



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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November 8, 2007

Hon. Robert G. Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
2 Center Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: 314 West 54th Street (Community Court Building)

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 is writing to you about the proposal for an addition to the rear of the building at 314 West 54th Street originally constructed for the Eleventh District Municipal Court and now housing the Midtown Community Court. The Board believes that the proposal shown to the Landmarks Task Force of the Board at its meeting on November 1 of this year shows a basically good design but one that cannot be considered appropriate to its context without modifications to make the proposed new façade less dominant and to restudy aspects of the proposed landscaping in the new rear courtyard.

The 54th Street façade is an example of the elaborate Beaux-Arts designs that Tammany commissioned for civic structures in the late 19th Century and was designed in 1894-96 by John H. Duncan, who is better known for such prominent structures as Grant's Tomb and the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch in Brooklyn. After various changes in both design and use the building was altered in 1993 by Davis Brody Bond to accommodate the Midtown Community Court as well as a number of small theaters, uses that were welcomed by the community and the Board. A proposal for a more extensive rear addition was approved some years ago by the Landmarks Commission, but was never executed owing to lack of funds.

The present less costly but quite ingenious proposal will make access and egress to the upper floors of the building both more convenient and fully compliant with legal requirements. The space between the two projecting rear wings will be filled in to provide an elevator that will make all areas in the building fully accessible. The fire escape at the south end of the full-height western wing will be removed and replaced by a square stair tower at the blind south end of the lower eastern wing. At the base of the western wing a large elevator machine room will be added with a large multi-use space above it, which will be topped with a terrace. The high concrete block wall on 53rd Street will be replaced by a tall picket fence with square piers and a gate. Changes, including some landscaping, will be made in and around the newly visible courtyard.

The treatment of most of the new façade will be dark glass with a contrasting rectangular framing of light-colored aluminum based on wide strips outlining the floors and narrower vertical members. A similar framing for the glass façade of the new room on the second floor of the western wing will be executed in a darker gray limestone, and stacked brick will front the mechanical room below it.

The historically undeveloped rear of the building is partially visible from the public way at several points along West 53rd Street, and is clearly visible across the street at a point directly to the south. One point of view at 53rd and Eighth Avenue still gives a glimpse of the top of the central spiral staircase that is a glory of the interior of Duncan's building, but this is only a fleeting and very partial view of an isolated element. The removal of the present wall next to the 53rd Street sidewalk will reveal the full base and courtyard of the rear of the structure, currently only partially visible, as well as three rather low trees.

At no point are the rear and front façades both visible. Currently it is possible, however, to see some of the side and back of the building down a narrow alleyway between the court building and the handsome police station to the east; and this alley will allow a glimpse of the top of the new stair tower in the future.

The proposal is ingenious and the design handsome; and in no way does the new design at the back interfere visually with or directly affect the distinctive front façade, since the new rear of the building can only be seen in isolation from the significant historic architectural features. It is probably more than coincidence that the proposed stair tower at the now blind end of the eastern wing recalls the square, almost medieval, tower originally erected on almost on the same footprint to hold a jail connected to the court through this wing.

The Board believes, however, that the bright color of the aluminum framing in contrast with the darker glass background may turn what is historically and functionally a secondary façade with no major entrance or architectural quality into a competing element of the building. This assertive design, together with the removal of the rear wall on the street, risks shifting the dominant aspect of the building to the 53rd Street side and suggesting that this is now the primary façade to the detriment of the fine 54th Street façade with its historic civic architecture that has established that point as the main entrance from the beginning to the present moment.

The Board believes that this effect could be avoided and the design made fully appropriate by reducing the contrast between the dark glass and its bright aluminum framing by treating the effect of the light color and surface of the aluminum in a way that is closer to the matt gray limestone framing around the multi-purpose room at the lower left corner of the design. A careful adjustment of these two surfaces would work to unify the design and also make it appear more as a handsome background façade.

The Board also believes that the details of the courtyard and the new entrance on 53rd Street, which have been made fully visible by the removal of the wall that nearly hid the ground floor, should be restudied to improve the design and its effect. A tree should be planted on the left side of the doorway recess to help establish this new but clearly secondary entrance to the building.

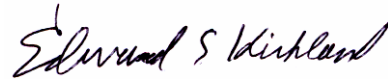
The proposed planters, which have no historic precedent in the originally purely utilitarian courtyard, risk causing social problems in the newly open recessed space located on a problem street. Historical and practical concerns join to indicate the planters might better be replaced by some such treatment as handsome stone paving and simple, two dimensional landscaping.

The Board is glad to report that the architect that presented to the Landmarks Task Force expressed an understanding of our concerns and willingness to take our suggestions under consideration.

Sincerely,



Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair, Manhattan Community Board 4



Edward Kirkland
Chair, Landmarks Task Force

Cc: Applicant (DCAS)
Midtown Community Court

Eleventh District Municipal Court, later the Seventh District Magistrates Court, now the Midtown Community Court, 314 West 54th Street (1894-96, by John H. Duncan, altered 1993 by Davis Brody Bond). This example of the fine Tammany-sponsored buildings of late 19th-Century New York is in the typical Renaissance classical mode with details incorporating appropriate civic symbols.