



CITY OF NEW YORK
MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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March 10, 2023

Kurt Arnold
Business Unit Leader
New York State Office of General Services
33rd Floor, Corning Tower, Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12242

Hope Knight
President and CEO
Empire State Development
633 Third Avenue, Floor 37
New York, NY 10017

Re: 550 West 20th Street Preservation Concerns

Dear Mr. Arnold and President Knight:

We write to request that Empire State Development (ESD) and the Office of General Services (OGS) begin, as soon as possible, comprehensive restoration and in-kind replacement of the terra-cotta elements of 550 West 20th Street, the former Bayview Correctional Facility.¹

The current plan is for this work to be carried out by the winner of the forthcoming Request for Proposals to renovate the building as supportive housing. Given the uncertainties of the RFP outcome and timeframe, this approach would add an unacceptably indefinite delay to the already significant lead time for replication of missing terra cotta. It would also make the chain of responsibility more tenuous by assigning the work to an unknown future subcontractor of the RFP-winning respondent's general contractor. Although the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) would still have oversight, more immediate oversight could be achieved if the scope of ongoing building repair work—under which the terra cotta was removed—were expanded to make full terra-cotta restoration its endpoint. This would better allow SHPO, OGS/ESD, and the community to participate in decisions related to the terra cotta restoration.

¹ At its regularly scheduled Full Board meeting on March 1st, 2023, the Board voted 36 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote to approve this letter.

We understand that the state has engaged Superstructures Engineers & Architects as a special consultant for restoration of the terra cotta, and that a report prepared by the firm recommends replacing terra cotta with cast stone, citing speed and affordability. While Superstructures is well qualified, its report describes itself as "intended to . . . propose alternate materials in lieu of terra cotta" as if those were the firm's instructions. As a State and National Register-eligible building, 550 West 20th Street merits nothing less than in-kind replacement of its terra cotta, which was inappropriately removed without required SHPO involvement. This solution is worth its lead time and marginally greater cost than cast stone, which weathers differently from terra cotta and doesn't provide an acceptable long-term result. Superstructures' own website states that "more and more, damaged terra cotta is being replaced in kind" and boasts that "virtually all of" the firm's "award-winning preservation projects have involved terra cotta" including the Brooklyn General Post Office where "17,000 damaged terra-cotta units were replaced with new terra cotta."

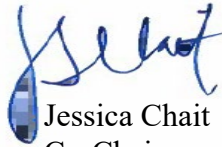
The means for such replication is at hand; Boston Valley Terra Cotta, a New York State firm, provided replacement polychrome terra cotta—very like Bayview's—for the restoration of Buffalo City Hall, a near-contemporary Art Deco structure. Properly maintained, as it would be under current New York City Local Law 11 inspections, such replacement terra cotta can be expected to last for centuries.

We look forward to your response.

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. Brad Hoylman-Sigal, New York Senate
Hon. Tony Simone, New York Assembly
Hon. Mark Levine, Manhattan Borough President
Hon. Erik Bottcher, City Council