



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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Burt Lazarin
Chair

Jesse R. Bodine
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January 5, 2018

Honorable Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th Floor
One Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: IRT Powerhouse, Con Ed Preservation Master Plan

Dear Chair Srinivasan,

At its regular Full Board meeting on January 3, 2018, Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) voted to recommend approval by a vote of 36 for, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote, of the following comments on the Consolidated Edison Company's (Con Ed) Landmark Preservation Master Plan ("Master Plan") for the IRT Powerhouse, at 855 Eleventh Avenue ("Powerhouse").

The Powerhouse occupies the entire city block between West 58th and West 59th Streets, from Eleventh to Twelfth Avenues. It was built in 1904 to generate power for New York City's first subway line, the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT). The Powerhouse was acquired by the Consolidated Edison Company in 1959. On December 5, 2017, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designated the Powerhouse a New York City Landmark.

The comments reflect the consensus of MCB4's Clinton/Hell's Kitchen Land Use Committee following a presentation on the Master Plan from representatives of Con Ed on December 13th, 2017.

In general, while the Board supports Con Ed's intent to keep the Powerhouse up-to-date as a vital New York City energy provider, there should be no *carte blanche* approval of potential future "modifications" of the building's exterior; each modification must first be reviewed by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. And the Master Plan should provide more detail on how Con Ed will repair existing damage to the exterior and restore the building's historic features. We ask that LPC and Con Edison address the following concerns as part of this application.

The Master Plan

In general, the Master Plan envisions modifications and additions to the Powerhouse's exterior and roof which Con Ed contends may be necessary in the future to replace old or install new energy producing equipment. These modifications and additions include:

1. Rooftop mechanical equipment;
2. Window modifications for ventilation or equipment access;
3. Addition of doors for large equipment access; and,
4. Potential stack modifications.

According to Con Ed, the Master Plan would facilitate the building's current energy production, anticipate possible future energy production capabilities in the building, allow for long-term planning, and "ensure the architectural character of the building and honor the building's original purpose."

MCB4 is grateful to Con Ed for its willingness to engage with the Board on how best to preserve this remarkable and architecturally, culturally, and historically significant New York City building. The Board recognizes the Powerhouse's importance in the City's current energy infrastructure and that Con Ed's anticipation of future possible modifications or additions to the building is a prudent planning strategy.

The Board feels, however, that the Master Plan is almost entirely a plan to preserve Con Ed, not the Powerhouse building. MCB4 is not opposed to a possible temporary modification to the exterior that may be necessary to move new equipment in or old equipment out of the building. And the Board understands that new technology may require new installation on the roof. But should modifications be contemplated:

1. LPC should first see the actual equipment that Con Ed says would trigger the necessity of creating another large opening on the exterior;
2. Historic materials must be used for repair and restoration; and,
3. Any rooftop mechanical equipment should stand alone and not be contained in housing which would have the effect of making the addition appear larger.

The Board also believes that Con Ed should provide more detail about its plans to repair the damage already visited upon the building before further "modifications" are inflicted on the exterior¹. These repairs include:

1. Realigning the cut-out doors along the 58th Street exterior to harmonize with the windows above;

¹ The Powerhouse underwent no significant exterior alterations up until its acquisition by ConEdison in 1959. Over the course of the next decade, Con Ed made a number of changes including making new street level openings in the building's north and south elevations, removing four of the plant's six original smokestacks, adding the modern, 500-foot reinforced stack, and removing the building's cornice.

2. Replacing the concrete blocks or plywood which now fill in the 46 sidewalk-level cut-outs into the building;
3. Replacing the roll-up metal doors with swing or sliding doors;
4. Repairing the sidewalk in front of the Eleventh Avenue front; and,
5. Replacing the cornice and historic features, such as the clock.

HISTORY OF THE IRT POWERHOUSE

Con Ed's Master Plan characterizes the Powerhouse as "a living and breathing monument to adaptive reuse that remains true to the original design intentions of the building." While MCB4 agrees the building is a monument to reuse, we are not certain that the building is animate and respiring. We are sure, however, that until the damage to the building's exterior is repaired, the Powerhouse will not be true to its original intention. *The Powerhouse was not solely designed as an energy-producing building; It was designed as a civic structure, an outward and visible monument to the aspirations of New York City at the very beginning of the Twentieth Century.*

It was for that reason the company that built the Powerhouse hired the most prestigious architect in the City, and perhaps the country, Stanford White, of one of New York City's premier architectural firms, McKim, Mead & White. The firm had designed mansions for the City's most prominent residents, including the Villard Houses on Madison Avenue in 1882, and public buildings such as Madison Square Garden in 1891 and the Washington Square Arch in 1895. The IRT Trustees did not stint when it came to constructing the Powerhouse. Con Ed should not stint in restoring it.

