



CITY OF NEW YORK  
**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR**

424 West 33 Street, Suite #580  
New York, NY 10001  
tel: 212-736-4536  
[www.nyc.gov/mcb4](http://www.nyc.gov/mcb4)

**JESSICA CHAIT**  
Chair

**JESSE R. BODINE**  
District Manager

June 10, 2024

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

Re: Proposed new entrance gate at 402 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street

Dear Chair Carroll:

Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on June 5, 2024, voted, by a vote of 26 in favor, 11 opposed, 3 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) denial of a Certificate of Appropriateness for the proposed introduction of a gate at 402 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street in the Chelsea Historic District. **The Board found that the gate is an unnecessary disruption of a masterful, open and welcoming entrance design by notable architect C.P.H. Gilbert, that security is not a particular problem in the neighborhood, that gated entrances to New York City apartment buildings are virtually unheard of, and that the proposal would contribute to an urban version of a gated community, detracting from the spirit of one of the city's most gracious blocks.**

### **Background**

402 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street was constructed as an apartment building in 1897 for Angelica Faber, a daughter of Don Alonzo Cushman. Cushman was a prominent landowner, rowhouse developer, and friend of Chelsea's Founder, Clement Clarke Moore. In 1839-40, he built the nearby Cushman Row at 406-418 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street, "one of the most splendid and best-preserved uniform rows of town houses in New York City," according the 1970 Chelsea Historic District Designation Report. The Cushman family followed in his footsteps as real estate developers, eventually lending its name to the Cushman & Wakefield global real-estate services firm. Angelica Faber named #402 the Donac in Don Alonzo Cushman's honor, incorporating the first three letters of his first name and his middle and last initials. This name is prominently displayed in terra cotta above the building entrance.

Other family members developed buildings on land inherited from Don Alonzo, including his nearby estate on the east side of Ninth Avenue between 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Streets. These include the Chelsea Court apartment complex on the north side of this site, completed in the same year as the Donac, and the adjacent 1928 Chelsea Court Tower apartment tower to Chelsea Court's south. The family continued Don Alonzo's commitment to architectural excellence, hiring the notable architect C.P.H. Gilbert to design all three of these projects. They also hired Gilbert to design the Cushman Building at One Maiden Lane, completed a year after the Donac. The designer of many landmarks, Gilbert is particularly renowned as one of the great architects of Gilded Age mansions including the Warburg House, now part of the Jewish Museum.

Gilbert's Donac is a small masterpiece of contextual design. Its concave southwest corner gracefully transitions from the street line to the setback façades of the historic rowhouses to its west. This concavity contains the entrance, lending it an inviting and embracing quality. A convex bay window within it, above the entrance, rises to the fourth floor of the five-story building, skillfully creating the impression that the Donac is stepping down to the three-story height of the neighboring rowhouses. Like Cushman Row and the General Theological Seminary across 20<sup>th</sup> Street, it contributes to making its block one of New York's best.

### **The proposal**

A previous owner removed low masonry side walls at the building entrance and replaced them with a six-foot-tall gated fence in the 1980s. These changes were made without the required Certificate of Appropriateness from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and are currently in violation. The proposed work will remove the out-of-compliance fence and gate, restore the masonry side walls, and introduce a new gate between them.

### **CB4's recommendation**

#### **Original design intent**

The masonry side walls of C.P.H. Gilbert's entrance to the Donac were clearly intended to terminate the building's original areaway fence and emphasize the open building entrance, creating a kind of inviting bridge from the sidewalk to it. The same ungated effect is seen at the entrance to his nearby Chelsea Court apartment building of the same year at 360 West 21<sup>st</sup> Street.

#### **Gate precedents in the area**

The applicant's presentation to MCB4 notes that the proposed gate "will be part of a continuous set of such gates on the block that extends for more than 600' over more than two dozen buildings." The 800-foot blockfront in fact has 18 townhouses with gates, the great majority of which are Greek Revival rowhouses for which gates matching and continuous with front garden fences are thematic. Interspersed among these are six townhouses without gates and five other apartment buildings, none of which has a gate. New York City apartment buildings do not as a rule have entrance gates. All of the gate precedents shown in the applicant's proposal material are for early-to-mid nineteenth-

century townhouses. None were built as apartment buildings and all significantly predate the Donac’s architectural period.

**Security**

Installation of similar security gates across the street at numbers 417, 419, and 421—originally faculty rowhouses for the General Theological Seminary expansion by notable architect Charles Coolidge Haight—was presented in an April 12, 2022, LPC public hearing. Neighborhood residents testified that homelessness and security were not a particular problem on the heavily trafficked block. In response, the Chair introduced the commissioner discussion by saying:

For our discussion on appropriateness, I know we’ve heard a lot of testimony about need, and that is not really part of our discussion. We don’t make our findings based on need, and so whether one person feels something isn’t safe and another person feels it is, is sort of outside of our purview. We look at the architectural appropriateness of the physical work, so we look at it in that context.

The commission then voted to approve the new gates. To believe that its findings weren’t based on the applicant’s claimed need for security is to believe that LPC acted solely to improve on Haight’s original work, a clearly inappropriate action. Need was plainly considered, and interpreted in the applicant’s favor. We note that homelessness and security are no more a particular concern on the block today than then. The area is a world away from the 1980s when the current fortress-like fence and gate were illegally installed. Recent years have seen an increase in gentrification and attendant property-protection measures, not homelessness or crime. This has brought to the Seminary Block in an unwelcome tone of exclusiveness and exclusion, a sad fate for the block Clement Clark Moore planned as the village green of his new community. The applicant told CB4 that the gate was for “basic security so that people aren’t kind of wandering into the front door of the building.” This concern calls for a standard apartment intercom buzzer system, not a reworking of C.P.H. Gilbert’s exceptional entrance design.

In conclusion, the stated reason for the addition of a gate does not merit a permanent change to this particularly sensitive building, and MCB4 recommends denial of the Certificate of Appropriateness.

Sincerely,

Jessica Chair  
Chair  
Manhattan  
Community Board 4

Kerry Keenen  
Co-Chair  
Chelsea  
Land Use Committee

Jeffrey LeFrancois  
Co-Chair  
Chelsea  
Land Use Committee