



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD No. 4

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J. LEE COMPTON
Chair

MICHELLE SOLOMON
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April 6, 2006

Hon. Robert B. Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: 418 West 20th Street
Chelsea Historic District

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 thanks you for the opportunity to review this application to make alterations to the rear of 418 West 20th Street, the westernmost building in the extraordinary group of Greek Revival buildings known as Cushman Row. After a detailed presentation of this complex proposal for extensive additions to the rear of the building at its meeting on March 30th 2006, the Landmarks Task Force of the Board voted that it had no objection to the proposed changes provided that significant modifications were made to the details of the application, in particular to the proposed rooftop addition. At its regular meeting April 5 the full Board voted to approve this letter embodying the Task Force response.

Cushman Row on 20th Street a little west of Ninth Avenue in the heart of the Chelsea Historic District was built in 1840 and is generally considered one of the two finest groups of Greek Revival houses in the city. The main fronts on 20th Street of the seven houses are still essentially intact except for the presence of dormers of varying design on the five houses directly to the east of this one; but the rear façades that originally faced the interior of the block are now at least partly visible from 19th Street over a parking lot in Fulton Houses and show various changes and additions. Most evident are the changes based on the tea rooms or tea porches, originally wooden additions on the back of the parlor floors, which typically date to the mid-19th century but here have been considerably enlarged or rebuilt in varying ways. The rear of 418 is fully visible and shows a full tea room and other changes that significantly diminish its historic character.

The application involves several changes what will have a significant cumulative effect on the building and its visible rear façades. The first is to enlarge the existing tea room by extending it some six feet further back and bringing it fully down to include the ground floor. The applicant further proposes to enlarge the already significantly altered rear at the fourth floor, by creating a new higher roof at an angle greater than that of the historic roof and actually projecting above the peak roofline in order to supply light to the room thus created. In front the applicant proposes to add dormers based on those of the adjoining house.

The Board has no objection in principle to the extension to the rear of the existing "tea porch addition." since the accumulation of multiple alterations in the rear of the houses in this part of the row has irrevocably diminished their historic character. The mockup of the rear addition, however, appears to indicate a structure extending somewhat higher and further to the back than the somewhat differing additions to the adjoining houses, and the Board believes that this addition should extend no further back than the greatest extension rearward of the

somewhat varying extensions on nearby houses nor higher than the line effectively established by the largely uniform top of these extensions. (It is possible the mockup reflects the height of the proposed railing, to which we have no objection if the design is appropriate.) No new conditions should be established that could be used as arguments in favor of future enlargements nearby.

The Board does not object in principle to a rooftop addition in the rear of the building, but is concerned above all by the fact that the proposed addition is to be lighted by a projection above the low peak of the roofline that is a defining feature of the front view of all the houses in the row. The architect claims with considerable plausibility that the addition is set far enough back that it cannot be seen directly from the street in front and that the existing chimneys and dormers of the row combine to block the angled line of sight from the street level to the east. Thus the view of the important historic façades will not be affected from these locations.

The addition will of course be clearly visible from the back. Even if it should technically be invisible from the public way in front, it will in fact break the unity of the roofline that forms a defining and unifying element of the row. The mockup shows that it will be visible from the close of the General Theological Seminary across 20th Street. The close is elevated several feet above the street and is regularly open to the public and guided tours. The view of Cushman Row and the historic houses farther to west on 20th Street from the close is a distinctive amenity of the Chelsea Historic District. The Board can approve the addition only if it is modified to eliminate significant impacts on essential historic features of the row.

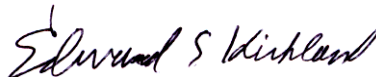
The architect has indicated a willingness to restudy this addition, using as a rear baseline for the addition the eavesline of the unaltered houses in the eastern portion of the row continued to the west and making the roof of the addition in the front start in back of the roofline and then slant upwards toward the rear with light to be obtained from roof windows. The unhistoric windows immediately below the baseline would be brought into substantial conformance with corresponding historic windows in less altered members of the row. If this can be done without creating new visibility from the front or a disproportionate increase in the height of the visible rear façade this approach seems promising as the basis of an appropriate solution.

Finally the Board has no objection to the addition of dormers to the front roof of the building, since all but one of the other houses have dormers. These vary considerably, two possible models being the neighbors at 414 and 416, which reflect the style of the 1920's but vary in detail, and 410 farther away, which approximates the historic style of 19th-century dormers. The design chosen should not be heavy in detail and should have casement windows, as is present in these nearby examples and is common in this portion of the Chelsea Historic District.

Sincerely,



J. Lee Compton
Chair
Manhattan Community Board No. 4



Edward S. Kirkland
Chair
Landmarks Taskforce

cc: Manhattan Borough President
Local elected officials
applicant