The design of public monuments at this time was influenced by the City Beautiful movement that shaped American cities after the World's Fair, the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Held in Chicago to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World in 1492, the Exposition had a profound effect on American urban architecture. It was felt that important civic institutions should inhabit architecture which would reflect the good taste of the builders, proclaim the prosperity of the city, and lift the pride of its citizens. This architectural zeitgeist gave New York some of its most iconic buildings including Grand Central Terminal, the New York Public Library, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

And, to the glory of Hell's Kitchen, the IRT Powerhouse².

The Master Plan posits that since there has been "significant development of the adjacent properties" the Powerhouse "is no longer the prominent structure." Given the supreme banality of the architecture on three sides of Stanford White's Powerhouse, (with the possible exception of Bjarke Ingels VIA 57 West) we would argue that the Powerhouse remains *the* prominent

² Hell's Kitchen was in need of some glory at the time. DeWitt Clinton Park, a few blocks south of the Powerhouse, was under construction, according to one history of the Powerhouse, "to civilize Hell's Kitchen, which by then had come to be seen as one of the most notorious slums in New York City." DeWitt Clinton Park was completed in 1905.

structure in the area. Minimizing new and repairing old and ill-conceived modifications to the exterior and restoring historic features will insure it remains so for the next hundred years.

CON ED OBJECTIVES, MCB4 RESPONSE

Con Ed says its Master Plan objectives “ensures future modifications respect the existing architectural character and honor the buildings original purpose.” Given the way doors were cut into the 58th Street exterior without aligning with the monumental windows above, and that the 46 cut-outs along the bottom of the 58th Street exterior have been filled in with concrete blocks (and some with plywood!) the Board is not reassured that future surgery on the building to make more doors will honor the building’s architectural character. The fact that one of the large opening with roll-up metal doors serves as an “active driveway” into the building for private cars, presumably to park, does not instill confidence in Con Ed’s rationale for cutting more openings in the exterior.

Potential Rooftop Equipment

In planning for future technological developments and power demands, Con Ed envisages the possibility of installing equipment on the roof, such as fin fan coolers or evaporative cooling towers. The Master Plan says Con Ed will place any equipment in such a way as to “minimize visibility.”

MCB4 recognizes that rooftop equipment may be necessary to meet future energy-producing capabilities. Some of the potential equipment, however, would be half the height of the existing building, making doubtful the likelihood of “minimizing visibility.”

If equipment is placed on the roof, MCB4 suggests that it not be enclosed in an attempt to hide the equipment, an attempt which might make the addition seem even larger. MCB4 also suggests that restoring the cornice will help minimize the visibility of rooftop additions.

Window Modifications

Con Ed foresees two scenarios for window modifications: 1) To allow for ventilation; and, 2) To allow for necessary ventilation for new equipment installations and for rapid emergency replacement of the equipment.

MCB4 approves Con Ed’s plan to replace damaged or missing grilles, mullions, and trim, finished to match existing detailing and color and to modify windows for ventilation as long as existing window are retained and replaced. And the Board approves replacing the glazing on the small windows at the top of the building with metal screens.

Removable Panel

In order to allow for the possible necessity of installing a large transformer into a vault, Con Ed envisions constructing a “removable panel.” This would entail “removing the existing brick jamb and pilaster, and salvaging bricks for reuse if possible; removing and preserving the existing terra cotta base; and replacing the pilaster and jamb with a new removal panel consisting of salvaged brick where possible or new full-sized brick veneer, to match existing brick, on a new

structural substructure.” Con Ed contends that up to ten windows may have to be modified for equipment installation.

MCB4 would prefer that Con Ed consider the possibility of internally moving equipment around to allow for installing new large equipment, thereby minimizing the need to cut more openings. MCB4 supports the concept of a removal panel if it is the only possible way to install a large transformer into a vault, as long as the panel is reconstructed with the original material. The Board does not find using a “brick veneer” to replace the original pilaster and jamb acceptable.

Addition of Doors

Con Ed proposes that any new access door will be located as close to Twelfth Avenue as “operationally possible.” It proposes that the metal roll-up door and frame receive “a finish to match adjacent material as closely as possible.” Additional doors, according to Con Ed, would be centered on existing windows and not exceed the width of the window plus brick jambs.

MCB4 approves Con Ed would be centering any new door with an existing window. There is no mention, however, of re-centering the other large doors which have been cut into the 58th Street exterior and which were not centered with the existing windows. These egregious lacerations of the wall and despoiling of the design of the 58th Street wall must be fixed.

