

JOHN WEIS

Chair

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CITY OF NEW YORK

**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR**

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October 6, 2010

Hon. Robert B Tierney

Chair

Landmarks Preservation Commission

Municipal Building, 9th floor

One Centre Street

New York, NY 10007

**Re: Former 11th District Municipal Court**

**314 West 54th Street**

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board 4 is writing about the proposed installation of HVAC on the roof of the former 11th District Municipal Court House, now the Midtown Community Court, located at 314 West 54th Street in the Clinton section of Community District 4. The application for this installation, which is apparently planned as the last portion of the renovation of the building by DCAS, appears appropriate, since there is no location on the public way from which the installation is significantly visible in connection with the important features of the courthouse complex.

The 54th Street portion of this handsome structure currently houses the Midtown Community Court, an institution that has been famously successful and that has led to the establishment of similar courts elsewhere in the city and even beyond. It has also been occupied since before designation by a small theater. The building was designed by the noted architect John Duncan and constructed in 1894-96, and its principal architectural feature is an elaborate Renaissance façade on the south side of 54th Street some distance in from Eighth Avenue. Since then the building has sheltered many tenants and endured heavy use, much neglect and various remodelings. The Board is happy to see the coming of what has been hoped to be completion of a much-needed restoration and updating that has included the careful restoration of Duncan’s façade. The proposed installation of new HVAC units on the roof has been presumed to be the last stage in this long process.

The drawings and site visits confirm that the proposed HVAC installation will be visible in more than passing and isolated glimpses at only a few points from the public way, and most of them involve no conflict with the important historic features of the building

Glimpses from the west present no problems, but locations on the east near the intersection of 54th Street and Eighth Avenue are more problematic. Even there the HVAC will be clearly seen only from a considerable angle and in a location set well back from the street façade on a flat roof with a parapet over a yard high. This roof dates from an enlargement upward of the building that dates from 1928 and bears almost no distinctive architectural features, especially in a side view. As one approaches the building from the east along 54th Street the HVAC installation gradually becomes invisible and the elaborate late 19th Century façade that is the glory of the building comes into full view. There is no place where the HVAC and this façade are simultaneously fully visible; and thus the installation, even if not ideally located, would appear acceptable in relation to this ornate primary façade on 54th Street. The limited roof space allows little leeway for adding machinery to rooftops.

At the back of the main block of the courthouse on 54th Street is a tall brick tower that is briefly discussed in the designation report. This tower encloses a circular staircase that is wrapped around a long-inoperative elevator and has long served the upper floors of the courthouse. It is set in a courtyard that separates the courtrooms on 54th Street from related buildings on the south side of the block, including a striking jail on 53rd Street that unfortunately was demolished before landmark designation. Two other buildings, originally midblock wings of the courthouse, still remain in the courtyard. These are in varying states of repair but show no significant architectural features, but the tower is largely in good condition. The lower part is of rough brick, since it too was not intended to be seen from the public way; but the upper portion, of face brick, ends in an elaborate copper top, now green with age. This feature is covered in a netting, apparently designed to protect it, that has almost the look of a nightcap. This may conceal a circular window.

The main proposed installation of the HVAC units on the roof of the courthouse is immediately to the north of this tower. While there is at present a good view of the tower from two locations on 53rd Street, there is no location where it is visible from an angle that would allow visibility of the HVAC. A smaller installation on the western rear wing of the courthouse will be all but invisible from the street, and nowhere does it interfere with views of the tower. We note that DCAS is constructing a new building on 53rd Street on the former jail site and that there has been some damage done to the south end of the western rear wing of the courthouse. Drawings show a connection between he old and new buidings is to be established at this point and we assume the situation will be remedied. Visually the new building will perform the function of closing the south end of the landmarks site as the jail originally did and restoring at least in part the historic condition in which most of the buildings at the rear of the courthouse were not visible from the street. We would hope that funds could be found for fully restoring the top of the tower and enabling removal of the netting. It would then, as presumably intended, form a unifying element crowning the courthouse complex. Designation of the Midtown North Police Station (originally the 18th Precinct), designed in a striking Art Moderne Style and located just to the east of the courthouse, would complete protection of this remarkable civic grouping.

Sincerely,

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| John Weis  *Chair*  Manhattan Community Board 4 | Edward S. Kirkland  Co-Chair  Landmarks Committee | John D. Lamb  Co-Chair  Landmarks Committee |

CC: applicant