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Testimony regarding agenda item 3, public hearing May 5, 2020

LPC-20-08010 49-51 Chambers Street - Former Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank - Individual and Interior Landmark - African Burial Ground & The Commons Historic District Manhattan - Block 153 - Lot 18

Founded in New York City in 1966, the Victorian Society in America is dedicated to fostering the appreciation and preservation of our nineteenth-century heritage as well as that of the early twentieth century, from 1837-1917. Among its other activities, the New York Chapter actively promotes preservation of the incomparable wealth of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historic districts, individual landmarks, interiors and civic art in the New York City area.

The proposal for 49-51 Chambers Street recalls another recent instance in which the City of New York de-accessioned a major individual landmark incorporating designated interior landmarks—346 Broadway, the former New York Life Insurance Co. building. Because the city did not provide for the permanent protection of the public's interest in these buildings, including access to their spectacular and important designated, historic interiors, it is left to the Commission alone to protect the public's interests. The proposed project would result in significant alterations to the designated banking room and associated spaces as well as to the façade. Many of these will be permanent or not easily reversed, all in support of what appears to be a for-profit "cultural" activity that may have a short life span.

The removal of significant amounts of historic stone and metalwork at the interior would cause the permanent loss of these protected features; the proposed new architectural elements of very different style and detail from the historic interior will alter the character of the space, obscure historic features, and call undue attention to themselves, thus diminishing the architectural and historic character of the interior.

The covering up of the vast windows, besides obscuring them, will significantly change the perception of the space by preventing natural light from flooding the interior. And the proposed light projections will essentially destroy the perception of the space. We understand that the Commission may not believe it is able to regulate the projection of light, either through the windows or onto the interior, but the Commission certainly can regulate the physical alterations and hardware that are required to accomplish these things. The extensive light and sound hardware will be highly visible and their installation destructive to the physical fabric of the interior.

Concerning the proposed exterior work, the photos on slides 11 and 12 show what a truly extraordinary façade this is—sedate yet bold and powerful, elegant, symmetrical. The over-the-top proposal for flags, banners, signboards, and canopies throws the whole out of balance and severely diminishes its architectural integrity. We note that there are two large flagpoles above the ground floor—not original but old. They provide ample opportunity for advertising the activity within, and one of them, being almost directly over the proposed main entrance to the facility, could easily denote “enter here.”

We urge the Commission to reject this proposal or require substantial redesign.

Preservation Committee
Victorian Society New York
May 1, 2020