



October 4, 2021

Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Sarah Carroll, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

Melanie La Rocca, Commissioner
New York City Department of Buildings
280 Broadway
New York, NY 10007

Via postal mail and email

Re: 44-54 Ninth Avenue/351-55 West 14th Streets, Manhattan

Dear Mayor de Blasio, Chair Carroll, and Commissioner La Rocca:

I write regarding the extremely disturbing news that the Department of Buildings has ordered and the Landmarks Preservation Commission has agreed to the demolition of the nine landmarked houses at 44-54 Ninth Avenue/351-55 West 14th Streets, Manhattan, on the basis of what has been determined to be unsafe conditions stemming from work approved by both agencies. This shocking and tragic development raises deeply troubling questions about the decision-making process and oversight which led to these circumstances, and the complete destruction — with the City's approval — of nine houses built between 1842 and 1846 and recognized at the city, state, and federal level for their historic significance. These buildings, described in the designation report for the NYC Gansevoort Market Historic District as “a picturesque ensemble at the wide, angled intersection of West 14th and Hudson Streets and Ninth Avenue” and “rare surviving examples of 1840s pitched-roofed rowhouses in Manhattan,” have long stood as a symbol and anchor of the Gansevoort Market Historic District.

The current circumstances result from approvals granted by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Department of Buildings allowing the destruction of much of the interiors of these nine buildings and a significant portion of their exteriors to allow them to serve as a low wing to a much larger office building, also approved for construction by these two agencies, on an interior lot behind them. Village Preservation objected strenuously to approval of that plan, as did the local community board, elected officials, and many neighbors, as wholly inappropriate for this landmarked site. We specifically objected to the degree of destruction of the historic material of the existing landmarked buildings, noting it made a mockery of the purpose of landmark preservation. Now, as we understand, the work to achieve this approved level of destruction has resulted in the undermining of the

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Andrew Berman

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structural integrity of the remaining sections of the buildings, requiring their destruction as well. Clearly something went very seriously awry here, and it's imperative that those responsible be held to account.

If the owner performed illegal work, or filed misleading, false, or inaccurate plans, they should be held responsible to fullest extent allowable by law.

However, if these city agencies approved plans for extensive alteration and deconstruction of landmarked buildings without properly examining whether or not such work could be performed safely and consistently with maintaining the parts of the buildings which were supposed to be preserved — their facades, roofs, and most of their rears as well as certain sidewalls — then these city agencies are responsible for this tragic situation. Under any circumstances, it's hard to imagine how these two agencies were not derelict in their duties of oversight in allowing this situation to come to pass.

Beyond this issue of responsibility and fault, it is hard to imagine how the remaining sections of the building, which still stand, could not be adequately shored up to safely remain standing. While this might require considerable expense on the part of the owner, the owner is in fact responsible for the current situation, and for preserving these buildings.

Should demotion move ahead, we urge in the strongest of terms that the owner be required to carefully deconstruct the buildings, maintain the historic material, and faithfully reconstruct the buildings as they were.

This situation also raises the larger issue of the Landmarks Preservation Commission increasingly commonly allowing the demolition of most or all of a building with the exception of the facade. This makes a hollow gesture (literally and figuratively) of historic preservation and landmark designation, and sacrifices the many environmental benefits of adaptive reuse. Beyond that, it also runs considerable risk of such work resulting in the complete destruction of the historic building, thus creating what is in effect a two-step process to destroy a landmarked building and sidestep landmark requirements, with the cooperation and approval of city agencies.

This tragic situation calls for a full accounting of all involved. We urge in the strongest of terms that if there is any safe way to preserve these nine buildings, it be done. If that is not possible, preservation of the historic materials and faithful reconstruction should be required. And the Landmarks Preservation Commission should end its anti-preservation practice of allowing demolition of all but the facades or parts of the shells of buildings.

Sincerely,



Andrew Berman
Executive Director

Cc: City Council Speaker Corey Johnson
Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer
State Senator Brad Hoylman

Assemblymember Deborah Glick
Community Board 4, Manhattan
New York Landmarks Conservancy
Historic Districts Council
Save Chelsea