The Board finds the existing metal roll-up doors appropriate for a shop or a garage, not for an iconic New York City monument. We fail to see how applying a “finish” to a metal roll-up door will improve things even if the color matches the adjacent masonry. All the metal roll-up doors should be replaced with swing or sliding doors.

Again, the Board would prefer Con Ed explore the feasibility of internally moving existing equipment around in order to install new equipment through an already existing opening, rather than cutting more doors in the exterior.

Potential Stack Modification

The existing concrete, the Master Plan points out, is non-historic. It was installed in 1968 after Con Ed removed the historic stacks. Con Ed says if it has to replace the stack it will be as far back from Eleventh Avenue as “operationally reasonable.”

The Board has no issues with the potential modifications or replacement of the stack. It is different in character from the original six stacks and adds little to the historic character of the Powerhouse, as the original six stacks did. As we pointed out in our April 2, 2009 letter to LPC, “The historic character of the powerhouse has been diminished by the gradual loss of its original chimneys, at least in part due to lack of maintenance.... The original stacks added considerably to the effect of the building, and the very tall modern stack at the east end is quite different in character.”

RESTORATIONS

In 1979, in anticipation of the 75th anniversary of the IRT, the Smithsonian acquired parts of the Powerhouse’s original equipment for display at the American History museum in Washington.

The building was documented along with the entire original IRT system in an extensive report for the federal government's Historic American Engineering Record. The following year the City's Landmarks Preservation Commission considered designating the Powerhouse as a protected landmark. Last month, thirty-seven years later, it succeeded.

Fortunately, after more than one hundred years and despite alterations and neglect, the building itself is largely intact. MCB4 is encouraged by Con Ed's intention to restore missing or altered features on windows that were modified. More must be done.

Doors

A number of large openings were introduced to the north and south elevations, probably to facilitate various mechanical upgrades within the building. There are four large doors on the West 58th Street exterior. For some reason, the openings were not cut directly under the monumental arched windows, but cut to the side, marring the stately rhythm of the 58th Street exterior and detracting from the majesty of the large arched windows above.

The cut-out doors along the 58th Street exterior must be realigned to harmonize with the windows above. And the roll-up metal doors must be replaced with swing or sliding doors.

Openings

There are 46 small sidewalk-level cut outs along the West 58th Street façade, which served some purpose in the past. Currently they are filled in with concrete blocks, and in some cases, plywood.

They should be filled in with material that matches the wall.

Cornice

Con Ed removed the building's terra-cotta cornice in 1968, apparently to save money on upkeep. Its removal would have shocked Charles McKim who was one of the first Americans to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Beaux-Arts architectural design emphasized the importance of well-proportioned elements in a well-proportioned whole. The cornice on the Powerhouse was a critical component of the beautifully proportioned design of the building. It provided a framing device to contain classical elements in the building's exterior. Its removal severely compromised the grandeur of the building.

It should be restored.

Clock

While not a classical architectural element on Beaux-Arts buildings, clocks were an important feature of city buildings aspiring to iconic civic presence. A clock, visible to all passing by, offered a communal service, providing information and engaging citizens visually with a great city building.

The clock should be restored.

Sidewalk

The sidewalk along Eleventh Avenue in front of the Powerhouse is in poor condition. Parts of the raised concrete support of the iron railing are cracked and deteriorating. The pitiful, neglected plantings between the railing are not improved by the plastic bags and street detritus accumulated between them.

The sidewalk must be repaired, maintained, and regularly cleared of debris..

Cleaning

The Beaux-Arts facades of the Powerhouse are composed of buff-colored brick and terra-cotta ornament above a plinth of pink granite. The facades appear now as monochrome washed-out sepia.

The Board recommends that Con Ed clean the building exterior.

CONCLUSION

MCB4 recognizes the importance of the Powerhouse as a vital energy provider for New York City and we support Con Ed's desire to keep its building up to date in order to continue its critical role of providing energy to the City. But the Powerhouse also holds a unique position in the cultural and architectural history of New York City. Con Ed now also has a responsibility to honor the City's historic past and preserve its present architectural treasure. By restoring the damage to the exterior and replacing the historical elements, by carefully and responsibly adapting the building for new energy production, the Powerhouse can continue to be an extraordinary meld of advanced technology, magnificent architecture, and great civic — and corporate — pride.

Sincerely,



[Signed on 1/5/18]

Burt Lazarin
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4

Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair
Clinton/Hell's Kitchen Land Use Committee

Cc Hon. Jerry Nadler, U.S Congress
Hon. Brad Hoylman, New York State Senator
Hon. Gale Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Hon. Linda Rosenthal, New York State Assembly
Hon. Richard Gottfried, New York State Assembly
Hon. Helen Rosenthal, City Council
Hon. Corey Johnson, City Council
John McAvoy, Consolidated Edison, Inc.