STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION REGARDING NEW CONSTRUCTION AT 27 EAST 4TH STREET, MANHATTAN IN THE NOHO HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION

The New York Landmarks Conservancy has concerns regarding plans for a new building at 27 East 4th Street, next to the Merchant’s House Museum. We’ve commented on versions of this proposal several times, going back over a decade. We’re pleased to see improvements but caution that many steps must be taken to secure Merchant’s House.

We do not oppose demolition of the existing 1945 garage in order to construct a new building. Under the guidance of the Commission, the design of the proposed new structure has become more sympathetic to the Historic District.

The City and the Commission have a responsibility to protect the integrity of the Merchant’s House Museum. As noted in our previous testimony, the significance of the Merchant’s House cannot be overstated. The Commission recognized this when it designated the exterior on its own first day of existence in 1965, and then the interior in 1981. The designation report for the interior states that “The Old Merchant’s House (is) a unique document of its period which shows with unrivaled authenticity how a prosperous New York City merchant and his family lived in the mid-19th century.” It is a National Historic Landmark and a member of the City’s Historic House Trust.

The focus on threats to this landmark is informed by past experience; in 1988, the building to the immediate east was demolished, requiring $1 million of structural repairs and interior restoration at the Merchant’s House, and closing it for over two years. The building envelope, the foundation, and the invaluable historic interior plaster will face risks if this project moves forward.

Following the last presentation of this proposal, the Commission made specific requests to the applicants, who have responded. The project team has undertaken additional testing and proposed steps beyond the Department of Buildings requirements for monitoring. We have a few suggestions to bolster the proposal: The original baseline for vibration monitoring was set in 2012, with plans to repeat just prior to construction. A more current baseline measurement should be part of the proposal. The pre-construction survey should include digital scans, which would provide a more accurate model if elements need to be restored or replaced.

The City’s long-term under-maintenance at Merchant’s House has also been problematic. But we understand that there are current plans to repair the building envelope, including the west façade, which would abut the new building. Assuming that this work does go forward, it should, along with enhanced monitoring, greatly diminish concerns about potential damage.

Finally, it is critical that all parties collaborate. A new project at 27 East 4th Street was first proposed over a decade ago. The City and Historic House Trust have no doubt been planning their project for some time. All of the designs and structural surveys need to be up-to-date, and represent current conditions. We trust the restoration plans are being shared with the project team. If the proposal is approved, it should not start until work on the west façade is complete. This should help ensure the best outcome for Merchant’s House and honor this landmark.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Conservancy’s views.