



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

330 West 42nd Street, 26th floor New York, NY 10036
tel: 212-736-4536 fax: 212-947-9512
www.nyc.gov/mcb4

BURT LAZARIN
Chair

JESSE R. BODINE
District Manager

May 7, 2019

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

Re: Renovation of 418 West 20th Street

Dear Chair Carroll:

On the unanimous recommendation of its Chelsea Land Use Committee, following a duly noticed public hearing at the Committee's meeting on April 15, 2019, Manhattan Community Board 4, at its regularly scheduled meeting on May 1, 2019, voted, by a vote of 37 in favor, 0 opposed, 2 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend denial of the application unless alterations are limited to restoration of the building's façade, removal of its non-original roof bulkhead, alteration without enlargement of the previously permitted basement and first-floor rear addition, and rearward extension of the existing cellar only to the rear face of this addition.

Description of the Proposal

418 West 20th Street is the westernmost of the seven houses comprising Cushman Row, built in 1840 by Don Alonzo Cushman, whose family would go on to develop much of Chelsea. It is considered one of the finest Greek Revival rows in the nation.

The proposed project would demolish all but the façade and front roof slope of the building, replacing the existing construction behind with a significantly larger new structure. The front fire escape would be removed in concert with change from multiple dwelling to single-family use. Restoration of the street façade would include paint removal and introduction of historically compatible replacement windows. The fenced front yard space would be altered, with part of it depressed to accommodate trash storage.

A previous enlargement, deemed contextual with neighboring ones in Cushman Row by CB4's advisory letter at the time and approved by LPC in 2006, extended the basement and first floor levels about six feet toward the rear of the property. Under the current proposal a new, lower cellar would extend over 29 feet to the rear beyond the existing cellar; new basement and first floor levels would extend to the rear about 7 1/2 feet beyond the existing basement and first floor addition, or about 13 1/2 feet beyond the original basement and first floor; new second and third floor levels would extend to the rear 10 feet beyond the existing, original second and third floors. Only the new fourth floor would retain the footprint of the existing fourth floor.

Historic Context

Cushman Row is one of New York's most revered and significant architectural treasures. The 1970 Chelsea Historic District Designation Report calls it "the outstanding feature" of the district. It is considered one of the finest Greek Revival rows in the nation, second in New York only to the row on Washington Square North. As described by Paul Goldberger in *The City Observed, New York: a Guide to the Architecture of Manhattan*, "The feeling of these houses is more delicate than at Washington Square; everything is a bit smaller and a bit less formal. . . . Here, it becomes clear that destruction or loss of one house destroys all—the lesson of the *tout ensemble* is irrefutable."

Cushman Row's modest scale and outsized impact are its first aspects described in the Designation Report: "The key to the impressive quality of this row is the ten-foot depth of the front yards. This setback enabled the designer to produce a monumental effect for the doorway and stoop on buildings only twenty-one feet wide." The report also notes that "changes in the row are so few as to constitute a miracle in ever-changing New York." As a result, the original unity of the group continues to exert its architectural power.

Scale, unity and intactness are clearly character-defining aspects of Cushman Row worth preserving.

Analysis and Recommendations

The proposed restoration of the front façade would make both no. 418 and the entire row more attractive. We support this part of the applicant's proposal.

While the rear façade of no. 418 has been altered, it still retains most of its original brickwork, some original window openings and original lintels in other cases where sills have been raised. Critically, the bulk of its rear wall plane aligns with that of the rest of the row. Its coplanar continuation of the material, texture, and much of the fenestration pattern of the row's back contributes to a still-strong overall reading of the whole as a unified mass. The current rear addition is consistent in modest height and projection with the rear additions of the next three houses to the east in the row, further adding to this sense of unity.

The Commission's 2006 permit covering the current rear addition (COFA-07-2883) noted "that the building's style, scale, materials, and details, are among the features which contribute to the special architectural and historic character of the Chelsea Historic District." It found the addition appropriate to the district for retaining a pre-existing tea porch's fenestration, increasing the

earlier porch's depth by an amount "only slightly perceptible from the street" and not exceeding the twelve-foot depth of the deepest neighboring tea porch, noting that it would "not further detract from the altered rear façade of the building or from Cushman Row." The permit also took into account that other changes to the rear façade would help restore its historic character.

The consistent tea-porch character of Cushman Row's rear additions, together with the shared wall plane above, creates a rear ensemble effect echoing that of the row's front. This would be worth preserving even if the back of Cushman Row were not highly visible from the public way on 19th Street and the intersection of 19th Street and Ninth Avenue. These views are across open spaces among New York City Housing Authority buildings which are unlikely to be filled in the foreseeable future.

