



Greenwich
Village
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Preservation

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April 19, 2013

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

**Re: Boundaries of the draft proposed South Village Historic District;
additional information re: Vanderbilt Hall, Kevorkian Center, and 130-148
West Houston Street**

Dear Chair Tierney,

Following up on my previous letter, I write regarding the draft boundaries of the proposed South Village Historic District recently released by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The LPC has excluded a few key sites from the draft proposed district that I strongly urge be reconsidered -- 130-148 West Houston Street, NYU Law School's Vanderbilt Hall (Eggers & Higgins, 1951), and the NYU Kevorkian Center (Johnson & Foster, 1972).

130-148 West Houston Street, between MacDougal and Sullivan Streets

These nine row houses on the north side of Houston Street were part of an 1844 development that also included the MacDougal Street row comprising the western half of the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens Historic District, one of New York City's earliest designated historic districts. The L-shaped development was created by the estate of Nicholas Low, a prominent New Yorker, and actually pre-dates the 1850 row houses on Sullivan Street which form the eastern half of the MacDougal Sullivan Gardens Historic District.

In 1920, the entire block was purchased by real estate corporation Hearth & Home from the Low estate, though only the buildings on MacDougal and Sullivan Streets were remodeled. The intent of the designers was to create private and communal gardens in the interior of the block, a planning scheme celebrated for addressing the growing housing problem by revitalizing older buildings. Due to the number of residents using this communal space, Hearth & Home's remodeling efforts were limited to those row houses on MacDougal and Sullivan Streets. The Houston and Bleecker Street buildings were then sold.

Despite this and the fact that the buildings have been altered, the Houston Street buildings retain the exact same scale and many basic architectural details as when they were built 170 years ago. These details include the three-bay fenestration pattern, brick facades, and window lintels and sills. Some also retain crenellated parapets, a typical early 20th century alteration. Their scale also contributes to the quality of life that residents enjoy in the shared garden

spaces in the interior of the block. Future large-scale development would negatively impact the groundbreaking communal gardens of the historic district, which the 1967 designation report calls out as “a very important feature of the plan.”

Culturally, as with the entire South Village neighborhood, the Houston Street buildings are an integral part of the immigrant and Italian-American history of the neighborhood. Luigi Cardi lived with his family in an apartment at 136 West Houston Street and owned Luigi’s Restaurant on the ground floor. In the midst of Prohibition, the restaurant was the scene of a police raid in January 1923 that resulted in United States Senator Robert Wagner, father of New York City Mayor Robert Wagner Jr., denying his role in protecting the establishment to enable it to sell liquor. A few doors down, no. 144 West Houston Street has been the home of Raffetto’s, one of the oldest pasta makers in the city, for a remarkable one-hundred seven years, since 1906.

NYU Vanderbilt Hall, 40 Washington Square South

Formerly known as Vanderbilt Law School, this NYU building was constructed in 1951 to the designs of Eggers & Higgins. Though the firm devised an elaborate college campus plan for NYU in the late 1940s that was to include several buildings in the neo-Georgian style, Vanderbilt is the only part of the complex that was realized. Also of significance, Vanderbilt was the first purpose-built NYU building off Washington Square; an earlier structure, the 1895 Main Building, had been conceived as a mixed-use building that was only partially intended for NYU use.

In stark contrast to NYU’s later additions to the area south of the park, Vanderbilt blends seamlessly and harmoniously with the historic, small-scale buildings of Greenwich Village; a rare feat for any university building of its size constructed in the post-war era. Its brick cladding and stone trim are sensitive design choices that recall the predominant building material of the neighborhood. Architectural historian Christopher Gray, writing recently in *the New York Times*, called Vanderbilt Hall a “neo-Georgian brick quadrangle of subtle sophistication,” crediting the building as one of the earliest examples of “modern” historicist architecture in New York.

