



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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BURT LAZARIN

Chair

JESSE R. BODINE

District Manager

January 9, 2019

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

Re: 550 West 27th Street, 260 Eleventh Avenue, 549 West 26th Street

Dear Chair Carroll:

On the recommendation of its Chelsea Land Use Committee, following a duly noticed public hearing at the Committee's meeting on December 17, 2018, Manhattan Community Board 4, at its regularly scheduled meeting on January 2, 2019, voted, by a vote of 32 in favor, 1 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 1 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend approval of the proposed project.

Background

The project will restore two adjacent buildings and combine them with each other and a new structure on a contiguous empty lot, all of which fall within the West Chelsea Historic District. The most significant existing building is 260 Eleventh Avenue, formerly the headquarters of the Otis Elevator Company, built in 1911-12, and occupying the full length of the project site's Eleventh Avenue frontage. It abuts 549 West 26th Street, built in 1900-01 for the John Williams Bronze and Iron Works. The project is completed by a site at 550 West 27th Street, the sole vacant lot in the West Chelsea Historic District.

New construction on the vacant lot will house an atrium and vertical circulation serving the unified complex. Clad in glass, its envelope will extend over the tops of both of the existing buildings, cantilevering over a rooftop terrace created on the John Williams Building and rising one story above the Otis Building. The existing buildings will have their brick-and-stone facades stripped of paint and/or cleaned, their windows replaced, new storefronts introduced, and their metal cornices restored.

Analysis

New Construction

The proposed new construction complements the existing buildings, harmonizing with their forceful industrial ethos while providing a contrasting glass-and-steel foil to their masonry expression. This contrast mutually heightens rather than diminishes the identity of both old and new. Rather than producing a deferential, “contextual” background-building for the impressive Otis Building, the new construction balances it with an equally bold design, similarly true to its time. The transparency of the new construction nonetheless defers somewhat to the opaque materiality of the older buildings, following the successful precedent of campus-unifying projects like the Morgan Library. Recessed where it abuts the Otis Building, the new element’s street façade makes an effectively clean transition. The visibility of the atrium’s elevators and stair shafts from the exterior will both enliven the street view with movement and poetically honor the Otis Company’s contribution to modern building technology. The contemporary character of the new construction will build upon the West Chelsea Historic District’s tradition of layered technological eras and forward-looking architecture; it will bookend the Otis Building with the iconic Starrett-Lehigh Building across Eleventh Avenue, the curtain-wall ribbon windows of which were once so cutting edge as to earn it a place in the Museum of Modern Art’s groundbreaking 1932 International Style exhibition, one of only a few American buildings included.

Rooftop Addition over the Otis Building

A new top floor will be added to the Otis Building, matching and extending the proposed glass-clad construction on the vacant lot. It will be set back 22 feet from the building’s existing street faces and 20 feet from its avenue face. This will require an exception to the required zoning envelope, which is predicated on maintaining a conventional street wall; the proposed setbacks’ sensitive preservation of the cornice’s dramatically terminating impact easily justifies an exception in this case. The proposed zoning text amendment will require public review at a later date.

Ground Floor Storefront Modifications

Existing structural bay openings along 26th and 27th Streets which have been altered happenstance over the years will be regularized and receive consistent new storefronts, windows and signage for commercial use. The Otis Building’s existing central entrance on Eleventh Avenue will likewise receive a new full-height storefront, as will alternate bays along Eleventh Avenue. Opening these side bays to floor level will provide separate entrances for ground floor retail uses, and will require the removal of substantial areas of the original, recessed granite base, necessary for the building’s adaptive re-use from a unitary headquarters for a single company.

Window Replacement

New window openings in a regularly grouped pattern will be created in the east façade of the John Williams Building. New and existing window openings throughout will receive aluminum windows to match original colors, which are to be researched and verified. Window configurations will match those of a period when the Otis Company owned both the Otis and John Williams Buildings. Existing windows to be replaced are aluminum and non-original.

Conclusion

The Board believes the proposed project is appropriate for the West Chelsea Historic District and supports each of the proposed actions.

Sincerely,



Burt Lazarin
Chair
Manhattan Community
Board 4



Lee Compton
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use
Committee



Betty Mackintosh
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use
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