Village Preservation has very serious concerns about the potential harm that the proposed project at 27 East 4th Street could pose to the adjacent Merchant’s House Museum.

Merchant’s House is a locally and nationally recognized landmark, designated as a New York City Individual and Interior Landmark, listed on the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places, and as a National Historic Landmark. At nearly 200 years old, it is the only early nineteenth-century New York City home that is so thoroughly preserved at both the interior and exterior.

As we expressed when this project first came forward in January 2021, we are very concerned about the safety of the proposed work, and the possible severe damage and resulting loss of integrity that it would cause to the Merchant’s House. As we have seen play out too many times in Lower Manhattan over the past couple of years, vibration monitoring is not sufficient to protect a vulnerable building, even at the more conservative threshold levels being proposed by the applicant. The monitors only gauge vibration levels that exceed a certain threshold, and once this has occurred, damage has often already commenced. In this case, the damage would be irreparable. Beyond the usual significant concerns of structural integrity and damage to exterior facade details, this 200-year-old house features delicate, ornate plaster elements that are extremely fragile. The Museum’s holdings contain many such architectural assets that will likely not be able to withstand the excavation and construction work as proposed.

There have been minimal changes to the proposed new building since it was last presented, per the published plans. The extent of excavation required remains extremely troubling. As before, we defer to the Museum’s experts who say that the planned precautions and safety measures are wholly inadequate to protect the house from substantial and lasting damage.

Further, while LPC has posted a presentation deck for public viewing, it glosses over the structural issues and does not go into the level of detail required for us and others to fully assess updates to the proposed scope of work. While we have been assured that Don Friedman of Old Structures and/or other consulting structural engineers will present additional information verbally at the upcoming Public Meeting of 12/12/2023, the public, preservation groups, elected officials, and museum staff should be afforded adequate time to assess those findings. We ask that the Commission does not make a final determination on Tuesday, but rather, postpone the deliberations to a future date, allowing time for both the public and LPC’s Commissioners to thoroughly review the engineers’ reports once they have been revealed. These are incredibly complicated issues, and one wrong step would irreparably destroy this invaluable piece of history.

This is a unique situation. The Merchant’s House Museum is a public institution and a national treasure. Even minor damage to the interior of the building would have a profound public impact, and affect the museum’s ability to serve the public. The museum should not have to face the possibility of short- or long-term closure due to anticipated repairs to damage caused by construction next door. We strongly urge the Commission to deny this or any other application for work at the adjacent lot that could endanger one of our city’s greatest and earliest historic landmarks.

Thank you.