Given the particular sensitivity of Cushman Row, CB4 recommends that the Commission preserve the existing front, roof and rear of 418 West 20th, allowing only the proposed removal of the roof bulkhead, rebuilding of the existing rear addition within its existing profile and footprint, and rearward extension of the cellar at its current depth no farther than the rear of the already-built addition to provide a foundation for its in-place reconstruction. All original rear-wall fabric should be retained, including brickwork and surviving window openings and lintels. CB4 would welcome restoration of this rear wall above the addition to its original design. Previous changes to the rear elevation should not be allowed to justify more discordant changes or removing the wall altogether.

The applicant cites structural deficiencies in the house's rear wall as a reason for removing it. Any real deficiencies should instead be repaired as part of the renovation, and not presented as justification for its unwarranted demolition. We do not support the proposed change to the front yard surface; it would create a unique deviation from all the other yards in the row and is not justified by the trash-storage concern, which might be solved by other means. We support the proposed front façade restoration, window replacement, and introduction of an enlarged front skylight.

Façadism and Establishing Precedent

A May 10, 2017, *Wall Street Journal* article, "Gutting New York Landmarks to Preserve Them," quotes the prominent preservation scholar and educator Andrew S. Dolkart as saying that façadism "has become the biggest issue in Greenwich Village and Chelsea, where early houses are being completely destroyed with interiors gutted, roof lines expanded and rear yards removed." Having found a reliable end-run around expanding historic districts, developers now routinely refer to "landmarked facades." Behind these, anachronistically modern replacement buildings enlarge upon their predecessors, divorcing facades not only from their authentic underlying fabric and structure, but their very building scale and the light and air of their historic inner-block contexts. Much of the character, quality, and environmental benefit of rowhouse-dominated historic districts lies in the open space at their center, which is legally protected by designation. It is only the established practice of the Commission that has left this space and the rear facades defining it typically unpreserved. These are nonetheless experienced from their homes by countless New Yorkers who are as much "the public" as tourists whose views from the

sidewalk have arbitrarily become the standard for what must be saved. As well as pedestrians, many residents of public housing have clear views of Cushman Row's rear face and the open center of its block.

So established has the policy of protecting just street facades become that even the oldest house in Chelsea, although publicly visible on three sides, fell victim to it. For the time being, it still stands at 404 West 20th Street, immediately east of Cushman Row. In 2016, the Commission issued a permit allowing demolition of all but its brick street façade, and construction behind it of a replacement building twice the size of the original. The permit also allows excavation of the house's site to create a cellar level extending nearly the depth of the lot, above which a cascade of new construction will project into former rear yard space, creating terraces with French doors. Drawing A-024B in the applicant's proposal for no. 418 shows the unbuilt but approved design for no. 404 looking like a matched bookend of the proposal for no. 418. The applicant's cover letter to CB4 clearly refers to it: "The rear of the townhouse will be expanded to provide additional living space as well as terraces in a manner that is *similar to many other townhouse renovations* in the West [sic] Chelsea Historic District. In addition, a portion of the rear garden will be excavated to provide additional living space below ground."

Rather than a validating precedent, CB4 views approval of the design for no. 404 as an unfortunate misstep by the Commission and a threat to the district in its uncharacteristic scale, impact on open space within the block, destruction of exterior historic fabric, and façadism. As our initial 2016 letter to LPC regarding no. 404 stated: "CB4 is concerned that the proposed demolition of the oldest house in the Chelsea Historic District will set a precedent for the gutting of other rowhouses in the district including Cushman Row, reducing the district's blocks to a false front of historic façades." If Cushman Row itself suffers the same fate, what can the future hold for the city's historic districts?

Conclusions

418 West 20th Street presumably was purchased with full knowledge of the building's history, its location in the Chelsea Historic District and its importance to the community. We recognize that the Commission must balance the interests of preservation with the legitimate interests and needs of building owners, but it is difficult to understand how a 5,500 square foot single-family house isn't already big enough and why an individual owner's desire for surplus space should outweigh the value to the public of an intact major landmark.

We also understand that the Commission has no purview over the interior of a non-public residential landmark. We believe, however, that its oversight of such a building's entire exterior envelope can strongly influence the likelihood that its interior will be preserved in part or whole, securing a level of historic integrity. If speculative buyers were less confident that the Commission will approve very substantial additions, they would be deterred from buying landmarks as potential teardowns for replacement with bigger, entirely modern buildings behind preserved façades. To the extent that a landmark is contained to its historic envelope, it will have more value if renovated for interior authenticity. The establishment of better-considered precedents will passively serve preservation.

The Commission's decision on as prominent a landmark as 418 West 20th Street will surely be watched. We therefore urge the Commission to use our recommendations listed above to preserve not only this building but to serve as notice that our historic past, as recognized in the designation of historic districts, will be respected.

Sincerely,



Burt Lazarin
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4



Lee Compton
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Betty Mackintosh
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee

cc: Hon Jerrold Nadler, U.S. Congress
Hon. Brad Hoylman, New York State Senator
Hon. Richard Gottfried, New York State Assembly
Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council
Hon. Gale Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Owners, 418 West 20 Street