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TESTIMONY OF THE GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Opposing the proposed demolition and additions at 46-74 Gansevoort Street November 10, 2015

Good afternoon Commissioners, I am Andrew Berman, Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, the largest membership organization in Greenwich Village, the East Village, and NoHo. I strongly urge you to reject this proposal, which is wrong for Gansevoort Street, wrong for the Gansevoort Market Historic District, and in principle, wrong for any historic district in New York City. As the group which first proposed and fought for designation of the Gansevoort Market Historic District, we are frankly deeply disturbed that such a proposal would even be considered. Change can and should be an appropriate and vital element of historic districts. This is not change; this is obliteration of the scale, sense of place, history and identity of the defining street of the Gansevoort Market Historic District – a street which also serves as a gateway to the High Line, the Whitney Museum, the Hudson River Park, and the West Village.

If you have not already, I strongly urge you to walk the district and this street. The south side of Gansevoort Street is unique, not only in this historic district but in New York, for maintaining an intact ensemble of 1- and 2-story meat market buildings, which capture this important facet of New York's development. It was these market buildings and their low-rise character which were specifically and most frequently cited by members of this very Commission when they voted unanimously to designate this district in 2003.

The proposed new buildings, including the 120 ft. tall 70-74 Gansevoort Street, will not be complimentary additions to this unique streetscape. They will overwhelm, overshadow, and fundamentally transform this charming, cobblestoned street. And the proposed additions to 60-68 Gansevoort Street, slicing off the parapet and extruding straight up from the existing buildings, will not serve as a thoughtful or delicate counterpoint; they will entomb the 2-story historic market buildings under the weight of the ponderous and

ungainly addition above, tripling the height and mass of the existing buildings.

GVSHP does not oppose thoughtful, modest additions to buildings in the Gansevoort Market Historic District, which defer to and maintain the character of the historic buildings for which this area was landmarked. That is not what these proposed additions and new construction are. I thus join the over 1,000 GVSHP members who have already written to the Commission about this application to urge you, in the strongest of terms, not to approve it or adjust it, but to send this application back to the drawing board.

I would like to share with you some of the comments made about this district and why it was worthy of designation by the Commissioners when they voted to approve it in 2003:

Former Chair Sherida Paulsen said: “The Gansevoort Market is important not just for its streetscapes, but for its buildings. This wonderful collection of survivors that represent ...represents the best of preservation over time. And these buildings need to be designated, protected, and preserved to continue to allow us to understand this story and our children to understand this story.”

Commissioner Roberta Gratz said: “The fact that the district reflects several eras of our history is very significant ...it has taken us a while to get to the point of being able to recognize the historic, architectural, economic and sociological value of our very mixed use districts, and this is clearly the most interesting in that kind of variety that we have seen designated. “

Vice-Chair Pablo Vangochea said: “A lot of these have low-rise buildings with very wide open spaces, there's a sense of airiness in the district which is very unique... unlike any other parts of Manhattan. ..and certainly it is definitely worth preserving... this is a district that in many ways the architecture has subtle relationships, one can say that ... the whole is greater than the sum of the parts themselves.”

Commissioner Richard Olcott said: “It all hangs together because of the market, because of the way it has been used and transformed and adaptively reused for the last hundred and some years...I think there are three or four moments in this district that there is nowhere else like them in the City of New York. And I think for that reason alone it merits designation.

Commissioner Thomas Pike said: "I'm very enthusiastic about the Gansevoort Market designation because I think it is really an expression of the vitality of New York City. Some people think preservation is about pretty things and picturesque things, but for me it's really about honesty and telling the human story accurately, and this market district really expresses a part of New York City that people often forget"

Commissioner Meredith Kane said: "In the case of the market... it's a very different kind of mundane, it's the real work-a-day mundane, and yet it's one that here has built up over time, representing probably 140 years of history."

We hope you will keep these comments in mind in your consideration of this application.

The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation opposes the proposed demolition of 50 and 70-74 Gansevoort Street. Both are clearly recognizable market buildings, and as such contribute to the sense of place, history, and character of this street and of the district.

50 Gansevoort Street, like its neighbor at 46 Gansevoort Street, was a purpose-built market building constructed in 1938-39. While the designation report refers to it as "clad in a no-style covering," which is undeniable, it is also undeniable that the building underneath is an integral part of the history of the development of this district and certainly of the unique ensemble which is the south side of Gansevoort Street. That the building was covered just days before designation, without landmarks approval, with this slapped-on wood panel covering, should not provide an excuse for demolition. The original brick structure underneath can and should be revealed, rather than destroyed.

The market buildings constructed at this time reflect an important period in this neighborhood and New York's evolution, when the High Line had been constructed and trucks were replacing ships and trains as the primary means of moving products in and out of the Meatpacking District. The building's shape, form, and awnings all speak to that history, and why the district was designated in the first place.

70-74 Gansevoort Street was erected in 1939 as a trucking depot. A simple, utilitarian structure, it was nevertheless designed by the

prestigious firm of Vorhees, Walker, Foley and Smith, the successor firm to Vorhees, Gmelin and Walker, responsible for such iconic landmarked New York buildings as the Barclay-Vesey Building, One Wall Street, the nearby Bell Telephone Labs (now the individually-landmarked Westbeth complex) and various Bell Telephone Buildings, many of which have been celebrated and restored in recent years. The building's shed was added and it was converted to a market building in 1949. 70-74 Gansevoort Street also adds immeasurably to the distinctive sense of place, the scale, and the fabric of Gansevoort Street, and tells the story of how this block and so much of this neighborhood was transformed to serve the meatpacking industry. That sense would be entirely erased from these sites by the proposed changes, and the continuity which exists on this block and perhaps nowhere else in New York would be lost forever. We urge that these buildings be preserved.

