



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

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**JESSICA CHAIT**  
Chair

**JESSE R. BODINE**  
District Manager

December 6, 2024

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

**Re: Proposed modifications to a signage master plan at 655 Sixth Avenue**

Dear Chair Carroll:

Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on December 4, 2024, voted, by a vote of 38 in favor, 2 opposed, 1 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 master plan modifications at 655 Sixth Avenue in the Ladies Mile Historic District.

**The Board finds that the proposed changes to the current signage master plan would result in a haphazard appearance incompatible with the building's ordered Neoclassical architecture and inappropriate to this exceptionally intact lynchpin of the historic district.**

**Background**

655 Sixth Avenue is a Neoclassical building with cast-iron façades in the Ladies Mile Historic District. It was built in stages between 1887 and 1895 as a department store by Hugh O'Neill, and is the most distinguished work of its architect, Mortimer C. Merritt. The Ladies Mile Historic District Designation Report states that the building's "large pediment, inscribed with 'Hugh O'Neill,' and rounded corner bays give the building special prominence on this avenue of large, ornate buildings." In his 1979 book *The City Observed: New York*, long-time *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger describes it as Sixth Avenue's most distinguished piece of retail architecture.

## **The Current Master Plan and Proposed Modification**

The current master plan, which was previously approved by LPC, restricts signage to illuminated signs behind first-floor transom glass. The regularity of this system allows a coherent appearance even with a variety of logotypes for different tenants.

The proposed new signage master plan is meant to make façade signs more visible from the street. However, there is no proposed change in the building's retail use to help support abandonment of the current master plan. We also note that retail tenants of the corner-turret locations already have prominently visible signage under the current master plan as a result of turret transom glazing that is at an angle to the street.

The proposed master plan would allow a mix of transom-level signs mounted outside of transom glass and lower signs mounted at about eye-level behind storefront glass. This creates a much less orderly appearance, with signs jogging up and down, and in and out. The overall appearance would be especially chaotic in the presence of a variety of logotypes, and jarringly inappropriate to the harmonious character of the building's Neoclassical architecture. The presentation materials include side-by-side images of the current and proposed signage plans that make clear the superiority of the current master plan.

Also, the proposed transom-level signs are individually problematic. They are an amalgam of several sign types: halo-lit lettering; rail-mounted cutout lettering; and flat sign panels. The combination of so many elements is distractingly complex and opaque, detracting from the underlying architecture. The usual transparency afforded by cut-out letters is lost to the backing panels, which effectively create a sign panel of the sort only allowed in a signband by LPC's guidelines for signage that can be approved by staff. While the applicant has elected to seek approval not by staff but through a public hearing, we would hope to see an explanation for deviations from the very sensible guidelines, either in the way of special uses, constraints, or opportunities. None of those exception-supporting conditions apply here. We note that the proposed 24-inch-tall transom-sign lettering unjustifiably exceeds the guidelines' maximum height of 18", exacerbating the negative impact of the transom assemblies.

## **MCB4 Recommendations**

MCB4 recommends that the applicant pursue a less distracting, better integrated solution that achieves the desired greater visibility within the spirit of LPC's guidelines. We would welcome non-illuminated, rail-mounted cutout lettering outside of transom glass that would be visible in daylight and legible in silhouette at night when backlit by interior lighting—an effect successfully achieved in other locations. We would also be open to blade signs meeting LPC's guideline criteria if attached to non-original

storefront framing or to flush, cast-iron surfaces that could, upon eventual removal, be patched and painted without leaving visible traces.

Sincerely,



Jessica Chair  
Chair  
Manhattan  
Community Board 4



Kerry Keenen  
Co-Chair  
Chelsea  
Land Use Committee

[Signed 12/06/24]  
Gregory Morris  
Co-Chair  
Chelsea  
Land Use Committee

cc: Hon. Mark Levine, Manhattan Borough President  
Hon. Erik Bottcher, City Council  
Applicant for 655 Sixth Avenue