discovered that the owners of 159 Bleecker Street, home of the historic Circle in the Square Theater, have filed plans to construct a sizeable addition to their building, transforming the current two story building built in 1917 into an eight-story building. As you know, this building is in the heart of the historic South Village, an area about which the Greenwich Village for Historic Preservation has been compiling historic data as part of an effort to secure historic district designation. As we have promised to in the past, while we compile the data that will facilitate the process of the Commission considering a proposal for historic district designation, we are bringing to your attention any immediate threat to the historic resources of this area. We believe this plan potentially constitutes such a threat.

We have several serious concerns. As you know, this stretch of Bleecker Street forms the historic core of much of the South Village, containing some of its most important historic buildings, housing some of its most important historic institutions, and forming an archetypical mix of the types of buildings which define this area. With the exception of the Ernest Flagg-designed former Mills House across the street, almost every building on this stretch of Bleecker Street, from LaGuardia Place to Sixth Avenue, form a fairly consistent streetscape. Nearly every structure is a two to five story building, a current or former, rowhouse, tenement, stable, or factory, rising straight up. A narrow, eight-story structure with terraces, as we understand this building will be, will significantly compromise the unified historic 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century character of this street. Also, while we understand the plan will in part maintain the current facade of the building, it is hard to imagine how a five or six story addition, rising straight up from this two story early 20th century structure, will not severely compromise the integrity of this building.

Finally, one of several archetypal building forms we have been studying in the South Village which clearly define the area and its historic significance is its small alternative theaters. Many of these theaters in the South Village were, like the Circle in the Square, built or altered from other types of existing structures (in this case, a movie theater), both presaging the adaptive re-use movement of the late 20th

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century and illustrating the South Village's unique innovative contributions to the world of theater and architecture. The former movie house was home to the Amato Opera before becoming the Circle in the Square, but was built by and for much of its history owned and operated by Italian-Americans, as was typical of most of this area during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This historically significant building archetype is among several in the South Village we hoped the Commission would preserve through designation, and we have been working towards seeing this goal achieved.

The current building plan for 159 Bleecker Street puts this in jeopardy. I am therefore attaching with this letter all historic data GVSHP has compiled regarding this building with the request that the Commission consider its options in terms of ensuring its preservation. GVSHP has also compiled most of the basic historic data from the Municipal Archives on all buildings on this block as well as the five surrounding blocks forming the Bleecker Street corridor between LaGuardia Place and Sixth Avenue. We would gladly furnish any or all of this information to the Commission now, before the rest of the remaining research on the entire Historic South Village study area is complete and a historic resources report is issued by architectural historian Andrew Dolkart. We offer this information to aid in any examination of designating this area now before it is compromised by this or any other building plan, or for any other reason that the Commission requests it.

Thank you for the attention to this urgent matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Berman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

cc: City Planning Commission Chair Amanda Burden  
Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields  
Congressman Jerrold Nadler  
State Senator Thomas K. Duane  
City Council Member Alan J. Gerson  
City Council Member Christine Quinn  
Assemblymember Deborah Glick  
Community Board #2, Manhattan  
Preservation League of New York State  
American Institute of Architects, NYC Chapter  
Historic Districts Council  
Andrew Dolkart  
South Village Landmarking Association  
Bleecker Area Merchants and Residents Association



August 16, 2004

Hon. Amanda Burden  
Chair, New York City Planning Commission  
22 Reade Street  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chair Burden:

I write to follow up with you on several important zoning issues that you discussed at last week's Town Hall Meeting with Mayor Bloomberg in Greenwich Village.

First, regarding the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation's efforts to see the Far West Village rezoned to ensure that the scale and character of the neighborhood is maintained, I want to thank you again for your encouraging words and your commitment to work with GVSHP, the community, and elected officials in achieving this goal. The staff at the Department of City Planning and Manhattan Borough Office Director Vishan Chakharbati have been very helpful in working with us on this matter, and I hope that there will be a proposal that all concerned parties can agree to in the coming weeks.

Second, I would also like to thank you for your commitment, expressed both at the Town Hall meeting and at a recent City Council hearing, to work with the City Council to reform the current community facility regulations which allow the concentration of oversized community facilities in communities like Greenwich Village and the East Village. This commitment, and your citation of the analysis and recommendations for zoning reform of GVSHP's 2002 "After the Kimmel Center" report, was very heartening, and GVSHP pledges to work with you and the Department, as well as the City Council, to help see such reforms implemented.

The timing of this conversation was prescient, in that another troubling example of a community facility that will compromise the distinctive built character of a neighborhood has just come to our attention, illustrating the ongoing urgency of the current situation. GVSHP has just learned that a developer intends to construct a narrow eight-story tower on the current site of the historic Circle in the Square Theater at 159 Bleeker Street, in the heart of the historic South Village. By including a community facility in the plan, he will be able to increase the bulk and height of the building considerably in this R7-2 zone, making it considerably larger and taller than would have otherwise been allowed. This is especially disappointing in that the site contains a historic building and is within an area for which GVSHP has been advocating for the extension of historic district protections. Further, it is an area of a fairly consistent, pleasing, and largely uninterrupted built environment, which this structure would certainly violate. And while these issues clearly point to the need for measures such as landmarking and more finely-tuned zoning in the South Village to maintain the area's distinctive built form (a possibility GVSHP would gladly explore with the Department), this proposed structure's most basic problem -- its additional, out-of-scale size and bulk -- would not be possible without the current community

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facility bulk allowance regulations that it will exploit. I thus look forward to working with the Department and the City Council to see the adoption of regulations that would reduce or eliminate the ability of oversized community facilities to concentrate in areas like Greenwich Village and the East Village. Given the ongoing need for such reforms, I urge that the promulgation of such measures begin as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Berman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

cc: City Council Speaker Gifford Miller  
City Council Land Use Committee Chair Melinda Katz  
City Council Zoning Subcommittee Chair Tony Avella  
City Council Member Christine Quinn  
City Council Member Alan Gerson  
City Council Member Margarita Lopez  
State Senator Thomas K. Duane  
Assemblymember Deborah Glick  
Landmarks Preservation Commission Chair Robert Tierney  
Citywide Coalition for Community Facility Reform  
American Institute of Architects, NYC Chapter  
Community Boards 2 & 3, Manhattan