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Preservation

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February 8, 2016

Hon. Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: 46-74 Gansevoort Street, Manhattan

Dear Chair Srinivasan:

I write in response to the materials submitted by the applicant regarding this site for presentation at the February 9th public meeting. It appears that the applicant is continuing to make the case that their proposed changes to the buildings are re-creating history that was lost. I would like to take this opportunity to express why this argument is utterly inappropriate in this case, and should not be used as justification for the proposed demolitions, additions, and new developments.

The applicant purports that both 50 and 70-74 Gansevoort Street warrant demolition because they are no-style buildings. While the designation report does refer to 70-74 Gansevoort as a no-style building and 50 Gansevoort as having a no-style cladding (which could easily be removed), the designation report also makes clear that the significance of these structures and their contribution to the district as a whole lies in their typologies as market buildings. This building type in fact defines the district itself. Further, the historic alterations to some of the buildings along Gansevoort Street, including the removal of the upper stories, represent a significant chapter in the Gansevoort Market story. As stated in the designation report for the district,

“Many of the buildings in the district that were architecturally adapted for market functions were properties acquired through foreclosure at the height of the Depression. Most of these buildings were functionally maximized at two stories (vacant, formerly residential, upper stories were no longer necessary)...The unusually wide Gansevoort Street assumed its distinctive character of low-rise market buildings with metal canopies at this time, largely through such newly-adapted structures...”

The designation report specifically says the following about 60-68 Gansevoort Street:

“This building, which has significant historic fabric reflecting its 1940 alteration, contributes to the historically-mixed architectural character and varied uses-including market-related functions – of the Gansevoort Market Historic District. Altered in 1940, during the last major phase of development of the district, when low-scale buildings were

constructed, or buildings were altered and reduced in height, for produce- and meat-related businesses and other market uses, the building further contributes to the visual cohesion of the district through its brick and stone façade and metal canopy.”

The report makes no mention of the alterations to 60-68 Gansevoort Street as being somehow lacking in architectural significance, as distinguished from 54-58 Gansevoort, as the applicant tries to argue.

These buildings in their earlier form, before being reduced to two stories to accommodate their change in program, did not have the current buildings' historic significance as meat market buildings. Their present height and configuration as buildings designed to store meat for short periods of time and move it in and out makes them unique and expresses their purpose as market buildings, thus making them stand out from the ubiquitous multi-story tenement buildings.

As in the Gansevoort Market Historic District, there are many examples of landmarked buildings and districts throughout the city which are significant precisely because of the alterations in the early and mid-twentieth century. These changes reflect change in use, needs and aesthetics, and often involved stripping the buildings of earlier features and even bulk and mass, as was done here.

For example, The First Houses complex (29-41 Avenue A and 112-138 East 3rd Street, built 1935-36) is composed of nineteenth century tenements in which every third structure was razed to bring light and air to the block and the remaining structures were stripped and simplified on the exterior and renovated to meet current housing needs. Its significance lies not in its earlier nineteenth century form, but in its more austere twentieth century form, with mass removed.

Similarly, at MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens and Turtle Bay Gardens, their significance lies in their alterations in 1920's when the houses were stripped of their nineteenth century ornament, and stoops and other details were removed to reflect current tastes and meet modern housing requirements.

In the Greenwich Village Historic District, Washington Mews and MacDougal Alley are also significant for having their forms altered in the early 20th century, and in many cases ornament and mass removed or rearranged to accommodate new uses. Another such example is the Sniffen Court Historic District. In the nineteenth century these buildings served as stables for residents of Murray Hill. By the early twentieth century they were altered to accommodate their new purpose as dwellings and a theater, with much of their original detail removed. The Lescaze House, recognized as the first truly “modern” residence of New York City, was an alteration of a nineteenth

century brownstone row house, here again with architectural details, a stoop, and other features removed. In none of these cases would we find it appropriate to restore these buildings to a prior condition, because it is in fact these altered conditions – even with the removal of detail, mass, and physical features – which are historically significant and which merit preservation.

Finally, I would strongly argue against the applicant's contention that it is appropriate to destroy currently intact historic features in order to replace them with inauthentic new features which replicate an earlier, historic condition. In any of the above examples this would likely be deemed inappropriate. Using another example, Saint Marks-in-the-Bowery Church, one of New York's oldest houses of worship, nevertheless replaced Peter Stuyvesant's earlier farmhouse and "Bouwerie Chapel" on the site, as noted in the landmark designation report. Arguably these older structures might be even more historically significant than the largely nineteenth century church which now stands there. And yet we would never allow the actual two hundred year old church to be replaced by a replica of the three-hundred fifty year old house or chapel which stood there previously.

Therefore it is incomprehensible to accept the applicant's argument for 48-74 Gansevoort Street that demolishing existing and significant historic buildings is appropriate in order to create vague replicas of earlier forms. If the LPC does approve alterations or additions for these structures on Gansevoort Street, the current forms of 1-2 story market buildings which define this street must remain intact and legible. This street, with its low-slung market buildings, is the essence of the Gansevoort Market Historic District, and the last intact ensemble vestige of this important chapter in New York City history.

Sincerely,



Andrew Berman
Executive Director