



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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DELORES RUBIN
Chair

JESSE R. BODINE
District Manager

August 1st, 2017

Hon. Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th floor
One Centre Street New York, NY 10007

Re: 601 West 26th Street, Starrett-Lehigh Building: Certificate of Appropriateness for Storefront Master Plan and Ground Floor Rehabilitation

Dear Chair Srinivasan:

On the recommendation of its Chelsea Land Use Committee, following a duly noticed public hearing at the Committee's meeting on July 17, 2017, Manhattan Community Board 4 (CB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on July 26, 2017, voted, by a vote of 35 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining and 0 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend approval of a proposed project for a storefront master plan, market entrances and temporary louver installation at the ground floor of 601 West 26th Street, the Starrett-Lehigh Building. We also have several comments and suggestions for the project.

Background

The 1930-31 Starrett-Lehigh Building was designated a New York City Individual Landmark in 1986 and stands within the West Chelsea Historic District designated in 2008. It is defined by the column-free ribbon windows of its upper floors, which originally placed it in the forefront of modern architecture in New York. Its upper floors contain 1.8 million square feet of rental manufacturing and warehouse space above a first floor built as a freight terminal of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. The first floor therefore has a somewhat separate identity. The railroad discontinued operations in 1944 and its tracks were removed from the building. First floor openings which were originally open rail passages, truck entrances, loading docks and storefronts have since been substantially altered.

Proposal

A proposed Storefront Master Plan is designed to facilitate new ground floor uses such as restaurants, food markets and drinking establishments, and to make the ground floor facade more attractive, lively and coherent. The plan includes:

1. The replacement of existing infill with two types of contemporary metal and glass storefronts with signage standards;
 - Clear glass in the old bay openings to replace the current non-historic materials and reflect the transparency of the original openings;
 - Canopies for new market entrances;
2. The installation of more appealing temporary metal panels over Con Edison louvers; and
3. The addition of permanent sidewalk flood barriers: plates flush with the sidewalk.

CB4 Analysis and Recommendations

CB4 recommends approval of the applicant's proposal. Enlivening the ground floor of the Starrett-Lehigh building and making it more attractive will enhance the neighborhood character. We also have some comments and suggestions.

Storefronts

Type B storefront glazing was described by the applicant's architect as intended to mimic the transparency of what were originally open bays. When questioned as to how this would be achieved, the architect said that high-transparency, low-iron glazing was under consideration. This should be required at these locations along with low glass surface reflectivity to achieve the desired effect of open bays.

The recesses at the top of the storefront types should be addressed for bird-proofing to avoid discoloration from droppings.

Truck Loading Docks

The proposal excludes several bays marked "not in scope," including seven loading docks on West 26th Street which are a longstanding community problem. Trucks parked perpendicular to these docks project out into the street, and sometimes across the center line, blocking passage for vehicle traffic and pedestrians. Pedestrians walking on the West 26th Street sidewalk along the south side of the Starrett-Lehigh building are forced to cross the street in the middle of the block or to walk into the street to get around the trucks. In both cases the parked trucks make it difficult to see oncoming traffic.

It is likely that the proposed ground floor improvements will generate more pedestrian activity on this block and more people will encounter this dangerous situation. CB4 regrets that the proposal does not include all ground floor openings and that there is no plan in place to correct the current unsafe truck loading arrangement. The applicant contends that there is not sufficient interior space to shift loading bays inside the building.

We believe that the sidewalk on the south side of the building is safe only between Eleventh Avenue and the beginning of the loading docks when vehicles are parked at the loading docks. Crossing 26th Street mid-block or walking in the street is particularly hazardous during times of heavy traffic turning onto the street from Twelfth Avenue. We have asked our Transportation Committee to review the situation and seek a solution that will protect pedestrians.

Other Suggestions

While old photos indicate that sidewalks in front of the building were historically absent of trees, CB4 feels that introducing street trees would be a great benefit and would reflect the building's adaptation to a new context and use without distracting from its historic character.

CB4 asks the applicant to explore making the roll-up doors more attractive, and to consider providing bicycle parking within the building.

The applicant said that these suggestions would be taken under consideration.

Sincerely,



Delores Rubin
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4



John Lee Compton, Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Betty Mackintosh, Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee

cc: Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Hon. Corey Johnson, City Council