Aside from our objection to the demolition of 50 Gansevoort Street, GVSHP has several issues with the design of the proposed new building on the site.

The long, narrow bricks on the façade of the proposed new building, oriented vertically rather than horizontally, makes an inharmonious and strident contrast with the surrounding structures. The striated pattern, reminiscent of corduroy concrete, seems entirely out of place for this street and district, more evocative of 1970's institutional architecture than anything typical of this area.

The open slice on the building's western face behind the street façade, as well as the trelliswork on the roof, also seem like odd choices with no real relationship to the architecture and character of Gansevoort Street or the Market memorialized by the creation of the Gansevoort Market Historic District. The proposed awning for this and the neighboring 46 Gansevoort Street also look overly fussy and lack the simple, basic functionality typical of the architectural character that distinguishes the meatpacking district.

We do not believe that the current proposed design would make an appropriate addition to the district.

The proposed additions to 60-68 Gansevoort Street would not only destroy the integrity and any sense of the scale or history of this row

of buildings, but destroy the overall ensemble of the street as well. We strongly urge these planned additions be rejected.

The four stories proposed to be built atop the existing buildings will subsume the existing historic structures. Rising straight up from the historic row and chopping off part of their parapets, the proposed new structure does not set back from, defer to, or in any way create any sort of interplay or dialogue with the existing buildings. Instead, it fundamentally transforms the buildings into something they are not, erasing their 75 year history as quintessential two-story meat market buildings and turning them instead into the base of a bland office building. The design also includes the odd element on its east side, mirroring that proposed for the west side of the new building of 50 Gansevoort Street, of a slice in the wall of the building. This appears to add nothing more than a feeling of artificiality to the building, which while perhaps appropriate for this proposal, is not an appropriate addition to Gansevoort Street.

Here as elsewhere on the street, the existing two-story market buildings create a sense of place and allow the history of the Gansevoort Market Historic District to be legible in a way that the proposed changes would erase. The old buildings would more or less cease to exist. Their story as functional buildings where meat was stored and moved in and out would be eliminated. Their transformation into two-story buildings, because such a form was the most efficient and functional for the time and the purpose, would be lost forever. There are so few such buildings left anywhere in New York, even here in the Meatpacking District. To destroy the very buildings around which the entire neighborhood's visual identity and history is based would run counter to the entire purpose of this area having been landmarked in the first place. We strongly urge you not to approve the proposed additions.

Aside from our objections to the proposed demolition of 70-74 Gansevoort Street, GVSHP has strong objections to the design and scale of the proposed new building on this site, and urge that it be rejected.

To start, the scale, reaching 120 feet to the top of the mechanicals, would be completely inappropriate for the site and street. To even consider adding a building of such scale to a blockfront currently composed of 1- and 2-story buildings is, on its face, absolutely wrong.

Beyond this, the building bears no relationship to the character of the district. When combined with the proposed additions to 60-68 Gansevoort Street, with which it will share floor heights, it will create a giant, hulking, monotonous mass. Rather than light or fanciful, the multi-story rooftop element seems jarringly out of place.

Similarly, the design of the large, gray brick building seems uncharacteristically institutional and inert. Because 70-74 Gansevoort Street is part of such a rare and compelling ensemble of market buildings, we do not believe that attempting to recreate one of the district's warehouse buildings is appropriate on this site. However, this design does not accomplish that goal either. Rather than conveying the solidity of those historic warehouse buildings, the large windows and metal framing of the proposed design make the new building seem intrusively large, and yet thin and weak at the same time.

In closing, we would like to stress to the Commission that there is so much that could be done with these buildings that would be 'appropriate,' as defined by the landmarks law, that would truly 'revitalize' this street, as the applicant claims their proposal will. We believe that some of the proposed restorations of 46 and 52-58 Gansevoort Street are acceptable and appropriate. And of course this ever-more-highly-trafficked street could thrive with a variety of retail and commercial activities, which would serve as a perfect backdrop and complement to the activities of the surrounding Meatpacking District, the High Line, and the Whitney Museum.

But this applicant seems more focused on being able to build large-scale office space, in spite of the fact that the scale required for such development is totally inappropriate for this site and is prohibited by restrictive declarations which govern the use of this property (and thus even if the Commission approved these proposed designs, the developments might never get built because of these restrictions).

When we originally proposed and pushed for designation of this district, we always knew that change and continued evolution of many of these buildings would likely be a part of the regulatory regime. However, we always hoped, and the Commission at the time seemed to agree, that any such change must respect the qualities which made these buildings worthy of designation in the first place. The Commission has a long history of approving thoughtful, modestly-

scaled, deferential additions to buildings in historic districts, and rejecting those that are out-of-scale, overly grandiose, and detract from rather than creating a pleasant dialogue with their historic surroundings.

Though we would be more than happy to see a simple restoration and adaptive reuse of these buildings move ahead, as has already taken place at 52-58 Gansevoort Street, we also recognize that there could be appropriate, sensitive, modest and deferential ways of adding to or altering some of these buildings. This proposal is not that. We hope that you will allow the beloved Gansevoort Street which forms the heart of this district to remain true to its roots, and you will reject this proposal.