



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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JEFFREY LEFRANCOIS
Chair

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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: Starrett-Lehigh Building, 601 West 26th Street, Manhattan: Modifications to rooftop, West 27th Street entrances and new entrance on 12th Avenue

Dear Chair Carroll:

On the recommendation of its Chelsea Land Use Committee, following a duly noticed public hearing at the Committee's meeting on July 18th, 2022, Manhattan Community Board 4 (CB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on July 27th, 2022, voted, by a vote of 36 in favor, 1 opposed, 1 abstaining, and 1 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend denial of an application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for rooftop landscaping and activation, and a new ground-floor entry at 12th Avenue. CB4 recommends approval of modifications to ground floor entrances on West 27th Street.

Background

The Starrett-Lehigh Building is Chelsea's most prominent 20th-century landmark. Located at 601 West 26th Street, it is an individual New York City landmark within the West Chelsea Historic District. 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.

In 2021 several zoning actions were approved to facilitate reuse of the building and to integrate it into the nearby neighborhood:

- A zoning map amendment to add the building (along with the Terminal Warehouse building) to the Special West Chelsea District and to create a new subarea (Subarea K), and a rezoning from M2-3 to M2-4 to facilitate a broader range of uses.
- A zoning text amendment to modify certain use, bulk, loading and signage requirements.

The building 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. This was clearly a fundamental design intention of the original architect. The design which gives the dominant, flowing horizontality of the rest of the building a clean roofline. Its critically important figure-ground relationship with the open sky is continuous, like the signature ribbon windows below. Thankfully, it has been preserved for the ninety years since the building's construction. 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 Proposal

The application proposes modifications to three areas:

1. 10th floor rooftop on the west side of the building
2. New 12th Avenue entrance
3. West 27th Street entrances

1. The 10th floor rooftop and clerestory terraces:

Improvements would include landscaped areas, workstations with seating, trellises, guardrails, the enlargement of an existing stair and elevator bulkhead at the west side of the 10th floor roof, and the enlargement of one existing stair bulkhead at the eastside of the roof. This rooftop work also includes modifying three bays of existing ribbon windows to create a roll-up glazed door for access to the roof on the 10th floor. An upper level would be added to an existing clerestory. According to the applicant the new rooftop amenities are intended for the use of existing tenants and their employees. A restaurant is planned inside the building which would use some of the adjacent outdoor space. The restaurant would also be used for large events such as weddings. Reservations from the public would be required.

2. New 12th Avenue entrance

At the ground level the installation of a new building entrance and marquee on Twelfth Avenue are proposed. This entrance would access an elevator to the 10th floor roof and would be convenient for public events at the restaurant / event space.

3. West 27th Street entrances

At the street level the proposal includes the installation of a new sliding-door bicycle entrance, building signage and two marquees on West 27th Street at the center of the block.

CB4 Analysis and Recommendations

Activation of 10th Floor Roof and Clerestory

CB4 finds that a number of proposed rooftop features will be visible from the street including pergolas, guardrails, trellises, landscaping features, and stair and bulkhead enlargements. These will detract from the original design of the building: the dominant, flowing horizontality on the upper levels. A clear roofline was intended. The height of the trellis on the clerestory would be 13' 2" inches above the existing roof. The proposal suggests no intent

to minimize its visibility, and in the case of the westernmost bulkhead, would increase its height by 2'5" so patrons could more easily access the restaurant / event space.

The applicant constructed a mockup of the proposed rooftop terrace and bulkhead extensions. Our review of this rooftop mock-up finds that the proposed construction would be clearly visible from both north and south; see photos in application. The mock-up can also be seen from the West Side Highway, the Hudson River Park, and Pier 66. This visibility would unacceptably detract from the building's originally intended fluid roof line. **For these reasons, CB4 recommends that LPC disapprove all the proposed visible elements.**

We also recommend that LPC disapprove the modifying of three bays of existing ribbon windows to create a roll-up glaze door access to the roof. This proposed change would alter the original design intent for the building, and most egregiously conflicts with the landmarked architecture of the Starrett- Lehigh building. This proposal is not restorative but is intended to create easier access to the rooftop terrace. CB4 believes that the ribbon windows truly represent the historic fabric of the building and must be protected. Creating a garage door style entryway would completely alter this historic facade at the terrace level.

According to the applicant, the proposed rooftop terrace would be a tenant-only amenity space. However, the applicant also stated that the indoor/outdoor restaurant would be used as a public space as well as for possible indoor/outdoor events and conferences. It is disingenuous to call the rooftop improvements a tenant-driven amenity. The applicant needs to clarify this issue.

The committee strongly urges LPC to deny the use of temporary structures such as trellises, as they historically become permanent once clear visibility concerns diminish over time.

And though not under LPC's purview, the event space/restaurant might generate noise and light pollution in the nearby community. The event space/restaurant would necessitate a review by CB4's Business and License and Permits Committee which would certainly consider potential noise and light pollution in its recommendation to the SLA.

New 12th Avenue entrance

CB4 recommends that LPC deny the proposed installation of a new building entrance and marquee on Twelfth Avenue. The existing elevator is used as a backup freight elevator and accesses a loading dock. The proposed 12th Avenue entrance is for accessing the proposed tenth floor roof terrace and is therefore intended to bring the public to a tenant-only space. It would alter the Master Plan from a designated storefront and add visible height at the tenth-floor bulkhead extension.

West 27th Street entrances

At the street level the proposal includes the installation of a new sliding-door bicycle entrance, building signage and two marquees on West 27th Street at the center of the block. We applaud the applicant's improving access to the bicycle storage area. **CB4 recommends that LPC approve the proposed modifications.** In 2017, RXR received approval from LPC to establish a storefront Master Plan for the base of the building. In subsequent applications, RXR has also received approval to install marquees on West 26th Street and Eleventh

Avenue, as well as signage on West 26th Street and Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues. Portions of that Master Plan have been implemented over the past few years. We find the new application to be in keeping with past support.

Conclusion

Though CB4 has and will continue to support reasonable continued alterations of the Starrett-Lehigh building Master Plan, we recommend LPC deny proposals that negatively impact the skyline, and visibly deviate from the original design intent. Our letter from April 2021 opposed additional elevations on eastern end of the building. To now ask for western side elevation of expansions would be a chipping away of the historic fabric of the building. 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. However, the application for visible rooftop additions, a visible height expansion of stair and elevator bulkheads, and the creation of a rolling door at the tenth floor do not preserve the powerful simplicity of the building’s historic design but dilute this impressive architectural presence.

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