



CITY OF NEW YORK

**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR**

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**JEFFREY LEFRANCOIS**  
Chair

**JESSE R. BODINE**  
District Manager

August 4, 2022

Sarah Carroll, Chair  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building, 9th Floor North  
1 Centre Street  
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Proposed renovation of 353 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street**

Dear Chair Carroll:

Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on July 27, 2022, voted, by a vote of 37 in favor, 2 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) **a denial of a Certificate of Appropriateness for proposed rooftop and rear additions to 353 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street in the Chelsea Historic District.** Although we appreciate the developer's proposed restoration of the façade, the committee found the height of the rooftop addition to be excessive. The rear yard addition would be visible from 21<sup>st</sup> Street through the donut hole. The cellar would be excavated up to five feet from the lot line, and the historic rear wall would be completely lost. We cannot support this application but would consider a more modest proposal from the applicant in the future.

**Background**

353 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street was built in a style transitional from Greek Revival to Italianate in 1852-3. Until recently, it housed seven apartments, one of which remains occupied by a tenant. In 2012 the Landmarks Preservation Commission approved a proposal for a rear addition to the building which was not built. In 2016, the Commission approved a proposal for both rear and rooftop additions which were also not built. The current proposal would further enlarge upon the 2016 project by extending the new rear wall four feet farther into the rear yard. Since the approved 2016 application expired before any new work was done, the committee considered this application, on the whole, as a new application.

## **The Application**

The current proposal would remove all of the rowhouse's roof and intact rear wall. The replacement structure would retain the front profile of the historic roofline and introduce a penthouse structure which would not be visible from the opposite sidewalk. The rear wall of the replacement structure would be built about eight feet to the rear of the demolished original rear wall and would be visible through the donut hole. The cellar level would be lowered by six feet and extended under the rear yard in newly excavated space to five feet from the rear property line. The interior would be gutted of all historic fabric and the new interior would include an elevator. The retained street façade would be restored. It was agreed between the applicant and the Board that the existing transoms above the front-façade, parlor-floor windows be retained, in keeping with the transom above the entry doors, thus preserving the horizontal effect at the parlor level.

## **CB4 Recommendation**

**We continue to oppose approval of the rooftop addition as we did for the earlier proposal.**<sup>1</sup> In 2016 we noted that, in taking its shape from the line of sight from the opposite sidewalk, the addition created an arbitrary building profile based on the Commission's policy, not historic precedent. We still hold that sightlines from neighboring buildings deserve consideration and argue against the rooftop addition. It has become increasingly clear to us that such rooftop additions, which are usually accompanied by stair relocation and the introduction of an elevator, make gutting of interiors inevitable. While interiors are not within the Commission's purview, its policies should not invite their demolition.

**CB4 also opposes the excavation and rearward extension of the house's cellar under the rear yard.** This too-common practice alters the soil character of the rear open space, limiting the kind of vegetation it can support; reduces stormwater permeability, an increasingly critical concern; and removes rear-façade structural support, inviting its destabilization and possible loss.

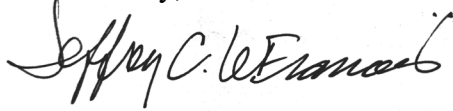
**And we oppose the total demolition of the existing rear wall and the plan to extend the house even further into the rear yard than was in the 2016 application.** Limiting rear additions to eight-foot foot projections from parlor-floor and basement levels only would follow the historic precedent of tea porches, while preserving a meaningful amount of rear-wall historic fabric and showing both the traditional vertical and horizontal alignment of historic rear-window openings. We suggested the developer consider this design instead, with appropriate measures taken to structurally support the remaining historic rear wall above. We hope the Commission will not feel compelled to allow demolition of the entire rear wall simply because it had approved this earlier. That approval has lapsed, and the Commission's policy on rear walls appears to have evolved in the interim.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://cbmanhattan.cityofnewyork.us/cb4/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/downloads/pdf/agendas/2015\\_01/17%20CLU%20Letter%20to%20LP%20re%20353%20W.%2020th%20Street,%20townhouse%20renovation.pdf](https://cbmanhattan.cityofnewyork.us/cb4/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/downloads/pdf/agendas/2015_01/17%20CLU%20Letter%20to%20LP%20re%20353%20W.%2020th%20Street,%20townhouse%20renovation.pdf)

In approving such transformative “additions” to this historic rowhouse, the Commission would not only allow the substitution of an entirely new building type for a historic one but would continue the trend of encouraging the conversion of modest rowhouse apartment buildings into opulent single-family homes, worsening our community’s affordable housing crisis.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey LeFrancois  
Chair  
Manhattan  
Community Board 4



Jessica Chait  
Co-Chair  
Chelsea Land Use  
Committee



Kerry Keenan  
Co-Chair  
Chelsea Land Use  
Committee

cc: Hon. Mark Levine, Manhattan Borough President  
Hon. Erik Bottcher, City Council