When commissioning the design of Vanderbilt Hall, the university responded in part to the Greenwich Village community’s desire to preserve the area’s character and Washington Square’s scale by keeping the building to four-and-a-half stories in height. When Vanderbilt opened in September 1951, the-then dean of the Law School, Russell D. Niles, said that the neo-Georgian style was chosen to reflect the traditional architecture of Washington Square and Greenwich Village as a whole. Neighbors, including two former chairmen of the Save Washington Square Committee, who formerly opposed the project, came out in support after its completion. A reverend at the Washington Square Methodist Church felt that the building would play a “living role in the shaping of law and society.” (*New York Times*, “N.Y.U. Law Center Attracts Old Foes”, Sept. 10, 1951, p. 23)

Otto Eggers, of Eggers & Higgins, was born in Greenwich Village and studied architecture at Cooper Union. Of his firm's Vanderbilt design, he said, "The design of the building also reflects my personal as well as professional interest...For years I was a member of the New York City Art Commission, which had continually advocated the preservation of the cultural and artistic atmosphere of Washington Square." The prolific firm of Eggers & Higgins designed many eclectic buildings in New York City, from the Cardinal Hayes High School (1941) in the Bronx to the Alfred E. Smith Houses (1952) on the Lower East Side. Their experience with designing educational buildings extended to Indiana University campus where they served as the primary architect for more than 30 years.

Vanderbilt Hall uniquely reflects the impact and historic significance of NYU's development in the post-war era, the conflict between the university and the Greenwich Village community about these plans, and the protracted struggle during this time to preserve the character of Greenwich Village and especially Washington Square and its environs. It is the rare case where the university's vision for expansion was fulfilled by successfully connecting to and continuing the scale and fabric of the Village.

NYU Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, 50 Washington Square South

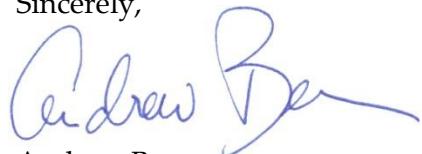
Across the street from Vanderbilt Hall is the NYU Kevorkian Center, which was designed by the noted architects Philip Johnson and Richard Foster. While the Kevorkian Center is decidedly modern, its low-scale is as harmonious with Greenwich Village as the more traditional Vanderbilt Hall. Constructed in 1972, it stands as the fourth and final building that Johnson and Foster collaborated on for NYU.

The Kevorkian Center is a perfect example of a modern building that responds to the changing times while also showing respect to the historic neighborhood in which it is located. The building has received praise for its contribution to the neighborhood and the field of architecture. Robert A. M. Stern's *New York 1960* describes the building as "undeniably effective in establishing a powerful presence and providing a visual antidote to decorative Modernism of its earlier NYU neighbors." (p. 241) Noted architecture critic Paul Goldberger also applauds the design as "a crisp, clean building that achieves urbanistic success through its streetside scale" with "a monumentality that is at least as powerful, and surely less strained, than that of the [Bobst] library." (p. 242)

Called by *the New York Times* "the dean of American architects," Philip Johnson was also awarded the very first Pritzker Prize for Architecture in 1979 and the American Institute of Architect's highest honor, its Gold Medal, in 1978. Johnson is known for his designs of the Glass House (his home in New Canaan, CT) and the former AT&T Building on Madison Avenue in midtown Manhattan, and worked with Mies van der Rohe on the design of the Seagram Building, a designated New York City Landmark. After starting his own firm, he collaborated on several projects with Richard Foster, including three other designs for NYU and the New York State Theater (1964) at Lincoln Center.

I hope you will consider this additional information as you make your final decision regarding the proposed boundaries of this district. I think you will recognize that all three sites contain significant features integral to the development and character of this historic neighborhood, and should be part of any South Village Historic District.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Andrew Berman".

Andrew Berman
Executive Director

Cc: City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn
Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer
Congressman Jerrold Nadler
State Senator Brad Hoylman
City Councilmember Margaret Chin
State Assemblymember Deborah Glick
Community Board #2, Manhattan
Preservation League of NY State
Historic District's Council
MacDougal Sullivan Gardens Association