**LPC Testimony for January 19, 2021**

***The first item was laid over from a previous hearing date. The testimony below was previously reviewed by the committee though it has been revised, and we expect to have the opportunity to present it at the Jan. 19 hearing.***

**LPC-21-03913 211 East 48th Street - Lescaze House - Individual Landmark, Manhattan**

The late Henry Hope Reed considered buildings like Lescaze House to be direct descendants of the anti-Classical, picturesque 19th-century Victorian architecture we know and love. The Lescaze House itself falls well outside the remit of the Victorian Society, but we comment on this project because it illustrates a larger historic preservation issue. This issue is clearly illustrated in slide 19, which shows that the proposal would effectively demolish the house behind the street façade.

In a city where so many of our designated buildings have only a single visible façade, we shouldn’t minimize the real potential for ending up with stage-set historic facades rather than real historic buildings. Today’s proposal is not the first, and it will surely not be the last of this type.

The Commission designates *buildings,* not *facades.* Historic preservation is about preserving buildings, districts, and historic fabric, not facadism. And the Commission is a historic preservation agency, not an aesthetic review board. There is something wrong when the definition of protected architectural features prevents the Commission from preserving buildings and protecting historic fabric beyond what can be seen from the street and leads the agency to approve facadist projects.

Lescaze’s goal as described in the Commission’s designation report – “the creation of an architecture expressive of the spirit and life of the 20th-century and of each client's' individual requirements -- is fully realized in this house by an harmonious design of deceptive simplicity, determined by a rational, functional plan, and developed through the use of the newest available technology, materials, and methods of construction.” The Lescaze House is recent, relatively speaking. Designated buildings of greater age often have historically interesting and important structural and constructional features—cast-iron columns, massive wood beams with hand joinery, brick nogging or cobbing within the wall. These represent significant historic fabric and can be of historic architectural interest. In historic frame buildings, visible exterior fabric has often been replaced, sometimes more than once, and unseen materials may represent the major part of remaining historic fabric. Yet, these are not “exterior architectural features” and current definitions leave them unprotected.

The Victorian Society suggests, in light of the application currently before the Commission, that it would be useful to begin considering how to modify the definition of protected features to allow the Commission some jurisdiction over the unseen parts of a building’s fabric, when that

fabric is deemed important to the building’s history and integrity. This would be different from interior landmark designation, which generally encompasses visible interior features and finishes, usually of extraordinary visual quality.

Regarding Lescaze House itself, the Commission said it best in its report: “The William Lescaze House and Office is a fulfillment of his prophesy.  It is a "classic" -- a prototypical building which, having survived over forty (now 86) years in a world of vertiginous change, still retains its validity -- aesthetically, urbanistically, structurally and humanistically.”

**LPC-21-03086 160 Maujer Street - Williamsburg Houses - Individual Landmark, Brooklyn**

Founded in New York City in 1966, the Victorian Society in America is dedicated to fostering the appreciation and preservation of our nineteenth and early 20th century heritage. The NY chapter promotes preservation of our historic districts, individual landmarks, interiors and civic art.

Architects Lescaze and Shreve relied on a very small number of carefully selected materials to create the Williamsburg Houses complex. The design was greatly diminished by loss of the original steel casement windows, a significant component of the design and so characteristic of buildings of this era. Although falling significantly beyond our formal period of interest, this proposal is so welcome from the New York City Housing Authority that VSNY is very happy to support its approval. We commend the applicants for their proposal to restore these very important facade elements.

**LPC-20-01343 216 Dean Street - Boerum Hill Historic District, Brooklyn**

The proposed solar panel installation, standing high off the building’s roof in order to accommodate a deck, will be very visible to the public from Bond Street, and therefore we do not believe it is architecturally appropriate to the building or historic district. The Victorian Society New York urges the Commission to exercise great care in its reviews of this and similar energy-saving and sustainability-based proposals that will affect the integrity and appearance of historic buildings and districts. We worry that as more and more of these come forward, and if they are approved, the precedents will become overwhelming and it will be impossible to contain the dramatic changes that may result. It appears that this would be the first such installation in this row of buildings.

The most sustainable building is the one that already exists and continues to be used or reused. Sustainable design and historic preservation should be mutually supportive, as they share similar objectives. But when conflicts arise between the two, preservation shouldn’t do all the compromising and defer to alterations that squeeze the last bit of energy savings from historic buildings. These projects can result in much harm to historic buildings and districts in exchange for an infinitesimal improvement to global sustainability.

**LPC-21-01212 424 7th Avenue (aka 372-374 14th Street) - Park Slope Historic District Extension, Brooklyn**

Although at the rear of this corner building, the proposed alteration will be visible from 14th Street. There is no guarantee it would continue to be partially obscured for the long term by the wood fence, which could be changed to a more open configuration. We note that the proposed door is unusually tall at 9 feet, and we suggest that a standard door height of about 7 feet to align with the adjacent window head would be a more appropriate solution. Alternately, a taller door that maintains the historic width of the opening could work. But increasing both the height and the width as proposed seems like an excessive intervention. Introducing an arched, double row of headers above the door to match those at the other openings would be an additional improvement to the design.

