



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

June 11, 2019

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

Re: Starrett-Lehigh Building Ground-floor Rehabilitation

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 May 20, 2019, Manhattan Community Board 4 (CB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on June 5, 2019, voted, by a vote of 45 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend approval of the application with recommendations as noted below.

Background

The 1930-31 Starrett-Lehigh Building was designated a New York City Individual Landmark in 1986 and stands within the West Chelsea Historic District designated in 2008. It is defined by the column-free ribbon windows of its upper floors, which originally placed it in the forefront of modern architecture in New York. Its upper floors contain 1.8 million square feet of rental manufacturing and warehouse space above a first floor built as a freight terminal of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. The first floor therefore has a distinct identity. The railroad discontinued operations in 1944 and its tracks were removed from the building. First floor openings which were originally open rail passages, truck entrances, loading docks and storefronts have since been substantially altered.

Description of the Proposal

The application modifies a storefront master plan approved in 2017. It proposes replacement of the existing non-historic main entrance infill and curvilinear canopy at the center of the West 26th Street facade with new, black metal-and-glass door and window systems, a rectilinear

canopy and signage; introduction of new, black metal-and-glass folding garage doors at the southern storefront bays on Eleventh Avenue; introduction of multi-light steel windows along a portion of the West 27th Street façade; installation of new, black metal blade signage at select storefronts; and installation of commemorative bronze plaques within the paving just outside the Eleventh Avenue market entrance.

Analysis and Recommendations

The general design intent of the original architects is represented in the 1932 architectural rendering reproduced on page 3 of the application package. Its clear distinction of the building's factory-window and brick upper-floor mass from a ground floor of open truck bays should serve as the standard for determining appropriateness of the master plan's elements. The earlier-approved plan had the merit of simulating the historic ground-floor voids with large fields of glass; these contrasted with the dense net of steel muntins and sash at the upper floor windows, preserving the clarity of the original concept. Specific recommendations follow.

Main Entrance

We find the proposed new entrance design appropriate except for its handling of accessibility—wheelchair users would be diverted to a separate, nearby, minor entrance not weather-protected by the entrance canopy. We feel very strongly that this second-class treatment must be remedied. At least one accessible, power-activated, swinging or sliding entrance door should be incorporated under the canopy and within the otherwise inviting, large field of clear glazing that marks the entrance. Universal design principles should be followed as much as possible.

We also recommend researching the originality of the “Starret Lehigh Building” signage seen at the historic building entrance enframing in the 1986 LPC designation photo on page 3 of the application package. If the font is found to have been original to the building, it should be — memorialized by incorporating it into new building signage or embedment into the paving outside the building's main entrance.

Storefront Bays on Eleventh Avenue

We find the proposed folding garage doors and their glass divisions out of character with the building's original design concept and recommend substituting laterally folding glass walls with full-height glass lights similar to those of the master plan's typical ground-floor glazing.

West 27th Street Multi-light Steel Windows

We regret the loss of the approved master plan's more open treatment of the West 27th Street windows, but recognize the risk of damage from trucks parking against the exterior at this location. CB4 therefore approves the proposal to retain and make continuous the existing concrete wall base. However, we strongly recommend that the opening above the base retain the approved master plan's simpler glazing pattern with full-height lights to preserve the contrast between upper-level factory sash windows and void-recalling ground-floor glazing. This would otherwise be a unique instance of the upper-level factory sash brought to the ground floor at a

former truck bay location, violating the building's original design concept. We recommend against introducing brick piers at this level.

Blade Signage

We find the proposed blade signs appropriate and recommend to the Commission that it make an exception to its standard of one sign per tenant so that blade signs can repeat as needed to reflect the order and regularity of the underlying column and window-bay rhythm.

Bronze Plaques

We welcome the introduction of bronze plaques in the paving outside the market entrance, which will laudably inform the public of the building's architectural and historic significance.

Street Trees

The proposal includes no street trees. As noted in CB4's attached 2017 letter on the approved master plan, introducing these would be a great benefit and reflect the building's adaptive reuse without distracting from its historic character. We strongly recommend that street trees be added to the master plan.

Public Hazard from Current Truck Parking on 26th Street

As noted in CB4's earlier letter the approved master plan excludes several bays marked "not in scope," including seven loading docks on West 26th Street which are a longstanding community problem. Trucks parked perpendicular to these docks project out into the street, and sometimes across the center line, blocking passage for vehicle traffic and pedestrians. Pedestrians walking on the West 26th Street sidewalk along the south side of the Starrett-Lehigh building are forced to cross the street in the middle of the block or to walk into the street to get around the trucks. In both cases the parked trucks make it difficult to see oncoming traffic. It is likely that the proposed ground floor improvements will generate more pedestrian activity on this block and more people will encounter this dangerous situation. CB4 regrets that the proposal does not include all ground floor openings and that there is no plan in place to correct the current unsafe truck loading arrangement. The applicant contends that there is not sufficient interior space to shift loading bays inside the building. We believe that the sidewalk on the south side of the building is safe only between Eleventh Avenue and the beginning of the loading docks when vehicles are parked at the loading docks. Crossing 26th Street mid-block or walking in the street is particularly hazardous during times of heavy traffic turning onto the street from Twelfth Avenue.

We urgently ask the owner to pursue a safe long-term solution as soon as possible, and provide flagmen to secure public safety in the meantime. We also request quarterly reports from the owner detailing progress on finding and implementing solutions, with the first one to be submitted by October 1st of this year.

Conclusion

The Starrett-Lehigh Building holds an uncommon place in the evolution of glass curtain-wall construction, ranking among the great industrial buildings that so distinctively influenced the development of modern architecture. It is notable not just for its scale and technology but its formal rigor, which makes it an icon of Chelsea and continuing inspiration for new buildings along the High Line. We are grateful for the applicant's master plan, which will be a guide through the complexities of diversified adaptive reuse without dilution of its impressive architectural force. We hope that our recommendations will be seen as enhancements to the proposal, helping preserve the powerful simplicity of the building's conceptual image.

Sincerely,



Burt Lazarin
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4



Lee Compton
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Betty Mackintosh
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee

Enclosure

cc: Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council
Hon. Gale Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Representatives of Starrett-Lehigh Building