**LPC-21-02939 49 Grove Street (aka 49-53 Grove Street; 317-321 Bleecker Street) - Greenwich Village Historic District, Manhattan**

The presentation raises questions, without the answers to which we cannot be fully enthusiastic about this project, though it is laudable to undertake a reconstruction of this magnitude, provided it is necessary. We found a lack of information about the reuse of salvaged material. Photo boards 9 and 10 identify areas of salvageable brick and photo board 16 calls out salvageable bluestone lintels, but we couldn’t find anything on the elevation drawings identifying areas where salvaged materials will be reused. Are any of the bricks or lintels going to be salvaged and reused, and what percentage?

There are decorative bandcourses that appear to be made of a material other than brick or bluestone; what is proposed for them? The approved mortar color appears to be rather more gray than the adjacent historic mortar; we would expect a warmer or buff colored mortar more closely matching the color of the brick.

Finally, we hope that a restoration campaign of this magnitude would include replication of the missing cornice. Indeed, this proposal to rebuild the street facades may be this building’s only chance to get back its cornice. The historic photograph provided, which can be no earlier than 1956 given the ’56 Chevrolet out front, doesn’t show it, but the 1939 tax photo does. Tenements of this era, and Herter Brothers tenements in particular, are noted for their elaborate cornices. This building was not an exception. This would be a perfect opportunity to restore this feature in the original or substitute material.



**LPC-21-03133 400 West 57th Street - The Windermere - Individual Landmark, Manhattan**

The Victorian Society New York supports this proposal to restore this building’s ground floor storefronts. We appreciate the careful research the applicants have done, but we have a couple of concerns with details that should be corrected in order for this proposal to be appropriate to this individual landmark. First the transom bars and the transom window framing appear oversized, resulting in glazed areas in the transoms that are much too small. Second, the southernmost storefront on 9th Avenue incorporates two pilasters that don’t reach the lintel above. This may be a drawing error. Are these reproductions of existing cast-iron pilasters? In what material? Is there evidence that this bay had them historically?

We’re confused about what is being called the “missing brick pilaster,” as the brick and stone pier just offset from this location looks historic in the available photograph.

We think the second display window south of the corner was projecting to match the first storefront on the other side of the door. This can just be seen in photo 4 from 1905, to the left of the door with transom proclaiming “White Rose Tea.”

Finally, if the brick infill at the arched former cellar entrance were carried down to grade without a stone base, it would better reflect the historic condition of this feature as an entrance.

**LPC-21-04604 111 Fifth Avenue - Ladies' Mile Historic District, Manhattan**

The proposed alteration to the entrance will have a minimal effect on its design and proportions, and therefore we feel the proposed design is appropriate. However, the loss of one of the two cast-iron and glass stair treads seems unwarranted; both should be retained in a flush configuration in order to preserve the historic material and the memory of the two-step entrance. Alternatively, they could perhaps be relocated to the non-accessible corner entrance, which appears to have similar dimensions.

**LPC-21-04086 122 Fifth Avenue - Ladies' Mile Historic District, Manhattan**

Because this application has two independent components, the construction of an addition on 17th Street and a Master Plan for storefronts on the 17thstreet, 18th Street and Fifth Avenue facades of the historic building, I’ll break my comments into two parts.

Applicants proposing additions to landmarks are usually urged to defer to the historic buildings, and this proposal does this well in terms of height, cornice line, window opening locations and the alignment of the floor levels. But in terms of details the proposal seems just too respectful – it looks as if someone had used a power-wash to scrub away all the original texture and detail, leaving a very bland façade in its place. It’s also hard to see a structure which is 38 feet wide and 10 stories tall as just an appendage. The VSNY recommends that the applicant treat this building less like an addition and more like a new building within the district, and restudy the design of the street wall to create a facade with greater depth and texture which is both respectful of the adjacent landmark and a positive addition to the district.

Concerning the storefront Master Plan, the applicants were fortunate to locate so many historic photographs showing the original proportions of the bulkheads and display windows. It’s unusual to have different bulkhead heights on the three different facades but that appears to be what we have here. They were also lucky to uncover so much of the historic detail which had been concealed over the years. But VSNY was unable to determine from the drawings how the several different storefront designs are being modified with “custom cast aluminum mullion caps” and where and how much of this new material is proposed. We think it’s important that the different historic storefront designs be respected and that replacement elements be correct for each design. In all other respects the proposal is very appropriate.

**LPC-21-04576 110 West 88th Street - Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, Manhattan**

**Status Update: *Approved as revised, with new materials (travertine), more regular fenestration pattern, and heavier window framing, 8-3.***

The Victorian Society New York finds this proposed new rowhouse generally appropriate. The design will help it blend into the streetscape by incorporating a stoop with double doors and a transom; an historic façade material; punched window openings on the upper floors; and floor levels which are very close to alignment with the adjacent historic houses. In addition, its position, between the end of this historic row of three story-plus-basement rowhouses and the adjacent five story apartment building, and the fact that four of the rowhouses have either Dutch or tri-angular gables which rise six or eight feet above the horizontal, allows construction of a new building with a four-story street-wall here which will not stand out awkwardly on the skyline.

However, we recommend that a horizontal mullion be added to the large single-pane window on the second floor to help it relate to the other divided windows proposed for this façade; and that the width of the single-pane window, which doesn’t appear to align with either the door opening on the parlor floor, or the window openings on the third floor, be restudied to create a more unified façade.

Finally, some of those who reviewed the proposal recommend that the use of light-colored limestone be reconsidered, noting that all the buildings in this row as well as the corner apartment house are of dark red brick and brownstone, except where these materials have been painted.